

# THE ARCHIVIST

*By Jessica Matthews*



ILLUSTRATED BY CHAS

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AN 'ADULT TV' NOVEL

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## THE ARCHIVIST

By Jessica Matthews

"I call this meeting to order." The mayor spoke, his voice reflecting the gravity of the meeting. He waited for silence, then continued. "Our project is in danger of closing, unless we can get some more funding."

"You mean we've all wasted three years of our lives," grumbled Bill, the proprietor of the biggest store in the settler project."

"Stop carping," Elizabeth snapped. "Listen to the mayor, we have to find a way forward, and I think we've got one. We just need some time..."

"Just because he's your father doesn't mean he's the only one with a good idea around here," he snapped back. "We all know the project's folding, let's get out while there's still something to sell."

"We just need to get a big investor to put some money into the town, that's all," the mayor tried to calm things down. "After all, we're an educational project, tax deductible, with a little prestige for any investor. And when we're running this settler town properly, there's a bit of fun for them when they visit."

"This isn't about fun," Luke scoffed. "It's about living the authentic settler life, or have you forgotten that?"

"No, of course not, but we can't ignore the world around us," the mayor said soothingly. "We need to interest some sponsors, and Elizabeth has done some research. All we ask is some time, and your authority to recruit a new settler."

"But you won't tell us what the project is to be," Clay interrupted.

"Well, we don't want word getting everywhere. It's a little unconventional, but every other appeal we've made has been unsuccessful. It's our last chance, we all deserve that, or the whole thing folds," the mayor said.

"Well I guess we've nothing to lose," Clay looked at Luke and the others. "I suggest we give it another year."

The meeting agreed. Elizabeth and her father sighed with relief. Now all they had to do was to find someone to fill the very special requirements they had in mind to attract the only potential investor with the money to keep the project going.

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"Here's just the job to suit you," a voice called across the room.

Mark reached and grabbed the paper. He had few illusions that it would be easy to find something which would allow him to earn the money he needed to return to do his

Masters. He was desperate and willing to take anything; after all, once in a job it was always easier to move to another. It was getting the first that was difficult.

“New Settler Wanted,” he read. “West Fork Settler Village and living museum have a vacancy for a new settler. The ideal candidate would be qualified in the history of the settler period and have an interest in the work of a living community.”

He had heard of the place and was familiar with its foundation. It relied upon sponsors, usually rich benefactors who, in return for their investment, could visit during a set couple of weeks each year, and indulge their fantasies for living in the style of the early settlers to whatever degree suited them. The rest of the year, the community had to survive as it would have done in the past. Mark read on. He was certainly interested, and was a graduate student with more than a little knowledge of the history surrounding the period. He had immersed himself in the past since he was given a child's history book when he was very young. The idea of understanding the past was very real to him, so the chance to take part in a living museum was an ideal opportunity. He resolved to apply immediately.

Thus it was that he found himself, after interview at his home faculty, traveling to the settler village, feeling the butterflies in his stomach as he waited to be picked up from the road side where the bus had dropped him. The sound of a horse drawn cart came to his ears. He turned and watched as it drew near.

“You Mark?” the driver asked. “I've come to collect you. Throw your bag on board and climb up.”

Nervously he did as he was asked, then held on as the driver turned the wagon and set off down the dirt road towards the horizon. He tried to make some conversation, but the noise of the iron wheels on the rocky road, together with the effort of hanging on to the seat, soon reduced him to silence as he held tight and watched the country passing by.

The journey seemed endless, the dust stuck in his eyes, ears, nose and throat. He could feel the grit against his skin as the pain of bouncing on the bare boards of the seat became more and more uncomfortable, until at last, the wagon approached a small collection of wooden buildings and stopped outside one which was labeled 'The West Fork Hotel,' although there was little else to distinguish it from the others clustered around the dusty street. There was no one to be seen.

“You'll find the Mayor in there waiting to greet you,” the driver said gruffly, then allowing only just sufficient time for Mark to recover his bag, he set off again and turned out of sight.

Mark picked up his bag and brushed his hand over his jacket. The dust seemed to have penetrated every seam, and to be grating against his hands as they grasped his bag. He walked into the hotel and paused, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the light. It was as if he had stepped back in time as his eyes adjusted to take in the entrance lobby into which he had stepped. There was a counter, with an old brass bell. He walked across, and nervously, pushed the plunger to make it ring.

“I'll be with you in a minute,” a woman's voice called from somewhere out back.

Mark waited, trying to look at ease, even if he was apprehensive. True, he had been interviewed for this job and had the opportunity to ask questions, but he hadn't known what to ask. He was so delighted to have got a job which seemed congenial, that only now did he begin to realize that he knew absolutely no one, and nothing about his fellow settlers. There was a big mirror on the wall. He walked to it and smoothed back his hair, a dirty blonde color, which he wore long in a pony tail.

"Now then, stranger." the woman who came behind the counter was slim and businesslike. "what can we do for you?" He would be perfect, she thought, as she looked him up and down.

"I was told to come here to meet the mayor," Mark stuttered. "I'm a new settler."

"I'll tell my father you're here," she said, smiling now. "I'm Elizabeth Stone, and this is my father's hotel."

"I've just arrived...", Mark started lamely.

"And you don't really know what you've let yourself into," she finished his sentence for him. "Don't worry, it's all strange for a while. It's not easy stepping back over a hundred and fifty years. Nothing will seem familiar."

"I guess I should have asked more questions when I was interviewed," Mark said.

"Well, nothing could have prepared you anyway. We're a small community, about two hundred and eighty people now, and we've been together for two years," Elizabeth explained. "Our purpose is to live as our forefathers did, and to be available to schools, colleges and our sponsors to visit for two weeks each year. We have to stay in character as settlers, and I guess you were chosen for your knowledge of the language and literature of that time. You'll be expected to help us to use only the appropriate language of the time when we're on show."

Just then a small man bustled into the room. "Hi there, settler, you must be Mark," he said, extending his hand for Mark to shake. "I'm the Mayor of this town."

"Pleased to meet you," Mark mumbled, 'I was just wondering..."

"Sure you were, it's always the same when we get a new settler, you're going to be apprenticed to the plough man, and in between you're going to be advising on language for visits by educational groups, and our sponsors. We really live the part here, so get ready to go back a hundred and fifty years and enjoy it." With that he was on his way out of the room as Mark began to protest, but to empty air.

"I guess you weren't warned about our mayor," Elizabeth said. "He can be a little gruff, but don't worry. I'll see you to your new home."

"Did he say something about ploughing?" Mark asked in amazement. "I thought I was going to be a book keeper or school teacher."

"No, you're the plough boy," Elizabeth said firmly. "We were told to expect you, is there anything wrong?"

"Nothing I guess," said Mark, "as long as you don't count that I'm terrified of horses."

“Oh, don't be silly,” Elizabeth chided, “you'll soon get over that. Come with me, I'll show you to your quarters, and take all the twentieth century away with me.”

“Everything?” Mark asked.

“Sure, why not,” came the reply. “You volunteered to go back a hundred and fifty years, didn't you.”

“Sure, but I didn't think it meant everything.”

“Well it sure does,” Elizabeth was laughing at him now. “You'll soon get used to it, but it really means getting rid of everything but we all cheat a little, especially when the sponsors are visiting.” They walked across the dusty street as the light was fading. Stopping at a building which looked more tumble down than secure, Elizabeth gestured for him to enter, and opened the door. The smell of horses assaulted his nose, and made him recoil. Mark was used to nothing like this.

“It's a little ripe,” he said slowly.

“That's just honest horse sweat,” she said. “You'll soon get so you don't notice it.”

“Don't you,” he asked.

“Sure, but I don't have to live with them,” Elizabeth chided. “Now your room's out back, just give me all your things, and I'm told you'll find all your new clothes and belongings ready for you.”

“Do I have to give you everything right now,” he asked.

“Right now,” she said severely, “even if I have to strip you myself.”

“And she sounds as if she could,” Mark thought to himself as he went into the small room she indicated, and began to remove all his clothes. He handed them out.

“And the bag,” she demanded. He passed his bag out as well, then heard the door close as he turned in the gloom to see just what was left for him. He had asked for this job, after all, and now he would have to see it through. He felt stupid standing there naked. He saw that there was a cupboard and some drawers, at the side of the small bed. He opened them in turn and saw that they held clothing of a kind he was unused to.

“Well I wonder what the last plough boy did,” he exclaimed as he fingered a dress of rough fabric from a hanger. “Perhaps he wasn't alone after all.” Then he found a rough plaid shirt, and some heavy cotton trousers, another shirt and what looked like a night shirt. In the drawers there was a mass of fabric. He pulled out some long john underpants, and a rough vest, a waistcoat and then some silk bloomers.

“Well whatever's here has to be what I wear,” he said to himself and pulled on the shirt, the long underpants and the trousers. They were wildly too big, but with the belt pulled tight, he guessed he looked as authentic as any settler on his first day. He looked for shoes. Where could they be. Under the bed perhaps right. He reached under and pulled out a rough brown boot, reached again and pulled out a trim laced black boot with a high heel that could only be worn by a lady, or a girl.

“Quite a guy, the last plough boy,” said Mark. “I hope I meet his girlfriend.”

The brown boots were far too large. They flopped about on his feet like boats. On a whim, he tried the black boots and found that they fitted snugly, but that was no good to him now. He decided to persist with the brown ones, and to walk across to the hotel to inquire if he could get something more suitable.

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“Well, he seems unassuming enough,” the mayor said to his daughter when they met back at the hotel.

“And he fits my profile perfectly. No family, no ties, and a good intellect,” she said. “He's not too tall, very thin, and not ruggedly masculine. I think he'll do very nicely.”

“I'm not sure this is ethical,” he said. “If word of your plans ever get out, we'll be in trouble.”

“No we won't,” Elizabeth replied softly. “After all, he's not going to do anything he doesn't want to. He just doesn't know it yet.”

“And you think he'll be just the sort of person to attract William Stone himself?” he asked.

“Trust me, by the time I've finished with Mark, Mr. Stone will be only too willing to sponsor us for another five years.

That's what he's agreed, if I can find the right person for him. Remember, whatever it costs, he won't notice. I think he could buy the whole state twice over and still have change to buy Hawaii.”

“Well, just so we don't harm the boy,” he said.

“We won't be harming him at all, just changing a few things, and after all, we could be leading him to a life of luxury, if Mr. Stone really likes him,” Elizabeth grinned. “Anyway, if I hadn't come up with a way to bribe the man who has everything, we'd be finished as a project anyway.”

“Okay, I give in,” he never could argue with his daughter. “But I don't understand why the man who could buy any favors he wants, would be willing to pay you to find him a boy that can be persuaded to look and act like a girl.”

“It's just because he could buy anything that he wants to do this. Perhaps he's looking for a girlfriend,” Elizabeth said.

“But he's too old for that,” the mayor said gravely. “But I guess with that kind of money, you're never too old.”

“Well, if it makes you feel easier, think of us as a dating agency. I've got to find someone to meet his requirements, and if it means I have to produce someone, just watch me.”

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“Hey, what did you expect?” asked the mayor when he complained. “This is the nineteenth century, boy.”

“Yes, but...,” Mark began.

“Now, no complaining, you've got to get to work. The horses need tending, and you're expected to get them out to the fields by first light.”

“But I don't know anything about horses,” Mark protested. “No one told me.”

“You sure, boy?” asked the mayor. “We were quite specific when we wrote to the agency who handle our recruiting.”

“Sure I'm sure,” he replied.

“Well, never mind, you'll soon pick it up.” The mayor smiled reassuringly. “It's not as if we're asking you to build a flying machine.” He laughed at his own joke. “As if man ever could fly like the birds, imagine!”

“That new plough boy of mine here yet,” a voice called from the door.

“Sure he is, Luke,” the mayor shouted. “Come back here and meet him.”

A bear of a man walked in. His cruel eyes made Mark shudder inside. “I guess they made some mistake,” he began. “I never touched a horse in my life... But I'm willing to learn.”

“And you think I've nothing better to do than teach you,” Luke sneered. “You're going to have to learn fast and earn your keep. If you're no good with the horses, we'll have to think of some other way of earning keep, just in case.”

“Now, Luke,” the mayor interrupted. “We've no other job vacant at the moment. He'll learn, he just needs a bit of time.”

“You never replaced Jane,” Luke said.

“No, we didn't, but she... She left with the last plough boy, and we decided that the hotel didn't need another waitress,” the mayor said. “After all, her morals weren't in keeping with the rest of the settlement.”

“Sure got no complaints from me,” said Luke. “Least ways not until she took off with my plough boy.”

“Well, we didn't ask for her to be replaced,” the mayor snapped, “Just think of the educational visits she ruined, appearing in front of the students.”

“And you think it wasn't like that for real?” Luke scoffed. “Why, I bet even the plough boys got their share back in the past, let alone the plough man.”

“Right, Luke,” the mayor replied, his exasperation showing. “Remember, our sponsors don't like that sort of thing.”

“Sure, they may not like it,” he replied. “Doesn't mean to say it doesn't go on.”

“Cut it out, Luke.” Elizabeth came in from the back. “We got a new plough boy, and he's here to contribute to the academic validity of our settlement. It's up to you to teach him, right?”

“Okay, I'll teach him,” Luke agreed. “He'd just better learn real good what I like.”



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The next few weeks went from bad to worse, as Mark struggled to learn about the horses. Whatever he did, Luke was unfailingly critical. Whatever he did, the horses were unfailingly uncooperative. It was as if they knew he was terrified of them, and no matter how he tried, Mark could not get the hang of all the harnesses, let alone the correct way to align the plough and other vintage machinery. If there had been any intellectual content to his day, he could have endured things better, but there was not. It was all horses, and Luke's unfailing sarcasm.

Socially, he fared little better. The only place to go was the bar of the hotel, but his attempts to strike up conversation in the all male atmosphere which prevailed brought him no friends. Elizabeth talked to him now and again, but she kept her distance. She smelled sweet though, and he wondered just how much of the twentieth century she had left behind. She always looked so good. She watched him watching her, biding her time, waiting until the right moment. It would come when he was at his most vulnerable. Then she would pounce.

The end of the summer soon came and the weather began to turn colder. Still the unremitting work continued. One day, with the wind blowing from the mountains with a real chill, there was a clap of thunder followed by teeming rain. Mark held onto the horses as best he could, but frightened by the rain, they broke away, dragging him through the mud, until he became disentangled from the reins. He lay there, exhausted and cold, as the rain soaked through his clothes. The nineteenth century hadn't provided him with anything suitable to the rain.

It grew dark. He knew he could not catch the animals, and even if could, it was more than he had the energy to contemplate. Dragging himself to his feet, he turned and walked slowly back towards his poor room at the back of the stables. It was depressing enough to be there at any time, now it was cold, and he smelled of the sodden clothing and stale sweat the day had given him. He pulled off his jacket, then sat shivering on the bed. He thought of his condition and a sob escaped his throat. He threw himself face down onto the pillow and sobbed and sobbed, shoulders heaving as he shivered.

"Hey, it's not all that bad," a voice said softly from the door.

"Please leave me alone," he said between sobs. "I'm just cold."

"Nonsense, you're crying," Elizabeth said, sitting beside him, her hand gently touching his shoulder. That seemed to make the sobs come faster, even though Mark was trying not to show his weakness to her. He pushed further into the pillow. "I saw you coming home alone, and when there were no lights I came across to see if you were all right," she said. "I've got lots of hot water over in the hotel, no one will know if you come across and get cleaned up."

"Please leave me," Mark's voice cracked as he tried to speak. "I don't want anyone to see me like this, least of all you."

"I think you'd better come with me," she insisted. "If I know Luke, he'll come looking for you as soon as word gets round that you've lost his precious horses."

Mark felt a flush of panic. Luke, angry again, was not a proposition he wanted to face right now. He would have to face him, there was no escape, but not here, not alone, and not now. He pushed himself up, and turned to look at Elizabeth, allowing her to see his tears flowing freely down his cheeks. "I'm frightened of Luke," he admitted. "What can I do?"

"I think you'd better come with me," Elizabeth insisted and pulled his hand. He stood without resistance, and allowed Elizabeth to wrap his dripping coat around his shoulders. It was heavy and wet. Every coarse fiber smelled of the horse sweat he had come to detest. When she held out her hand again, Mark stifled his sobs, sniffed to regain a little composure, then followed her across the street to the hotel.

She lead him through a deserted alley to the back door, then motioning for him to keep silent, into the corridor and up the back stairs. Mark stepped quickly after her and in a whirl, she had him organized. In a private room, a big bath was filling, his clothes were removed despite his feeble protests, and he was half pushed, half helped into the tub where sweetly scented bubbles closed over him, protecting his modesty. He lay back, allowing the warmth to soothe him.

"Mark, wake up," Elizabeth was shaking his shoulder, "I think you'd better get out now, before you dissolve."

"Sorry," he replied, rubbing his eyes. "I guess I must have fallen asleep."

"I guess you did," Elizabeth replied, a gleam in her eye, as she stroked his cheek thoughtfully. "You're very smooth," she observed. "Don't you shave?"

"Sure I do," Mark replied defensively. "But the truth is, I only need to about once a week, it's real fine. I couldn't grow a settler beard even if I wanted to."

She paused as if about to say something more, then changed her mind and turned to the door. "Now get washed up, and I'll bring you some supper in a few minutes."

Mark did as he was told, soaping carefully, then untying his hair which he wore in a 'settler' pony tail, he ducked his head under the water and washed it thoroughly with the shampoo he found waiting on the bath side. He laughed to himself as he realized it was a very modern product, not at all in period, then relaxed, feeling warm again, and clean for the first time since he came to the town and started to wear those authentic settler clothes. It was wonderful not to be smelling like a horse, he thought as he stood to dry himself. Then he realized he had no clothes. Elizabeth must have taken them away to dry whilst he slept. He dried on the towel she had left for him, then wrapped it round his waist.

He saw that it dragged on the floor, so tied it higher, then higher still, so that it wrapped round his body just under his arms. Even then it almost touched the floor making a second towel, he wrapped it round his hair, turban like, as he used to do in the university steam room, then sat to wait. For the first time, he noticed that the window blind was open, but dismissed any concern. There was no other building as tall as the hotel. No one could see him; nonetheless, he took care to stand away from the glass where the rain still beat steadily. Perhaps it was that his eyes had got used to the oil lamps, which were used by the settlers everywhere, but the room suddenly seemed very bright against the gloom outside.

"Here's your supper," Elizabeth bustled in, carrying a tray. "There some hot soup, fresh bread, and fruit to follow. All very authentic, and cooked on the range in our kitchen. I told the cook I wanted to eat alone tonight, because I had a headache, so we won't be disturbed." Mark was suddenly very hungry, and accepted the tray greedily. As the soup hit his stomach, he started to feel better.

"What did you do with my clothes?" he asked, suddenly concerned.

"They're drying in the furnace room, where we heat the hotel's system from," she said. "They should be safe there, but they'll take a long time to dry, how did you ever get so wet and muddy."

"I don't want to remember," Mark replied. "Although, I guess come morning, I'd better think of something to say to Luke, before he tears me limb from limb for allowing the horses to bolt."

"Don't worry about that for now," Elizabeth soothed. "Just relax."

"I can't pay for the room." Mark suddenly remembered he had no money.

"That's no problem," Elizabeth assured him. "This is my room when we don't have anyone special visiting."

"It's certainly a great room to have," Mark took note of his surroundings for the first time, taking in the big bed, the bureau, and the easy chairs near the window. There was even an old upright piano against the wall.

"It's furnished like the suite of an old time cattle magnate in one of the rail head towns," Elizabeth explained. "We've got pictures to prove how authentic everything really is. I'm allowed to use it as long as there's no paying guests."

"Do you play?" Mark asked, indicating the piano.

"I try, but I should have practiced harder when I was little," she replied. "I wish I could play well, we really need a saloon piano player. I have to do my best every Saturday evening, but I wish we'd get someone to play regularly. Worst of all, there's a big gathering for the sponsors in a few weeks and they're expecting an 'authentic saloon experience' as the brochure says."

"Surely you're not the only one who can play," Mark asked. "There's the church at the other end of town."

"Have you been there?" she asked.

"No," he admitted. "I just heard them singing, and I'm sure I heard a piano being played."

"You did, but this is an authentic community, remember," Elizabeth explained, catching his eyes which said he didn't understand. "They're not going to do the devil's work by playing for entertainment."

"Right." Mark understood, then added slowly, "I can play, but I don't know anything in period."

"That's no problem. If you can play, we've got all the latest tunes. Stephen Foster ballads, the minstrel hits, selections from the classics, and boxes of music that no

one's ever opened since last century. If you can play, you just might have another job," she said. "In fact, how about an audition."

"But no one knows I'm here," he protested. "They'll just think it's me..." She wasn't accepting excuses.

"But you've a headache, remember?" Mark reminded her.

"It's better, now play something," she commanded. Mark got up, tripped on the towel, and fell flat. He stood, holding the towel to cover his nakedness. She laughed at his blushes. It was infectious and he began to laugh as well.

"I think you'd better wear something more secure," she said, opening a wardrobe, and pulling out a robe. "It's perhaps a little feminine for your taste, but you're about my size, and it's all we've got." Mark held out his arms and allowed Elizabeth to help him into the robe which fastened with an elaborate tie belt. She stood before him and adjusted the fit. It was richly patterned, in shades of deep red and maroon, with a scooped neck in the style of the Empire line, so fashionable in the settler times.

"The towel just doesn't match," she said, pulling it away. His hair tumbled in a damp mass around his face. "Hey, I never realized your hair was this long, what with it always being tied back. Wait while I get a comb."

Mark smelled the sweet scent of the shampoo as she combed his hair out. He felt the sensation of the comb and her hand as she stroked gently, teasing out the tangles so that his hair fell across his shoulders and down his back. She turned to the dresser and he saw a broad red ribbon in her hand. Deftly she caught his hair, twisted and tied the ribbon in a big bow, high on his head where he could see it in the mirror. The ends of the ribbon hung down onto his shoulder.

"We shouldn't be doing this," Mark said, no real hint of protest in his voice. He felt a stirring in his loins which had its own agenda. Real protest was not an option.

"It's just a little fun," Elizabeth said brightly. "Come on, I want to hear you audition. Get over there and play." Mark moved slowly, almost tripped as the full skirt of the robe dragged in an unfamiliar manner on the floor. He felt the material move around him, and heard the swish of the silk and satin. It was a surprisingly sensuous feeling, especially as the bodice suddenly felt quite tight against him. The trim of the sleeves almost hid his hands, as he raised his arm to brush back a stray strand of hair. He perceived it as a very feminine gesture and once more, there was that feeling of forbidden stimulation as he felt his manhood swelling.

Awkwardly, he stepped round the piano stool and sat. Elizabeth watched as he swept a hand under the seat of the robe to smooth it before settling to look at the music in front of him on the stand. Where did he learn to do that, she thought as the first tentative notes began to sound. He played, becoming bolder as his fingers adapted to the feel of the keyboard. He improvised, adding chords and a little embellishment to the basic tunes. Elizabeth rummaged through the music pile, and put new pieces in front of him. It was not difficult. Mark could sight read the notation as well as he could improvise. The music seemed to take over, all the worries and troubles which he knew were to come faded from his mind, as he played and played, oblivious to time passing, until there was a knock on the door. Mark froze.

“Elizabeth, do you know what time it is?” It was her father, the mayor, talking.

“Sorry dad,” she called. “I got carried away.”

“I’ll say you did,” he replied. “I never heard you play like that before, it was wonderful. It’ll be a real treat at the dance next week. Good night.”

“Good night, dad,” she called back, then walked across the room to Mark. “Shit,” she said emphatically. “That’s something I never thought of. I’m playing piano for the dance, except that I can’t play like you. Now he’ll wonder about it.”

“You could say that you’re too nervous to play like that in public,” Mark suggested lamely.

“I guess I’ll have to,” she replied, then to his surprise, she sat on the stool and put her arms around him. He could smell her perfume as she held him tight. “I think we could be good friends, and goodness knows, you need something different here, don’t you?”

The tear which sprang to Mark’s eye gave the answer immediately as she clung to him. “You’d better stay the night,” she suggested. “Your clothes won’t be dry yet. I’ll get them first thing in the morning and you can sneak back to the stable before Luke comes looking for you. You can have the couch, there’s a spare cover to go over that robe, you should be warm enough.”

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Morning came all too soon. Elizabeth shook Mark awake, then almost dragged the robe from him, urging him to hurry into his stiff but dry clothes. Even now they still smelled of stale horses, but they were all he had. Almost tripping over his own feet as he ran barefoot along the corridor, he stumbled headlong into the ample figure of the cook. They looked at each other in surprise, but said nothing.

He ran outside and paused on the porch to pull on his stiff and unyielding boots. It was still raining as he ran round to the rear of the stable to the big back doors. To his surprise the missing horses were standing there patiently as if waiting for him to let them in. Wasting no time at all, he dragged the doors open and lead them in, tipping feed from the hopper into their stalls. Maybe, just maybe, Luke would not find out what had happened if he was quick.

Using all the knowledge he had acquired over the summer, Mark shrugged the harness over the horses, surprised at their cooperation this morning. They stepped into the yoke and soon were off towards the land where Luke would no doubt be waiting critically. Sure enough, Mark could see him standing impassively as they drew near. “Sure was a storm, boy,” he said gruffly. “Must have made them jumpy.”

“They were a little,” Mark agreed.

“Sure was a night,” Luke took the reins from him. “Guess you had a night too, boy.”

“I don’t understand,” Mark looked puzzled.

“Just guessing,” Luke said, reaching out and untying the red ribbon from Mark’s hair. He held it out for him to take. “Sure looks like you was doing something different,

boy. Don't smell much like you used to either. That lavender water I can smell?" he asked, turning away to his work with a leer on his lips.

"I just bathe sometimes, that's all," Mark replied.

"Sure you do," Luke's eyes held his gaze, as if he knew some secret.

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The next days passed slowly for Mark. Luke kept him hard at work, and by evening he was physically too tired to do anything other than eat and sleep. The weather was kinder, and he remained dry, although the smell of horses was clinging too him like never before.

By Friday evening, he was fed up, and built a big fire in his room to heat water to wash. He wanted to feel clean again. Struggling to use the authentic soap to get clean, he wished for the luxury of Elizabeth's bath room. His hair, as it dried, felt coarse and tangled from the soap, with none of the pleasant scent of his last bath. He sat naked in front of the fire, drying his hair. The thought of pulling on his work clothes again was not appealing, but then just as he was reaching for his shirt, he remembered the clothes left in the room. After all, he reasoned, he had worn Elizabeth's robe the other night, there may be one like it just hanging there waiting for him.

Mark stepped to the cupboard and opened the door. He saw that there were a couple of dresses of a rough material, full skirted, very pioneer in style, then another hanger held a skirt, black and full again, but made from a softer material. There were a couple of blouses, but no robe. He turned to the drawers and opened them in turn, looking properly through them for the first time since his arrival. There were garments of a softer material here, made in styles he had never seen before. There were full slips - the word fell into his mind instinctively and a heavy boned corset with steel fasteners in front and laces at the back. There were stockings, and bloomers. The materials were at once soft and appealing to touch, but there was no robe.

He remembered the boots under the bed, and crouched down to rummage under the iron bedstead to see what had been left there. He was rewarded by not one, but two pairs of boots, the ones with the heels he had discovered before, and another pair, more stoutly made, with just a little heel as if made for serious walking. As he was about to get up, he saw pushed right back against the wall at the head of the bed, there was a bag. He pulled it out.

Sitting on the bed, he examined it carefully. It was leather and seemed well made, round and deep with a strong clasp which was locked. He tried to push the release, but it remained firmly shut. Looking round for something to open it, he reached for one of the fire irons, and inserted the thin end against the clasp. He pushed, then twisted, hearing a click as the clasp flew open. He looked inside the bag, then turned it out onto the bed. There wasn't much authentic here either. It contained cosmetics, all modern, some still brightly packaged. There were some small boxes, as well. He opened them in turn, finding that he had stumbled upon a modest collection of jewelry which looked as if it might have been in period. A brown envelope remained, he tore

the flap and found a wad of bank notes in his hand, all modern, and when counted added to \$2450.

“Why on earth would that be left here,” he said out loud. He could not answer, and turned again to the wardrobe. There was a brown paper wrapped parcel on the bottom which he had missed before. He pulled it out onto the bed and folded back the paper. A dress of deep violet with black trim and a matching stole lay there. He unfolded it gently, hearing the material crinkle as he did so. This was quite out of character with the other dresses. This was the dress of a saloon girl - at least that was what they wore in the films he remembered. Perhaps his predecessors had been given a different role to the one which he had been given.

Still there was no robe, and Mark felt the chill as the fire began to burn down. He put another couple of logs in the grate and shivered as he waited for it to catch fire. On an impulse, he reached for one of the fuller slips and pulled it over his head. It fell softly down his body, reaching almost to his ankles, with broad shoulder straps. He pulled the stole over his shoulders, wrapping it around himself. The material had a scent of lavender clinging to it, and felt wonderful after the coarse things he had been wearing. A tingle from his manhood reminded him how much he enjoyed the feel of these forbidden clothes.

A knock at the door brought him up with a start. He froze, hoping who ever it was would go away. “Are you there, Mark?” Elizabeth's voice called, as she knocked again. “Let me in, it's cold out here.” Mark looked around frantically hoping to find something to put on to hide his slip. “I've nothing on,” he called back in a loud whisper. “I'm in bed.”

“Come on, let me in,” Elizabeth insisted. “There's nothing I didn't see the other night.” Mark thought if he opened the door, then got under the covers quickly, he could hide the way he was dressed from her. Quickly he unlatched the door and leapt for the bed as she entered. It went wrong. His foot caught in the hem of the slip and he fell heavily. He lay on the floor. Elizabeth stood over him, looking down.

“So,” she said, “you liked my robe so much, you decided to make a lifestyle change?” She was mocking him.

“It's not like that,” he said. “I just bathed, and I had nothing comfortable to wear. This was just lying around in the wardrobe. I didn't think it would matter please don't tell anyone.”

“I think it's rather cute,” Elizabeth said gently. “I'd rather have a man in touch with his feminine side than some of the creatures round here. They're more in touch with their Neanderthal side, and I don't go for that.”

“You really won't tell,” Mark asked.

“I really won't tell,” Elizabeth assured him. “I didn't tell on our last plough boy, but when it got embarrassing, he had to leave.”

“You mean these were his clothes?” Mark asked in astonishment.

“Sure they were,” she replied. “He liked to dress up now and then, it just got a bit too much 'now', rather than just 'then', and he had to go. He wanted to be called Jane and work in the hotel.”

“Is that why Luke's so abrupt with me?” he asked.

“Luke's like that with everyone, but he wasn't kind at all,” she replied. “That's why Jane went in a hurry, leaving everything behind.”

“I just wanted to wear something softer than usual,” Mark said.

“So I see. In fact that's sort of opened the subject which brought me here,” Elizabeth said gently.

“You'll have to explain,” Mark said.

“Well, I thought you might like to be guest pianist at our social. There'll be lots of people here, lots of guests from our sponsors sampling a couple of days in the life of a frontier town, so you'll mingle in quite well.”

“But... I'm here anyway, of course I'll mingle in well,” Mark said.

“But I haven't explained what I have in mind,” Elizabeth continued. “I thought you could take my place at the piano, and I could be the tough daughter of the mayor, play the part of the saloon keeper with a heart of gold and all that stereotype stuff while you play the piano all prettied up for the part.”

“Hey, we're not on the same page here,” Mark protested. “You mean you want me to wear a dress and play the piano? No way. I'll be a laughing stock. The transvestite kid they'll call me. I can't do it.”

“But no one's going to know you're a transvestite unless you tell them.”

“Luke will recognize me,” Mark protested.

“Luke never goes to these socials with our sponsors. He may miss you, but father will tell him you're required here.”

When Elizabeth said it, everything sounded easy.

“I promise I can teach you to pass as the real thing, you'll just have to be careful.” Elizabeth touched his arm gently and looked pleading into his eyes. “I really want you to do this, do it for me, please. I can't play the piano as well as you can, and everyone's expecting it to be so authentic. Please, for me.”

Elizabeth's presence was so overwhelming that Mark felt his resistance failing at every moment. He looked into her eyes, and tried to look away. “You promise no one will know.”

“I promise I'll keep it a secret, even from dad,” she assured him. “I'll tell him you're one of the guests who always wanted to be a piano player in a saloon and you're having a few days fantasy. That's all he needs to know. It'll be fun.”

“I'm scared, the way you say 'Fun' sounds scary to me,” Mark protested weakly.

“Hey,” she said softly, “I mean it will be fun for you; and I told you I like a man who's just a bit softer and sweeter than the norm.” Her hand stroked his thigh as if to emphasize an unspoken aspect of the agreement. “Please say you'll do it.”



“But I don't know how to act as a girl,” Mark protested.

“That's not the point,” Elizabeth said firmly. “No one knows how someone pretending to be a dance hall girl from the past would act. Just vamp it, no one will know the difference. This is your opportunity to be whatever comes into your head.”

Her enthusiasm was infectious. Mark found himself unable to resist her argument. “Okay,” he agreed. “When do I have to do it?”

“Well, you have to prepare first, but don't worry, I'll see you through that,” Elizabeth hugged him and kissed him with delight. “I'm really looking forward to this.” Mark felt her hand pulling him towards her. Hesitantly his hand went round her waist. He felt the softer fabric of her dress, then as he held her a little tighter, he could feel something harder, stronger fabric underneath. His hand continued round her waist as she kissed him. Her tongue was making an exploratory move across his teeth as he felt the laces at the back which secured her corset. He realized at once that she was dressed in a totally authentic manner.

“You like what you feel,” she asked, giving him time to breathe as she kissed the bridge of his nose, then licked his eyelid.

Mark had never felt anything like this before. Sure there had been girls at High School, and at College, but usually when he tried to move the relationship into an intimate phase, he was rebuffed. He never had the confidence to push forward manfully, now this girl was making the running. It was a different feeling.

“Isn't it uncomfortable to wear all the period clothes?” Mark asked.

“No, of course not,” Elizabeth stood in front of him and put his hands on her waist. “Feel,” she demanded. “I'm laced for comfort tonight, and I'm twenty three inches. When I really want it tight, I've a twenty inch waist, just think of that. It's a wonderful feeling to be laced real tight, you have to breath real careful, but it's real sexy. You'll find out soon.”

She kissed him again before he could reply, using her free hand to guide his to her breast. He could feel the swell of her spilling over the supporting shade of the corset, then the nipple itself hardened against his touch. He tried to think of some protest to make. Hadn't she just told him he was going to be wearing corsets. He should argue, but somehow he didn't want to break the spell. She moaned softly as his hand explored further, pulling back to look at him.

“Later,” she said. “But only if you're a good girl.” The incongruity and intention was lost on Mark as he surrendered to her. He moved as she gently pushed him back onto the narrow bed, and made no protest as her hands started to explore his body, emphasizing the unfamiliar sensations of the long slip he was wearing. His manhood responded strongly but he was not allowed to take any initiative. She grasped him firmly, rubbing until he was at the point of climax, then she gripped the base of his shaft to deny him release, until the urgency passed.

She pushed him back once more and opened the buttons of her dress so that the tops of her breasts which he has only been able to feel before, were exposed. Pushing his hand away, she placed her palm under one, and guided the nipple into his mouth. Instinctively he knew he was being commanded to suck, and surprised by her insis-

tence, obeyed. Then she was moving again, climbing above him, hitching her skirts and dropping all the folds of material over his face. It was dark and the scent of her intimacy came to him.

He moved his head from side to side, trying to find a way through all the skirts and underskirts to her skin, then a touch told him she was not wearing any panties. A silly thought, that they hadn't been invented yet, flashed through his mind. A giggle was suppressed as she pushed down until his mouth was touching the lips of her vagina. He could smell and feel her wetness and raised his tongue. He was rewarded by her gasp, and felt her tense and shuffle her legs so that he was able to reach further inside her as his tongue probed. She moved rhythmically as he worked, then all at once was moving away and the material once more enveloped him whilst she stood beside him.

"I think it's your turn," she said, taking his penis in her hand. He grew at once, and watched in the firelight as she flicked the tip with her tongue, then licked round the head. She did not linger, but with both hands began to manipulate him as if he were some sort of domestic animal being milked. He could not stop, and spurted his seed with a shudder. She held him with one hand and used the other to catch it. As he ebbed, she raised her wet fingers to his mouth and allowed a few drops to fall onto his lips.

Mark recoiled in horror, did she really want him to do this. He was about to ask when she thrust her fingers into his lips. He could taste the salty sweetness of his own fluids as her fingers gently massaged round his mouth. Then she kissed him, her tongue preventing any attempt to spit anything out.

"Girls have to get used to that taste," Elizabeth said. "Let's say that's your first lesson at girl school. I promise you'll enjoy the other lessons too."

"I don't know how you dare...," he started.

"Hey, no protests," she silenced him with a firm finger over his lips as if he were a naughty child. "I'm the teacher, remember?"

She turned and picked up the leather bag, and waved it to him in farewell. With that she was gone, closing the door softly behind her. He lay back, pulling the harsh blanket over his slip. Was it all real, or had he been dreaming.

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Mark did not see Elizabeth for the next few days. The weather remained kind, the horses cooperative, and even Luke was less sullen with him - if a few grunts instead of being ignored could count as anything meaningful. It was on the next Monday that things began to change. Luke was the first to tell him when they stopped for a mid morning break.

"Mayor says you've to report to his office this evening," he told Mark. "You're not going to be able to work with me for the next week or so, special job, he says. You're going to be real sorry to be away from all this." He gestured around the field where the rain was starting to fall heavily again.