

THE NOVELIST

By Jessica Matthews



ILLUSTRATED BY CHAS

AN 'ADULT TV' NOVEL

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Reluctant Press TG Publishers

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By Jessica Matthews

Alison Kent relaxed as she turned from the auto route onto the departmental road which would lead her home. Just a few dozen kilometers more, through the villages, sleepy now in early afternoon when the country was at its hottest. The familiar smells of the south of France came to her: lavender, wild thyme, rosemary, all mixed with the aroma of the pine trees. On an impulse she pulled her silver Mercedes coupe onto the side of the road and sat as the hood retracted into its position behind the two seats. The final soft click told her that the cover had locked into place. The full heat of the sun hit her now that the cool air of the car was released into the atmosphere.

She eased the car once more into drive, and set off. She pulled her sun glasses from their resting place in her hair, and settled them into place. The wind took her hair gently as the car gathered speed, pulling at the elegant French pleat she always wore after she went to Nice to have her hair retouched. Its elegance gave her an air of authority as she shopped in her usual haunts; she acquired it since they had gotten used to her halting French, her expensive tastes, and willingness to tip generously.

The Mercedes purred along. She knew the road, knew the grape harvest, the “vendage”, would be in progress. At any minute, she could meet one of the narrow trundling tractors, its orange beacon flashing, as it dragged an equally narrow trailer load of precious black grapes to the local cooperative to make the wines upon which the prosperity of the farmers rested. She wondered if she would have time to watch them harvesting her own small fields of vines before she had to fly out to promote her latest novel.

The novels. They had rescued her from an obscure life as a dull typist in the Rust Belt. She was just 44 years old, wealthy, a successful writer and business woman. Her handsome husband had died tragically in an accident at sea, and her daughter directed her seamlessly through the chat shows, personal appearances, and all the other public duties required to keep the dollars rolling in. Janet was the most determined daughter anyone could have. Not only that, she had the looks and figure of a model, and naturally blonde hair. She was determined to make sure her mother's fame and reputation spread far and wide, despite anyone or anything.

It was Janet who had found the house in the Hills, away from the Riviera, away from the distractions and intrusions which imposed themselves upon the successful if allowed to. Alison *needed* that separation. It wasn't easy writing a new bestseller every year. Her readers expected certain standards and wrote to criticize if the details were wrong, if there was too much sex, or not enough. They expected a rags to riches story, a strong heroine triumphing over ruthless men, winning through against the odds to find happiness on her own terms. It was a successful formula, but one which required endless variations.

She eased the car past a tractor as she approached the final village. Impulsively, she reached behind her head and shook out the pins holding her pleat, allowing her hair to blow in the wind. She glanced in the mirror just to watch it blow; there was a sensation to long hair which she never tired of feeling. The pale blonde hair fell to her shoulders; the wind took it gently behind her as she turned into the winding drive leading to her front door. Her daughter would be waiting, her grand daughter too. The latter was already a year old and no doubt eagerly awaited the present which lay wrapped on the seat beside Alison.

Life was good. To have all this, to have come up from nothing whatever, just like one of her own heroines, all before she was forty was almost too much to think about. Now was the time to enjoy. Yet all was not as it seemed. It all started with a chance meeting with Alison's daughter on a blind date. In truth, the woman in the car was not 44, was not really Alison Kent and was not really the owner of all the wealth she was gleefully spending.

Mark always wanted to work in publishing. That was why he had majored in literature, even though he knew the competition for jobs would be fierce. He had underestimated just how tough it would be; without connections to any of the great literary houses, he was left to struggle. Almost a year after graduating, he was still just getting by with agency jobs, editing and correcting, verifying details. The pay was barely enough to keep body and soul together, yet he never thought of changing as he kept trying to ease himself into favor with the in crowd.

It wasn't cheap to do that. He bought presents, and entertained above his budget. Most of the time he was in debt, and had barely sufficient to eat. Still, it kept him looking right. He adopted an "artistic" look out of necessity. It seemed to work for him.

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"Mark, this is your favorite agency," Mary's voice on the answering machine said. "We've a job for you, if you're free for a few weeks. Give me a call when you get in."

He knew immediately who it was even though she left no name. Just as he was about to tell them of his decision to move away! He hesitated; should he go anyway, or give it one more shot? It wouldn't hurt to see what the job was, even if he didn't want it. Another day and he would have told the landlord that he was leaving his single room. He picked up the telephone.

"They've asked for you by name," Mary said. "It's Alison Kent. You know, not quite literary, sex and shopping novels and a massive ego. You must have seen her on television, looking like one of her own heroines."

"You're familiar with her work," he joked.

"Not really, but she's so good at self promotion, who could miss her," she continued.

"Not me," Mark admitted. "I read somewhere that she gets the biggest royalty checks of any author ever."

“And she sure spends it,” Mary replied. “She used to be a real dog, but look at her now. She's a living tribute to the value of a good cosmetic surgeon.”

“That's unfair, Mary,” Mark chided. “Real unfair. She's entitled to spend her money however she wants.”

“But she's completely transformed herself,” Mary replied.

“Sure, but it's what sells.” Mark defended his position. “She has to look good, and draw attention to herself; it's what makes her interesting to the public. After all, if she still looked like an overweight librarian with little piggy eyes and mousy hair, she'd never be invited on the chat shows.”

“And sex sure sells books, I know,” Mary admitted. “It's my job, too. I just wish I were her agent.”

“Okay, we've been as catty as we can, so what's the job?” Mark asked. “Do I get to meet her?”

“You sure do,” Mary replied. “She wants you to do some editing on her latest blockbuster. Apparently, her last editor left to publish his own novels.”

“And I get to be her new apprentice,” Mark asked.

“Anyway,” Mary ignored his sarcasm, “she wants you to check the period detail on her latest block buster. Are you interested?”

“I'm flattered of course, but I can't say I've read anything she's written. I was planning on going back to school,” Mark replied. “How long is she thinking the job will take, because I've got to give notice on my room here.”

“Well, you can give notice anyway,” Mary laughed. “I forgot to say they want you to go to Europe to meet with Miss Kent, and discuss the project. They'll pay expenses, and you get to stay at the family villa or whatever they have. It's in France, did I mention that?”

“No, you didn't. Seeing that that's the case, I can't think of any reason not to go,” Mark said. “Thanks, I'll take it.”

“I'll send you details, and I'll ring them and tell them you'll do it. They said they'd send tickets directly to you, if that's okay.”

“Sure it is,” Mark said, then added as an afterthought, “how did they think of me?”

“Remember Janet Kent? That's her daughter. You were nice to her when she had to attend something or other. Don't tell me you never made the connection,” Mary said.

“No, I never did, she was just a girl I took to a rather dull party a few months ago. She hardly said a word to me, never let on who she was. She said she had to be there, seemed rather frightened of everyone.”

“And like I said, you were kind to her, so there's your connection,” Mary said. “You know the old saying, ‘one good turn...’ Even if the job's no good, it's a holiday. I'm jealous.”

“I'll send you a post card,” Mark said and hung up.

He remembered Janet Kent. She was dark, slim and lithe, with a gamin sensuality about her. He had fantasized about her, but knew she would never call him back. She was far too assertive for him anyway. He lay back on the bed and wondered if the thrift shop would have any suitable clothes for him to impress his new employer.

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It was the first time he had left the country. The journey was long, tedious in tourist class. Speaking no French, the difficulty of changing from one airport to another in Paris for the flight to the South was a nightmare, but he managed without getting lost. Soon he was watching the River Rhone winding its way to the Mediterranean, before the plane began to descend, then swing out over the sea to land on the runway at Nice.

He walked down the steps from the plane, feeling the heat and followed the crowd into the cool arrivals hall. He had been told that he would be met, but realized as he walked that he had no idea how to recognize anyone. He walked through the hall, then turned and walked back. He stepped outside the air-conditioned hall once more, into the heat of the early evening and watched the cars and taxis passing by, people being met, kissing in that very French way on both cheeks, before getting into their cars and driving away.

He walked back into the hall and sat down. His instructions ended with his arrival in Nice. He had no idea where he was supposed to go. He was just beginning to wonder if he had come all this way just to be stranded.

“Hi there,” she said. “I bet you thought I wasn't coming.”

Mark turned to see Janet Kent standing behind him, looking like a school girl, tanned and very French. “I was beginning to worry.”

“You can pretend we're French if you like,” she said. “You can kiss me on both cheeks, just like they're doing.”

Embarrassed, he stood and imitated the people he had been watching. She giggled. “I never did thank you for looking after me that time,” she said. “Mummy wanted me to see the people she was dealing with, so that I could put faces to some of the names when I'm organizing her trips.”

“You do that?” he asked as they walked across the car park.

“Well, I share the organizing with Richard. He's my step father, but he's away a lot traveling for his businesses. Between us we manage, but now I'm going back to school.”

She flicked the remote control and a tiny yellow car flashed its lights to indicate it was unlocked. “I wouldn't get in yet, not until I've opened the back to let out the heat. They don't have air-conditioning in the little cars here.” She opened the tail gate, then looked at Mark. “Your luggage?” she asked.

“I travel light,” he said hefting his cloth bag into the rear of the car. “I just need to wash things regularly.”

Then they were off. Out into the traffic she sped with the panache of a native and all the disrespect of a taxi driver as she crossed four lanes of traffic to take them through the town. She weaved in and out of crowded streets, until she suddenly turned into an underground garage. It was cool and dark and as his eyes adjusted from the bright sun light, she was out and waiting for him to follow. They entered an elevator. She pushed the only button, and he guessed it was a private elevator.

“Mummy lives on the top floor. She doesn't like it much, but Richard said it was a great investment,” Janet confided. “Now we're having a house converted in the hills about two hours drive away, Mummy insisted it was better to write away from all the distractions here, and he had to agree. I think it will be lovely to live away from all the bustle.”

Mark didn't know how to answer. His nerves were unsettled as he was about to meet his new employer for the first time. Despite Mary's disparaging remarks, she *was* successful and rich and he needed the job.

“Don't let her intimidate you,” Janet whispered as the doors opened.

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Alison Kent was beautiful. Nothing natural, but really the most beautiful that money could make her, thought Mark as she walked towards him hand outstretched, bracelets jingling against her wrists. She was slender, dressed in a simple black dress, short, with black heels. It showed her figure to perfection, and it was cut discreetly low at the neck, just showing a hint of tanned breasts. Understated sexuality, just like the image he had had of the novelist.

“I'm pleased you could come, Mark,” she said. “Janet's been helping me, but in a few days she goes back to school, and I need someone to take over.”

Closer, the flaws showed a little. Her make-up was too perfect, too precise. There was a hint of darkness at the roots of her blonde hair which she wore tightly drawn back into a formal pleat. He gripped her hand gently, feeling all the rings she was wearing as they shook hands. Her face smiled, but her eyes were expressionless.

“You have two days before we start work,” she said, stepping back. “I've asked Janet to show you 'round, so that you'll be able to run some errands for me when she's gone, then it's down to work. The publishers wanted the finished manuscript last month. I'm already behind, and if I miss the next deadline, then we miss the Christmas marketing period, and that could cost me a lot of money.”

“Surely you already have an editor,” Mark asked. “I mean, I know one left to publish, but someone as prolific as you must have staff available.”

“I did, but Janet convinced me that I needed a new approach, someone younger and perhaps more critical,” Alison replied. “In this business, it doesn't do to get stale, and end up telling the same old story time after time, just with different names for the characters.”

“No, I guess not,” Mark said carefully. “But I have to confess that I don't have a great knowledge of the genre.”

“That doesn't matter,” Alison assured him. “It's the critical faculties that you have that are important. Just tell me if it seems too trite, or improbable.”

“I'll try.” Mark returned her smile with more assurance that he felt. “You said Janet's not going to be here.”

“That's right,” Alison answered as Janet came back into the room. “She's going to deal with a few things for me. She has a little time to show you 'round, and I hope you're a quick learner, because the traffic here can be horrendous, and I'll be relying on you to get me places, and do the running about.”

“Don't worry, Mummy.” Janet took her arm and smiled at Mark. “I'll make sure he learns all the shortcuts. He'll be driving like a native within a couple of days, only I promise I'll make sure he's safer than most of them.”

“Get him to look a little more like a native too, will you?” she instructed. “He looks too much like a tourist, he'll stand out wherever he goes.”

“Nonsense, Mummy,” Janet replied. “All he needs is a tan and a few props. In a couple of weeks, he'll be fine.”

They laughed. It seemed they were close and shared a private sense of humor. Everything seemed to be going well, Mark thought. They were friendly, and he had a couple of days with Janet to learn about his new environment. He felt that he had fallen upon his feet this time.

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Next day, his education began in earnest. Janet sat him behind the wheel of their tiny car, and guided him through the narrow streets of old Nice. The chaotic mess of parking, driving, walking, shopping, gossiping people alarmed him as they approached the main road along the coast, the famous Boulevard des Anglais. It was terrifying at first. Four narrow lanes of speeding traffic, drivers changing lanes at a whim, parking in the right lane, then in the left lane.

Amidst it all, the tiny motorcycles buzzing angrily as they wove in and out of the traffic. Janet said they were ridden by school children over fourteen. Whatever, they terrified Mark as they wove, like suicidal cockroaches, in and out of the speeding, crowded lanes. Janet took him as far as the port where the ferry to Corsica departed, then back again, past the airport, and after a death-defying turn, told him to park on the road side. Relieved, he got out and followed her to a beach-side bar.

Janet ordered for them as they sat looking out over the steeply shelving pebble beach. Bronzed bodies were sprawled on plastic reclining chairs in the sun. Men and women were bathing in the sea, which seemed to be chest deep within a few feet of the shore. Rafts for bathers floated about fifty yards from the shore. Mark was mildly surprised to see some of the women wore nothing more than a brief bikini bottom.

“I hope you'll be good for Mummy,” Janet confided as they sipped their drinks. “I wanted someone who would bring her a fresh outlook.”

“So why me?” Mark asked. “Not that I'm not grateful, but we just met that one time.”

"I did my homework," Janet said. "I know you're nearly broke, you're not involved with anyone, and you're basically a kind person."

"Well, I can't argue with any of that," Mark smiled. "So why does that qualify me for this job?"

"Alison needs someone to stimulate her imagination, as well as do the donkey work of editing," Janet replied. "I'm told you want to write yourself, so you'll be able to work from her outlines and drafts"

"What about her husband?" Mark asked "The publicity says he's involved in her work."

"That's the publicity machine," Janet replied. "Richard—he's my step father—my real father died when I was small. His work keeps him away, and he seems to be making less and less effort to get home. Mummy knows he sleeps with his personal assistants, and that he has an apartment at his disposal wherever his business takes him. They appear together, to keep up the myth, but she's lonely underneath it all."

"And you figure I'm the person to do what exactly?" Mark asked, more puzzled than before.

"You're the person to do her editing and whatever else an author's personal assistant does," Janet said. "The important thing is that you're not an old maid, you're not in awe of her, and that you let her find something new in herself."

"That's a tall order," Mark said.

"Just look upon it as an extended holiday, with a bit of literary work thrown in," Janet told him. "Then remember, you're being paid as well. Just do your best."

"I always took her for the kind of author who hardly needs an assistant," Mark said.

"Don't be fooled," Janet replied. "Behind that perfect exterior, there lies an insecure person. Remember, she's redesigned herself physically and mentally."

"So the press reports about the plastic surgery..."

"Are all true," Janet admitted. "She's always looking for the next thing, I think she's become addicted to surgery. I'm just glad she can afford the best, and that it gives her so much pleasure."

"It must give her some pain as well," said Mark.

"Sure, but she'd say it was worth it," Janet smiled. "And she's her own biggest asset where publicity's concerned. People want to see her, and *that* sells books."

"I can't argue," Mark replied. "I've seen the sales figures."

"Come on, we've got to get you used to this place." Janet got up. "Alison will expect you to drive her round when I'm away; she hates driving herself unless she has to."

Mark drove again. She took him back the garage entrance where they changed over. The traffic was feeling easier now. Although it was seemingly chaotic, there was an order about it. With the exception of the kids on their motor cycles, there was an expectation that anyone might change lanes, park, or turn off at any time. The locals

seemed to have adapted to the system, and Mark began to understand that it was easier than it had seemed at first. The maze of streets without a navigator was another matter.

They drove out into the hills at the back of the town and stopped to look over the heat haze to the Mediterranean, then turned back to a shady restaurant where they ate salads for lunch, washed down with bottled water. After talking for ages at their table, watching the local people coming and going, they stepped out once more into the heat of the afternoon.

The car was like an oven, even though he had parked it in the shade, and Janet drove back with all the windows open wide. She drove 'round the narrow streets again, then once more, making sure Mark had a good grasp of the geography, before heading back into the garage, and into the air-conditioned luxury of the apartment.

They stepped out onto the roof; for the first time, Mark was impressed by the peaceful aura of the roof terrace, just a short distance above the busy streets. The noise sounded distant. He caught a view of the bay, the colors of the sea, the people on the beaches, and the boats out on the water. Alison was lounging on a reclining chair and looked up upon hearing their voices. A greeting, then she and Janet left him to his own thoughts as they made their excuses, and went inside, telling him that they were going out for dinner about half past nine.

"But I haven't brought anything formal," Mark said. "I haven't been shopping either."

"You don't need anything special," Alison said. "Just look cool."

Mark wondered how to do *that*.

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At nine in the evening, he was showered and drying his hair which almost touched his shoulders. He was dressed in his jockey shorts, wondering what he could wear. He had only one pair of slacks, and one pair of jeans to his name, and neither looked really suitable. He pulled on the robe which had been left in his room and resolved to go and give his excuses to Alison, even though he was really hungry,

"Nonsense, you must come," was her response. "Janet will be so disappointed if you stay home; it's her last night here and she wants to make sure we're going to get on while she's away. We won't see her for a few weeks at least."

"But really," Mark insisted. "I've got nothing to wear."

"Oh, is *that* all?" Alison smiled at him. "Janet did say you'd been having a lean time. We should have thought to give you an advance. I'm sure there must be something here that you can wear. I'll call Janet."

Janet was called and Mark burned with embarrassment as Alison explained his predicament. "We'll have a look in Richard's room," she decided. "He's sure to have left *something*, he has so many clothes."

If Mark was surprised that Richard's room wasn't shared with Alison, he did not show it. They entered the room together and soon suits and shirts were being examined against him. The first thing he tried on proved there was no point in continuing.

“Just how big *is* Richard?” Mark asked as the waist of the trousers hung loosely around his hips, threatening to fall as soon as he took his hand away. The bottoms of the trouser legs flapped loosely on the floor as he turned towards the mirror.

“I'd forgotten just how tall he is,” Janet said. “I'm sorry Mark, there's nothing here that's going to be useful.”

“Wait a minute,” Alison said. “I'm about Mark's height. I've lots of slacks and trousers. I'm sure there must be something there.”

“Oh no.” Mark recoiled in horror. “I couldn't possibly borrow from you.”

“Why not?” Janet snapped at him. “The labels are better than anything you've ever worn before, and I'm sure there's something to fit you.”

Against his better judgment, Mark allowed himself to be propelled into Alison's room. Immediately upon entering, he felt intimidated. It was white everywhere: carpet, walls, drapes, fabrics on the bed and chairs. There were big mirrors, from floor to ceiling, and bright lights everywhere. The dressing table was a mass of bottles and cosmetics, with a mirror and spotlights burning brightly. Color in the room came from carefully chosen cushions and pictures. The drapes were not drawn, and the lights of the city were visible through the windows which made up one wall of the room. Janet and Alison left him looking out as they opened the closets. He was given two pairs of trousers, one black, the other silver gray, and told to try them on. He turned to leave the room.

“Now, Mark,” Janet said.

“I was just going to my room,” he said.

“Just try them here,” Janet said. “There's two of us, we feel safe. You wouldn't be here if we didn't feel it was safe to be alone around you.”

Mark complied, and opened his robe to pull the black trousers up. The material was at once soft and cool to his touch, as he pulled them to his waist. To his surprise, the zip was at the side, and he struggled to fasten the waistband, then pull the zipper closed. He turned and stepped to the mirror.

“There, I knew we'd have something to fit you,” Janet said. “I bet they feel good too, after the heavy things you're used to. Try the others before we decide.”

Mark noticed that Janet had taken it on herself to make the decisions, as he complied. The gray trousers were side-fastening too, and closed more easily at the waist, but they were distinctly feminine in their cut, with wider legs and a tight fit under the crotch which did nothing to conceal his male equipment. Against his desire, he felt himself stiffening. Either Janet and Alison did not see this, or they chose not to notice. “I think the gray,” Alison said. “I've got a matching top somewhere.”

“That would be lovely,” Janet replied, ignoring Mark as she turned back to the closet.

The top was plain, and of identical material. It slipped over his head and fell smoothly down below the waist. The neck was slashed but high, the sleeves three-quarter length. The material felt great as Mark moved, but when he saw himself in the mirror, he felt a dread dullness in his stomach. He looked too effeminate.

“That looks really great,” Janet said, as Mark was about to say something critical.

“I'm not sure,” Mark said. “I think it looks like I'm wearing my sister's clothes.”

“So what?” Janet said. “This is France, and your sister's a long way away. She won't know. I think it looks great on you, even if you don't quite fill it.”

Mark blushed. “I'm not sure I dare go out in this.”

“I like it too,” Alison said. “Mark, you look almost Italian. If only you had really dark hair and a decent tan, no one would take you for anything else.”

“I *like* the idea of being taken to dinner by an Italian gigolo,” Janet giggled. “I always fancied one of my own, but you'd never let me share your boy friends, mother.”

“The idea!” Alison said in mock anger. “I never had *boyfriends*. I just had escorts when I needed someone to accompany me. A girlfriend would have been as useful, but you were too young or at school.”

“But when I *was* there...” Janet let the question hang in the air.

“It's always good to be seen with the same escort,” Alison replied. “It shows consistency. After all, Richard never stayed long enough for anyone to get to know him. It's expected that an author should not be alone.”

The conversation tailed off. “Of course, mother,” Janet said. “You'll have Mark around to help you out now.”

Without any hint that he should be consulted, it was decided that Mark would wear the gray. Despite his misgivings, he didn't want to cause a scene. They *were* trying to be kind to him and for all he knew, he may be dressed in the height of fashion for the average Italian male. After all, Italy was only a few kilometers along the coast.

Mark looked again in the mirror. What he saw confirmed his initial feelings. Anyone could tell he was wearing clothes designed for the opposite sex. He felt quite uncomfortable, yet how could he tell them? He didn't want to create a scene; after all, this was his new employer.

Mark returned to his room to get his shoes. He pulled on his socks and then the better pair of his two battered trainers. He felt the softness of his trousers as he pulled them up out of the way to fasten the laces. They had been white, and now they were gray, although they hardly matched the material of his other clothes. He stood, and turned to look at himself in the small mirror of his room.

His hands felt instinctively for the pockets. There were none. His figure was lean and slim, the softness of the material emphasized just how slim he was. He was feeling more uncomfortable the more he looked, but there was no going back now. With a sigh, he stepped out of the door.

“You can't go in those shoes!” Janet cried as soon as she saw him. “They spoil *everything*. Take them off.”

She rushed from the room and left him feeling stupid in his stocking feet. He heard the door close and she was back.

“Try these.” She handed him a pair of sandals in pale grey. He took them, feeling the softness of the leather. “You can't wear them with socks either.” Sheepishly, he took off his socks, then pulled the sandals onto his feet. They were tight against his skin, and with the small block heel, felt strange under his right foot as he pulled the other one onto his left. He stood and took a tentative step. This was even more humiliating, and he started to protest.

“That's settled then,” Janet announced, cutting him short. “We can go now.”

“I'll just get my perfume,” Alison called. She came back into the room, spraying herself liberally with the contents of a pear-shaped bottle. “You might like this one.” She handed the bottle to Janet.

“It's lovely!” she exclaimed. “May I use some?”

“Of course you may. It does nothing in the bottle, only when it's worn.” Alison smiled. “Here, Mark.” Janet stepped over to him and began to spray the perfume on his neck and forearms. “We might as well use the same scent, then we don't clash.”

Mark was stunned at what she had done. What would people think of him, smelling like an expensive lady. Then he thought again. He was only here for a short piece of editing, just a few weeks. He might as well go with whatever pleased his employer. It didn't stop him from feeling uneasy though.

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Mark's journey to the restaurant passed like a bad dream. Janet drove the little yellow car, with Alison in the front and him in the back. He was in a cold sweat of panic. He had seen himself in the mirror as he was walking out the door, and what he saw shocked him profoundly.

He looked wrong, like he was dressed in girl's clothes, which in reality, he was. He should never have let them dress him. His top was like a loose sweater, which fitted where it clung, and fell everywhere else loosely over his body. He had no shape, therefore *it* had no shape. The neck was hardly the type of thing one of his colleagues back home would ever have worn. He knew they had told him it was in fashion, but he doubted it.

The trousers, too, felt wonderful, as they slipped comfortably over his skin, but where they nipped his crotch, they were a constant reminder that they were too tight, too revealing, to allow him to relax. And why did he keep getting hard down there as the thoughts of his predicament buzzed around his brain?

He shifted in his seat, as the car slowed to climb out of the city. He felt the neck of his top slip off his shoulder. Finally, they arrived at their destination. He was feeling awkward with no pockets, nowhere to put his hands to look casual. The lights of the foyer were bright, and heightened his insecurity. He saw himself in the mirror as Janet and Alison were greeted. They were clearly valued customers from the amount of cheek kissing and rapid French that was being exchanged with the man welcoming them.

Then it was his turn. Alison made the introductions, in French of course, so he understood nothing at all. Mark was taken totally by surprise when the man suddenly kissed him on both cheeks as he had done to the ladies. Before he could do anything more than blush deeply, they were being escorted to their table.

“What was that about, the kisses and what he said?” Mark asked, still red-faced.

“Oh, don't worry,” Alison said. “Paul's just a little effusive, and we spend a lot of money here, so he goes out of his way to be that little bit extra French for us.”

“It was awful,” Mark said. “I didn't know what to do. I could have died with shame when he did that.”

“It's just the local custom,” Janet chipped in. “It's not as if he was trying to take you to bed. Just accept that you're in a different country. They do things differently here.”

Mark tried to relax as the meal was ordered and served. All the language passed him by. It seemed to be taken for granted that he would eat whatever was ordered for him; he wasn't consulted about the menu at all, not that he could have understood a word of it. He forced himself to relax and began to look around at the other diners. He found some of them looking at him and quickly avoided any real eye contact.

They were a mixed bunch. Their fellow diners ranged from the elderly to the young, the portly to the slim, the beautiful to the ugly. Was *anyone* dressed like he was? He looked again, more cautiously this time. There were a couple of swarthy men, black-haired and tanned, who were wearing soft summer sweaters in a similar material. None had three-quarter sleeves and a slashed neck. He pushed his sleeves up to disguise their length. They fell back almost immediately.

The meal was served with full ceremony. Alison was invited to taste the wine, and then Janet and he were served in turn. He was isolated by his lack of French, as the women chatted with the staff, and then with some of the other diners who seemed to know them well.

“I'm just telling them that you're my new secretary,” Alison said. “Come on, look cheerful and give a friendly wave.”

Mark complied. “Why say ‘secretary?’” he asked. “I'm to be your editor, with a little research thrown in.”

“Of course you are,” Alison agreed. “It's just that I don't know the words for all that. Anyway, they all understand that a secretary does more than just type these days.”

As the meal and the wine took over, Mark relaxed. He still felt self-conscious, but could do nothing about his situation. Experience had taught him that when there was nothing he could change, all he could do was sit back and let it happen. Much to his surprise, he began to enjoy himself, as a second bottle of wine followed the first.

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“Where are we going?” Mark asked as the car took the road past the entrance to their parking spot.

“Well, as it’s Janet’s last night here, I’m taking her to her favorite bar for a last look. The floor show's supposed to be the finest in town at the moment.”

“Can't you drop me off first?” Mark asked. “I'm rather tired.” This was a lie, but he had seen how differently he was dressed from all the other diners, and he didn't want to stand out as the boy wearing the women's clothes any longer than strictly necessary.

“We're almost there,” Janet said. “And if we have to go back and drop you off, we'll miss the show.”

Mark mumbled something which was taken to be assent. The car pulled into the smallest of spaces, and they were out again. The cool of the night air, with the special scent of the sea came to him as he walked between them towards a black door with a small flashing sign of a lady turning ‘round and ‘round, her skirt rising as she twirled.

Alison knocked on the door. A panel opened and she said a few words of French. The door opened and they were admitted to a poorly lit room with an audience crushed into a small area. The music was loud, and two girls were going through a dance routine on a small stage set at head height at the far end of the room. The bar was the full length of one side of the room, and Mark followed Alison and Janet as they made their way toward the front of the bar.

He began to relax a little once more. The lights inside were dimmed. His clothes would hardly be seen inside the gloom. Even if they were, what did it matter? He was just passing through this town. His eyes adjusted, the people around him became more distinct. They sat at a table which had been cleared for them.

“I think the floor show here's really the best in Nice,” Janet told him.

“Now don't give away any secrets,” Alison interrupted. “Let Mark find out for himself.”

Before Mark could ask what he should find out, a waitress appeared at their table. Alison ordered in rapid French, again taking it for granted that Mark would have whatever he was given. Mark looked at the waitress, tall and elegantly made-up, with huge false eye lashes which fluttered with her every eye movement. She was so tall, and well-built, there was something about her which made him look at her again as she walked away, her hips swaying in her tight leotard costume.

The lights dimmed, then spotlights came on to illuminate a small stage in front of them. An announcement in French was followed by clapping and whistles from the audience. A blonde girl stepped into the circle of light and an introduction played. She sang in a deep, throaty voice, rolling the letter 'r' in a very continental manner. Slowly, she removed her long wrap to reveal a tight dress underneath, low-cut so as to leave little to the imagination, with spaghetti straps.

Her second song began, a livelier number, and she was joined on stage by three dancing girls. And what dancing girls they were, tall and well-built, breasts almost bare, as they showed nearly everything in the skimpiest of costumes. Mark watched, Mark concentrated; he had never seen *anything* so sexy before.

The waitress returned between numbers. She bent to place their drinks on the table. Mark looked down her cleavage; it was impossible not to do so. She stood directly in front of him, as if challenging him not to look away. Alison handed over some bank notes. The waitress stooped to place some coins on the table, holding eye contact with Mark as she did so. Then as she walked away, she let her hand brush across his shoulders. He looked up at her, she looked back and winked, the eye lashes exaggerating her gesture. Mark blushed.

“Be careful,” Janet said. “She likes to take advantage of new customers, and if you ask her for a date, she'll agree instantly.”

“Well, it might be a good idea to make some friends here,” Mark said with more confidence than he felt.

“Sure, but be warned, she'll let you find out her secret on the first date.”

“And that's a problem?” Mark was puzzled.

“Only if you don't mind dating *boys*,” Janet replied, laughing at his wide-eyed amazement.

Just then the song reached its climax and the singer stood back, waved and blew kisses at the audience. Then she pulled her wig off, revealing that she, too, was really a boy. Mark's look of astonishment must have been a sight to behold, for both Alison and Janet burst out laughing.

“You didn't realize anything!” Janet chided him. “I always thought this was the best show in Nice. All the girls on the staff here are really boys. Not just that, they're the most beautiful boys in France.”

“And the most expensive,” Alison added. “I thought *I* was addicted to plastic surgery, but these guys must keep a hospital going all by themselves.”

“You mean they've made themselves...had implants...and had...all that kind of stuff?” Mark stumbled over his incredulity.

“Sure they have!” Alison said. “They know you've got to suffer to be beautiful.”

“They're certainly beautiful,” Mark said in amazement as he looked with new attention at the waitresses and bar staff. “I know we have bars like this back home, but I never went to one.”

“We don't have anything like *this* at home,” Alison said. “This place is really special. I get some of my best story lines just sitting and listening to people in here. I change them around of course, but...”

Mark could hear no more as the music surged once again. The floor show continued. The dancing girls in different costumes which covered little more than before, began to move through the audience. It was fascinating to watch. Mark looked around and caught the eyes of a group of men looking directly at him. He felt his top slip, exposing his shoulder, then very self-consciously pulled the material over his naked shoulder.

A thought hit him hard. “They think I'm one of them. They think I'm trying to dress like a girl.” He shivered at the implications of the thought and looked away. He wanted

to go, but dare not say so. Janet and Alison were obviously enjoying their evening. He kept his eyes firmly on the show, not daring to look 'round again.

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The next few days passed quickly. No comment was made about their evening before Janet departed to continue her business. Mark had seen her obviously enjoying herself with the creatures who were boys but looked like girls. He had watched her as she danced with one, holding him closely. They looked like two girls dancing together to a slow number. Her eyes were bright and sparkling when she returned, and he found himself wishing *he* could make her look so happy.

Alison wrote each day, her hours varying with her social commitments. Mark was left to organize his own schedule. Being a professional, and an organized person by nature, Mark soon settled into a routine of reading and editing. He marked passages for checking, passages for revision, and noted inconsistencies. He made list after list for Alison, and soon the pair had a disciplined working relationship.

He just worked and worked. It was his idea of heaven, being closely involved with the creative process, and actually being paid to do checking and editing. The book was finely structured, with a wealth of detail which should make it stand out. The accuracy of the locations, the fashion, the designers, coupled with Alison's characterization made it a sure winner. Everything she wrote, he rewrote, allowing himself to add shape and substance where it was lacking. He took to making suggestions about the direction of the plot, until Alison came to ask the where and how questions without realizing what she was doing.

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"Janet's coming back this week end," Alison told him as they were sitting and discussing the final stages of the plot. "Oh, and there's a party, and she wants you to go with her. I said you'd love to take her."

"Alison, how could you?" Mark chided. "I can't speak a word of the language, and you know I've hardly been out. I thought I'd left literary parties behind when I came here to work."

"This isn't a literary party," Alison replied. "It's one Janet's been wanting to get an invitation to for the three years we've been here. She'll tell you about it when she arrives. Please look after her for me. Promise you'll go?"

"Okay, if it means so much to you," Mark relented.

Then the subject changed, and whenever he tried to ask further questions about the party, Alison just ignored him.

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"Where are we going?" Mark asked Janet when he picked her up from the airport.

"Why, just to the best night out I could get invited to," Janet replied. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"But what is it?" Mark persisted as she stalled him on the drive home.

"It's the Oasis' annual invitation party, if you must know, and you're going to be my escort." Janet turned to look at him. "Please say you'll enjoy it with me."

"I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that place," Mark admitted. "Last time, I felt...well, I felt like they thought I was trying to be one of the girls there. You remember, you had me dress in that gray thing. I felt wrong."

"Well, this time, you'll have a perfectly beautiful dress to wear," Janet said. "It's a condition of the ticket, that each girl has to be accompanied by a man in a dress."

"I'm not doing that!" Mark gasped.

"Yes you are," Janet told him. "First reason is this is the best invitation I've got and I don't want to go with anyone I don't feel safe with."

"No, I don't feel safe there. I don't want to go." Mark's protest was soft, he felt a cold sweat break out at the thought that she could expect him to do this.

"Nonsense, what could be safer than being with a beautiful woman, and being dressed so beautifully that you're a work of art?" Janet knew she could win this one.

"What's safe about that? What about all the other men there? They'll think..." Mark couldn't finish the sentence. Little thrills were taking his voice as the thought of what she intended penetrated his brain.

"They'll think what exactly?" Janet asked. "They'll be dressed up just like you'll be dressed up."

"I don't care. It's not my idea of fun." Mark wondered if he was protesting too strongly. After all, it could be fun, and there was nobody in Nice to know what he was doing.

"There's a second reason why you should do it," Janet said softly.

"I can't think of any reason why I should," Mark snapped back. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you're working with Alison on her book. You're writing about women, but you don't understand what you're writing about," Janet said. "I can tell that you're writing some of the passages of the book, but it's designed for women to read. They'll spot the things you get wrong."

"I'm not getting things wrong. That's why I'm here." Mark snapped back. "I've checked everything."

"Sure you have, and I'm not criticizing, but when you write about a conversation in the beauty salon, you get the process wrong. When you write about a woman getting ready to meet her lover, it's not quite right, it's not as good as it could be." Janet took his hand. "And I want it to be as good as it can be. I want to help you get the details right."

"And wearing a dress can do that?" Mark asked.

“Not on its own,” Janet laughed. “But you need to know about the things women do routinely. You need to know how they dress, how makeup goes on, how girls use hair signals or play with their jewelry to send a message. It’s the bits of color, the details, that can make the novel really *live*.”

“And women will read the novel so carefully that they’ll pick up these things.” Mark was beginning to think seriously about what he was hearing.

“Sure they do,” Janet assured him. “Just think how you would use your hands if you had long finger nails and rings on your fingers. Think how you’d walk in high heels. There’s a whole world you don’t understand.”

“Okay, I give in,” Mark said. “I’ll do it.”

“And you’ll cooperate with me?” Janet asked. “I’ll make sure you really have a learning experience, if nothing else.”

“I’ll cooperate, I promise,” he replied, “but don’t expect me to like it.”

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“I’m so glad you’ve agreed to go with Janet,” Alison said next morning as they sat together having coffee. “Has she told you any details?”

“No, but I guess you’ve discussed it.” Mark was warming to the idea. After all, he reasoned, if he *had* to do it, he might as well do it with a pleasant heart.

“Sure we discussed it,” Janet admitted. “And Alison’s going to help you get ready. We’ve got a couple of weeks, so you’re going to have to get some work done if we’re going to look right.”

“And how am I going to look?” Mark asked.

“Why, exactly like *me*.” Alison smiled at him wickedly.

“You’re joking,” Mark spluttered.

“No, we’re not.” Janet had a wicked look as well. “You can’t look like a natural woman, and Mummy’s the most beautiful unnatural woman I know.”

“It’s true. There’s nothing natural about me,” Alison agreed. “Why have the money if you can’t indulge yourself? I like looking the best I can. I like being an elegant blonde. When I first started writing I was just boring—mousy hair, dull. Ugh...but look at me *now*.”

“But why does that mean I have to...” Mark ran out of words.

“Well that’s simple. The clothes will fit, and we have the resources,” Janet explained.

“The resources?” he asked.

“Sure, the same beauty salon as Alison uses, all the same cosmetics,” Janet continued, “and you can watch Alison like a hawk for the next few days. Try and act the way she does, watch and learn.”

Mark looked from Janet to Alison, then back again. The absurdity hit him and he laughed. They laughed with him. Alison wiped a tear from her face, using the ring finger of her right hand. Mark copied the gesture.

“How was that?” he asked as he did it again.

“Fine, you just need the nails and the rings, then you'll do it like that naturally.” Alison laughed at his impersonation.

“‘Naturally’ isn't the word I'd choose,” Mark admitted.

“With what we're doing, I would hope not,” Alison added. “I don't want you taking me over altogether.”

“Hey, *I'm* the one who's being taken over.” Mark felt he should make some protest again, but secretly, the whole idea, now that it was almost upon him, was gaining a certain appeal. He still didn't want to agree *too* easily, but he didn't want to protest too much either.

“Right. Lessons start immediately.” Janet stood. “Once you're ready, you can get back to work. All you have to do today is get used to heels. Just do everything you would normally do, but do it in heels.”

“Is that all?” Mark expected something much more complicated.

“That's enough. You'll come to hate us soon,” Janet assured him. “From now on, wear heels every waking minute until you can walk in them as if it's second nature.”

Mark followed Janet as she went to his room to collect all his shoes, taking even the old sandals from his feet. She took his hand and walked with him to Alison's room where she opened the closet and pulled out several pairs of shoes, in a variety of styles and heights. She bundled them into his arms, added a shoe horn and some stockings, then pushed him back to his room. “Use the stockings. They're the kind that stay up themselves. They'll help your feet to slip into the shoes, and when you've chosen which you're going to wear, Alison will be waiting for you.”

Mark looked at his fate, and sorted the shoes into pairs. There were black shoes and tan-colored ones, elegant and more casual, but all with tapering heels, all at least four inches high. With a trembling hand, Mark pulled on the stockings, then eased his left foot into the lowest of the shoes, a soft tan pair. He felt the angle of his foot resting on the floor as he pulled on the right one. Then he stood. He felt pushed forwards, standing unnaturally with shoulders back to keep his balance. His posture was different.

Carefully, he took a few steps. He stopped, shortened his stride and tried again. It still felt wrong, his balance was adrift. He stopped again, feeling the pinch of the shoes against his toes as the weight was pushed forwards. He stepped forwards again, this time instinctively placing his toe on the ground first, putting the heel in front of the toe. His hips moved to compensate and balance. He turned, pivoting on the shoes, then stepped forwards again, feeling the effect of the shortened stride and the new balance.

Taking a deep breath, he opened the door and walked out to the terrace where Alison and Janet were talking. As he approached, they fell silent and watched him.