



Reluctant Press presents:

The Pearls

Marie Sweet



ILLUSTRATIONS BY C. PAGANI

A 'HER TV' E-BOOK

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The Pearls

By Marie Sweet

One

I will never forget the evening Miss Georgia suggested I attend finishing school.

Finishing school? I suppose it made sense to her, given how far I had come, but I was torn apart between the intensity of my desires and the certainty of what I thought others would think and say, as well as the practical realities of work and paying the bills.

I felt the vibration of my heartbeat while the silence in the library room was occasionally interrupted by echoes and sounds coming from elsewhere in the Rabbit Hole, where Miss Georgia helped me experience life as “Juliette.”

“I don’t see how this should be such a surprise to you, Julie,” she said. I dropped into the red leather couch if for no other reason than to buy me more time before I had to respond.

“Knees together, Juliette,” she said, from behind her desk. “Ladies are always conscious of their modesty, aren’t we?”

I sat up straight, smoothing my skirt while straightening its hem across my legs. “Yes, Miss Georgia,” I replied. As she had taught me, I grazed my stockings against each other at the knees as I crossed my ankles.

For almost a year Miss Georgia guided me on weekly hour-long tours of the forbidden and enchanting land of the feminine; all too brief sojourns to their exotic locales where she taught me all about their customs, native costumes, and language. Luckily for me, my body has always been small, some would say diminutive, providing her with a size 6-8 canvas on which to create her art and inflame my passions. We treated it like night school: I did my homework, the exercises she assigned, and I expectantly anticipated my next quizzes and grades. But I wasn’t there to earn credits or a degree. My attendance was

solely for my own continuing education, to experience life in their country without having to become a permanent resident.

I had been wearing the outfit she chose for me that evening, modeling it for her and refining my persona according to her patient instruction. My airy lavender dress had cap sleeves and a lacy handkerchief hem that stopped just above my knees. I felt enchanted, all of my senses alive and alert, like I was on a runner's high. I couldn't get enough of it; although it was a life-long addiction for what I felt was an unmentionable affliction or weakness in my character.

From her stately wing-backed chair, she watched me enter the dimly lit living room, gliding among its tables and chairs while balancing "Little Women" on my head. From time to time, she had me pause and curtsy to her before proceeding, always keeping my posture erect and a welcoming smile on my face like a good hostess. After a time, she asked me to join her on the couch. Like a kindly mentor, she beckoned me to lay my head on her lap. I unclasped my shoes, sat and pivoted on the cool leather of the couch, tucked my feet back while straightening my skirt, and rested my head on her thighs. She stroked my hair and my chin, traced my lips, and followed the curve of my neck, all the while telling me how pretty I was, and how much she enjoyed my company on our evenings together.

Her hand floated over my form-fitting bodice and down past my waist where she located the stiffness beneath my skirt's layers of gauzy fabric. She gathered my skirt and slip up to my waist, and then cupped her hand over the bulge in my panties, allowing one finger to press upward between my legs. Despite my natural excitement—perhaps even to avoid disturbing the moment—I stayed perfectly still on her lap while I ached for her to do whatever she wanted to or with me.

"What's wrong, Julie?" she asked, using the tone she reserved for our tender "mother-daughter" talks. She fluffed my skirt back into place and then began tracing the folds of my ear, teasing my pearl earring suspended on its delicate gold chain, which draped against my neck. "I know when something is troubling you, my dear."

I considered denying my feelings, telling her that I was just tired out or coming up with some other excuse. On some level, I was afraid of hurting her but in truth I was trying to hide from my inner confrontation.

Finally, I let it out; I told her: I didn't know what to do with my life. What should I do next? Should I take what seemed to be the next inevitable step on this slippery slope and start changing my gender to what it seemed I was already becoming? Might that lead me to be like others I'd read about, who tragically followed what they thought was their heart's desire only to discover in the end, they didn't find the happiness they had been so desperate for. Gender change was the epitome of a one-way ticket. Once I embarked on the journey, round-trip was not an option.

Her palm warmed my cheek as she told me that this is certainly the hardest decision of all. One that only I could make. "Time will tell," was the best advice she could give me. "Stay within your feelings for now and keep exploring yourself. Someday you will find what's within you and then you will have peace."

That was all I wanted: peace. To know that whatever was within me, that drove me to feel the way I did—my desire for femininity—was okay, and that I deserved love and respect without shame.

All too soon, our time was up. As we stood, she hugged and kissed me, during which I fulfilled the girl's role, my arms above her shoulders, hers around my waist. And then, instead of sending me to the dressing room with a pat on my bottom, she asked me to come to her office. It was kind of fun walking down the hall with her, almost like we were out in public. I almost hoped we might run into another guest, perhaps one of those men wearing pink sissy panties under a too-short satin dress, with a pacifier in his mouth. It had happened on another recent visit: he'd stared at me, like he was wondering whether I was a girl or not. I don't think he was able to tell, although I felt I read in his eyes that wanted to be like me.

As Miss Georgia and I made our way down the hallway, the staccato tapping of our heels on the parquet floor mingled with the muted sounds of adventures behind the doors that lined the hallway. I couldn't help but wonder what might be going on in those rooms. Some, I knew through first-hand experience, were medieval, with iron doors and chains, whips and collars lining stone walls.

This was the first time she showed me her office. I studied its features, wondering what they might tell me about its mistress. The walls were brightly painted in a lime green pastel, which added a certain *contretemps* with the carved mahogany furniture. Two upholstered leather chairs faced her desk, like those in a bank president's or CEO's office. Fine art paintings of ocean and mountain scenes hung on the walls between sconces that held candles whose flames drifted and sputtered as the air settled. Through the leaded glass window panes behind her chair I saw the rear garden where she had first instructed me on how to walk like a lady, one foot directly in front of the other.

While I surveyed my surroundings, Miss Georgia stood in front of a full-length mirror on the wall near her desk, examining her appearance, tucking a stray hair into her coiffure.

"How long have you been coming to see me?" she asked. When I didn't respond, she said, almost to herself, "Over six months, I suppose."

"It's been almost exactly a year, Miss." I stared at my hands clasped together on my lap, pink fingernails; on my wrist was the pretty faux-pearl bracelet she had given me for my birthday.

I found her watching me through the mirror reflection. "You know, Julie... you're my favorite. Your voice, demeanor and carriage all attest to your desires. In virtually every way you are a pretty young woman." She cleared her throat and I noticed she had that look of someone who is feeling emotional. "As much as I enjoy our times together, I'm not sure what else I can give you here."

The sincerity of her praise and feelings for me filled me with indescribable happiness. I couldn't help smiling. Indeed, I had worked hard to get where I was. A year ago, I conquered my initial trepidations and began visiting her every week to explore myself, and through this adventure, I hoped to find out who I really was. But despite it all, I still felt lost, frightened, and remained not a little ashamed. It wasn't as if this was something I could talk about with my work associates. I shuddered when I imagined what they would

think. I could hear the comments, the strange looks I'd receive. No, my Rabbit Hole persona was—had to be—my secret, my oasis in the lonely world I lived in.

"Miss Georgia, I don't know why I feel like I have to be here, but I can't imagine not coming to see you. Sometimes when I'm here I don't want to be, but always when I'm away, I think about coming back and staying here forever."

"Then, why don't you go outside and free yourself of this, this... guilt, you seem to carry around with you? I've always said there is nothing wrong with you." She turned back to the mirror on the wall. "Look at yourself! What do you see?"

I stood next to her and looked at my reflection, frowning at my image. "I see me, in a dress and makeup."

"You see a *girl* don't you?"

"I guess so, I..."

"And that's what everyone sees when they see you, Juliette." She returned to her chair and turned away toward the garden. "I've known many like you over the years, and I know the difficulty you have coming to terms with your feelings. At least for me, you're no man dressing as a woman. When you're outside the Rabbit Hole you are, quite simply, a girl dressed in drag."

"But I don't like men."

"Who says you have to?"

"Can't I just stay here, with you? I'd do anything. I could clean, help you with your calendar..."

"Well no, you can't do that." She organized some papers on her desk, arranged some pink message slips. "Have I ever mentioned *finishing school* to you?"

My eyes widened at the possibility of what those two words might mean. "No! I mean, I never even thought of that as a possibility."

"There is a special place, a boarding school, if you will, for people such as yourself who want to go deeper into their journey, get closer to themselves, and then maybe find out what it is they really want."

I looked back at the mirror, examined myself in its reflection, my brunette hair softly framing my face and draping below my shoulders, riding on the tops of my breasts covered by the thin fabric of my dress. I started shaking as I considered the implications. I was afraid I was going to start crying.

Miss Georgia hugged me from behind. My head fell back as I leaned into her warmth. I always felt so natural with her. Like everything in the world was finally all right.

She glanced at her watch. "Think about it some more until our next meeting. We can talk about it again if you wish."

As I drove home, I was caught up in the contrast between what I'd just left and the sights and sounds of the city around me. It's surreal, I reflected, like waking up from a delightful dream. But it's also depressing, as I shifted in my seat to relieve a twist in my jeans.

Leaving the Rabbit Hole always left me feeling empty, like I often felt after finishing a good book. I couldn't wait to return. The neon of the strip malls, stoplights, and headlights all merged into a meaningless blur.

Two

The following morning I walked into the thirty-story office building where I worked as an accounting clerk, past the guard and into the press of the elevator. Some were talking and joking, others had that resigned expression of defeat, glancing at their watches to check the time: eight or nine hours until freedom.

Since I'd started my lessons at the Rabbit Hole, I felt like I was apart from everyone, even those who were my long-time friends. When my work associates talked about football or women, I played my role but I was like a typecast actor anxious for a new part.

I knew I would always stay on the male side of the fence. It was paralyzing to consider the ramifications and recriminations of friends and family, even people I didn't even know. I ruminated about The Operation often enough, read first-hand experiences and looked at pictures on the Web, but I always out-thought my own rationalizations and convinced myself that I couldn't make that change. I was stuck in a purgatory; just close enough to Hell to feel the heat.

I guess that's not really true. I knew what I wanted; I just didn't want to admit it. It was Miss Georgia's suggestion that I wear lingerie under my slacks, sometimes even a pretty camisole, buried under layers of t-shirt, dress shirt, and sweater, to hide any telltale bumps of strap or buckle. Wearing panties, I sat whenever I went to the restroom. It was a cheap thrill to see their silky pastel bunched up against the wool of my slacks and to snug them up my waist when I was finished.

"James! Jesus Christ, *there you are,*" my boss, Mike, said as I stepped off the elevator.

"I told you I needed the Greenwich numbers on my desk first thing, didn't I? So where the fuck are they?"

Here we go again, I thought. I sighed. My interchanges with him summed up my life. "I'm sorry, Mike. I didn't have time last night... but it's almost done. I'll have it to you in a few minutes?"

"Goddamn it James." He stomped down the hall to his office, turned back to me, "Any moron could have gotten this finished on time. What do I need *you* for, anyway?"

Heads peeked out around cubicle walls like rubber-neckers at the scene of a bloody accident, to see who had been slaughtered.

Sally, a pretty secretary who seemed to like me, broke the spell. "James, could you give me a hand with these?"

Coming up the hallway towards me, she was carrying a stack of black binders that threatened to slide out of her arms at any moment. Just as I reached her, they started falling, one of them spilling its contents across the floor. My first instinct—reinforced the previous evening—was to crouch as Miss Georgia had taught me, my legs snuggled together as I bent my knees to lower myself to the floor. Luckily I realized that that wouldn't be

“right” in my work-persona; I stooped over at the waist and started picking up the binders. One of them kept slipping through my fingers so I bent over more to chase it down. When I finally got a good hold on it, my shirttail had come out of my pants.

Too late I remembered my pink waist-high panties. I turned to look behind me and saw Sally and another secretary looking kind of funny at me. The color of my panties, I’m sure, caught their eyes, like a yellow umbrella at a funeral. I jammed my shirt back into my pants, hoping beyond hope that they might doubt their eyes, or maybe, have some sensitivity to my situation.

The redness of my face, though, confirmed their suspicions. Maybe if I hadn’t been so self-conscious, none of it would have mattered. The corners of Sally’s mouth turned up and her eyes met mine; I knew it wouldn’t be long before this latest news would hit the office newswire.

Three

I couldn’t sleep that night, replaying over and over again what had happened. It’s not like I’m the only one who ever cross-dressed. Think about it: famous people on TV, even kings, have done so, and they’ve lived their lives in peace. In some Pacific Islands and American Indian tribes, people like me are accepted and although not encouraged, are welcomed and included in the community.

Maybe I ought to get another job, move to another city. My rent, credit cards, and the cost of weekly visits to the Rabbit Hole, kept my bank account hovering near zero. Lean and mean, I thought. That’s what I am. No, I may be lean, but I’m certainly not mean. Not like those who, until today, I had presumed were my friends.

Later that afternoon when Mike had heard the news, he came to my cubicle, filling its entryway with his bulk, his arms draped across its entry to prevent escape. He said he was looking for his report, but I could see it in his eyes and wide smile. I was trapped.

Four

The next morning I decided that I’d had enough. I wasn’t going to give up the battle for my manhood. I got up early and went to the office to get ahead of my work. I’d show them that I was someone to be respected. That I wasn’t hiding in shame, I was who I was, and who in the hell cared what they suspected?

The rest of the week proceeded uneventfully and the stares and whispered conversations gradually faded until once again, I was just another cog in the machine, amongst so many others, indistinguishable in my lonely anonymity.

After lunch on Friday, my phone rang. I answered, “Accounts Receivable, this is James.”

“Juliette?”

In an instant I was transported back to the Pink Panties Incident, terrified that once again my truth would be exposed.

I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Yes, Miss Georgia?”

"I'm very sorry for disturbing you at work, but do you have a moment?" After the briefest of pauses, she continued, "I've been thinking a lot about you, you know, what we talked about. It seems to me that you need to experience yourself more as a girl, and I'm having a get-together at my house tomorrow evening. Would you like to come and help?"

"I don't know, I—"

"Come on now, listen to me. It'd be good for you. For the most part, you'd be in the kitchen. The guests would hardly know you're there. And I really could use your help. Please?"

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed Sally walking towards me down the corridor. Beautiful as always, she was wearing a red silk dress, with a white belt cinched tightly around her narrow waist. She stopped to talk to someone, and I admired how brightly and easily she smiled. At least she was happy in *her* role.

"Yes, Miss, I'll be there." I watched Sally some more. She giggled at something the other said. "But what will I wear?" I asked.

"Come over at three. We'll have plenty of time to get you ready before my guests begin arriving."

Five

I pulled up into her driveway and stopped at the gate where I pressed the intercom button. She told me to park in the rear, out of the way of the guest parking area.

She met me at the kitchen door smiling encouragement. "Hurry up, girl!" she laughed. "We've got work to do."

I knew I was doing the right thing as my excitement of this new adventure was mounting. I followed her up the stairs into one of the guest bedrooms. There she showed me what I would be wearing that evening.

The baby doll dress was delightfully girlish. Aquamarine, with a shirred bodice held up by spaghetti straps. Its billowing mesh skirt would rest two or three inches above my knees. A charmeuse tie was centered around the Empire waist. Matching ballet slippers and sheer white pantyhose would complete my ensemble.

I settled the figure-enhancing panties high up around my waist and slipped the stockings up my smooth legs. She helped slip the dress's skirt over my head; it was so airy and light it felt like I was wearing nothing at all. I was inescapably a girl as Miss Georgia closed its hidden zipper along my side.

Out of the jewelry box she withdrew a strand of pearls and matching earrings for me to wear.

"My my, Juliette. You're such a girly-girl," she said smiling happily as she watched me slipping on an earring. "I'm not sure if I should let my guests see you. They might insist that you join us."

The thing is, I *liked* being a girly-girl—I wanted to be ultra-feminine—but at the thought of her guests seeing me, that this wasn't going to be a private affair with Miss

Georgia, I grew afraid and anxious. I looked down at my feet, the delicate straps of my slippers wrapped around my ankles. I couldn't meet her eyes, which, I sensed, continued to examine me like I was her tender ingénue.

"Thank you so much, Miss Georgia," I said. "I'm so scared, but I don't think I've ever looked this nice and I know I've never been this happy."

"Tonight is going to be very important for you, and in a way, for me too. I know you will make me proud."

Six

That evening I helped the guests with their coats at the door and later, brought them refreshments and hors d'ouerves before dinner. A late arrival came into the living room as I was pouring champagne for a lady and gentleman sitting near one of the leather-topped end tables. She looked like a forty-something fashion model or movie star as she discarded her white overcoat on a chair by the entrance, leaving her in a trim black bolero jacket and pants with gold buttons, otherwise unadorned except for a simple gold chain bracelet and matching earrings. Her hair was light brown with blonde highlights, cut into a practical businesswoman's style; understated sexuality, attractive and low-maintenance.

Although immediately invited into a conversation grouping, I observed her surveying the scene, checking out the rest of the party. I couldn't turn away when her eyes met mine, like I was a child caught doing something naughty, afraid that if I looked away too quickly she would know I had been admiring her, but also knowing that the longer I kept my eyes on her, the more certain she would be of her assessment.

Soon after, she disengaged from the others and came straight toward me, her stride and demeanor radiating confident awareness of the power of her beauty's effect. It was if she was the ruler and all of us were in her dominion. As she grew closer, I had little doubt that she would be just as comfortable negotiating multi-million dollar deals as confronting heads of state on their diplomacy.

On reaching me, she held out her hand. I gently pressed back on her fingers with my fingertips, as Miss Georgia had regularly rehearsed with me. I caught the scent of designer perfume coming from her wrist.

"You must be Juliette," she said, her sharp eyes observant, registering everything. "Georgia suggested we meet and get to know each other."

What did she mean by that? What had she been told? Again, I felt naked, like my dress had disappeared, the confluence between my thighs uncovered by the short skirt of my dress. It felt like there was something going on that was out of my power to control. I shivered for a moment, suddenly unsteady in my ballet slippers.

I looked down at my feet, noticed that one of my stockings was starting to gather at the ankle; I resisted the urge to straighten it. "Thank you, ma'am," I said, not knowing what else to say, so embarrassed that I couldn't think of anything more interesting or spontaneous; I couldn't even meet her gaze. I became intensely aware of my bust and cleavage in my bodice. Two distinctly feminine mounds tented out from my chest by my breast forms. If she disapproved, I would be devastated.

"As she promised, you are a *lovely* little thing." She stood back slightly to study me. Her eyes followed the lilt of my hair balanced on my shoulders, down my dress to my legs. She scanned the room, then said, "I wonder, do you have a moment to join me on the terrace?" she said, motioning to the French doors set into the rear wall. "It would give us some privacy."

Without waiting for my reply, her hand clutched my elbow and she began gently steering me toward the doors. Being escorted by this beautiful stranger, I felt like I was walking on a cloud, caught up in a dream. As we reached the white French doors, one of the male guests cast a flirting smile at me and then opened the door for us. My escort's face froze him out as she tightened her grip on me: something was going on that I didn't understand. Was she possibly jealous of other admirers?

A slight chill rode on the evening breeze and the cast of the full moon painted the lake's water like navy blue velvet highlighted with diamond sequins. We stopped at the balustrade that edged the patio and disappeared into the shadows.

The soft garden light lit her face from below like a dramatic screen shot of the leading lady. She was, in fact, stunning. Not like a professionally quaffed starlet or some air-brushed Cosmo-model. She was her own woman, fully in control, independent; a mature lady who had moved well beyond the gushing exuberance of her twenties to the calmness of a judge who has seen it all, knows what she wants and expects it to be forthcoming. I sensed something happening between us that I didn't want to stop.

"It's a beautiful evening, isn't it?" she asked, starting conversation, but more a statement of fact, not expecting a reply. And when she didn't hear one, she looked out at the water, almost like she was talking to herself, although it was clear she was talking to me. "You really like this, don't you?"

"The party? Oh yes, I—"

"No Juliette," she said, returning her focus to me. She smiled in a friendly, intimate way that told me she was going to tell me something nice and that she really meant it. "I meant, being the prettiest one in the room."

I blushed and looked down at the terra cotta tiles, delighted to hear her words.

"You are, you know," she said. "You must have noticed the men. Several of them were watching you, trying to catch your eye."

"That's okay, I guess."

"What do you mean? I thought you liked it?"

"I do... it's just that, I like women more."

"Oh, I see. And what is it that you like about them?"

I closed my eyes and reflected for a moment. Something about this stranger was bringing me closer to my deepest desires, bringing them closer to the surface so that in some ways it was the first time I was fully aware of what I really felt and wanted.

"I like women..." I said, and stopped for a moment. "I imagine finding a woman who knows what she wants and, I guess, finds that I fulfill some important part of her dreams."

"Really? And why is that?"

“To me, women have so much more flexibility of choice in who they are inside and out, in what they want. If a woman like that really wanted me, then, well, I think that would be the best thing I could ever imagine.”

“What do you offer her?”

“Oh, that’s easy!” I giggled a moment before becoming more serious. “I hope this doesn’t sound too stereotypical, too, you know, two-dimensional...” I watched her for some sign of acceptance; she merely nodded and waited for me to continue. “For the right woman, I’d be her sexy playmate, her devoted wife, her sultry hostess... whatever she wanted. I’d be there, you know, for her. Body and soul.”

We stopped talking for a minute or two. I watched the water lapping against the rocks, its little waves sparkling in the moonlight.

“Juliette, may I call you, Julie? I imagine you’re wondering about Georgia and me, what she told me, and who I am.” She came closer to me, more intimate. I looked up at her, realizing she was half a head taller than me.

“I’ve known her for over fifteen years; she was my neighbor when I first moved to California and we became friends. We were both starting our careers, me in land development, and she in fashion consulting. We drifted apart when our jobs began to get in the way; I moved south, while she stayed here in the Valley.”

She began tracing her fingernail down my arm as if she was telling me that she knew she would have her way with me—it was only a matter of time. I didn’t move, afraid she might stop.

“We bumped into each other about a year ago in Carmel, re-started our relationship and, well, it’s been terrific finding an old friend.”

She stopped, lost in thought, as if deciding whether she should proceed or not. “And now, she told me about you. How you might like to attend my... school.”

I was flabbergasted to hear this; it was so sudden. I couldn’t imagine meeting a beautiful woman like her, let alone that she would have a school for people like me.

“You mean, as a student?” Finally, I had found my voice.

“Of course, as a student.” She took a sip of her drink and continued, “There are strict entrance requirements, of course. But with Georgia’s recommendation, I’m sure you’ll fit in perfectly.”

I couldn’t imagine anything more exiting than this: standing on the terrace of an elegant villa overlooking a moonlit lake, a beautiful woman talking to me about attending her girl’s school. I was aware of everything around me, the sounds of grasshoppers, the slippery satin lining of my dress caressing my chest and waist down to my thighs where it melted into the snugness of my stockings. A fantasy come true.

“This is all so sudden for me,” I said. My voice shook from the raw feelings she had exposed within me. “I’m honored that you would consider me. I... I’m not sure I’m really ready for this.”

She straightened and reached over to my bare shoulder, her warmth calming me with her acceptance and reminding me of the reality I was already in, the clothes I was wearing.

Her fingers lightly traced the strap holding up the top of my dress. "Are you sure of that? It looks to me like this is *exactly* what you're ready for."

"I'm so sorry, I meant no disrespect. I just meant that I wasn't sure I could do this *right now*. I do have a job, responsibilities--"

"Assuming you qualify, the school will support you completely, tuition, clothing, all that sort of thing." She started stroking my hair, rearranging it over my shoulder. "You see, I know all about you, more than you imagine." In a whisper she said, "Juliette, this is something you want, to try something completely different. Maybe I can offer that to you."

I started shaking, wondering why the world seemed to be turning upside down. She guided me to a nearby table. I tucked my skirt under me as I sat down, spread it over my knees and crossed my hands in my lap. She turned her chair so we faced each other, her pants-covered knees against mine, my stockings pulled tight, creating light circles on each knee.

"You're right, this is very exciting for me to think about. I just don't know--"

She leaned over and took my hands in hers. When she felt the cold in my fingers she removed her jacket and draped it over my bare shoulders, pulling it closed around my front. The crisp lines of her bolero contrasted sharply with the frou frou femininity of my blue dress. I loved every second; it was delightful being the focus of this wonderful woman's attention.

"I have a proposal for you. Take a vacation and come down to see us for a couple of weeks. If it works out, you can stay. If not, you'll have experienced something you'll never forget."

"What a vacation that would be," I said, more to myself than to her. "But, would I have some time for myself, you know, to relax?"

"I'm sure you'll be okay," she said. "Besides, it'll be fun for you. I'll make sure of that."

"When are you thinking?"

"As soon as you can."

She was right; I couldn't pass this up. My mind started churning, thinking out loud. "Let's see, I'll have to get my vacation approved; that shouldn't be a problem. And I'll have to pack up my clothes--"

"I'll supply everything you need," she interrupted. "I'll have my driver pick you up and bring you to the school. Are you a hard worker, Juliette?"

"That's what others have said."

"Some of my acquaintances have said that I expect a lot of my students, but I have no doubt I'll be pleased with you," she said. "You will *please* me, won't you, girl?"

"I'll do my best, I promise." I snuggled into her jacket, enjoying its warmth. "I just realized, I don't even know your name."

“Lourdes Manchester,’ but you must always address me as ‘Headmistress Lourdes, or just, Headmistress,” she said. She cleared her throat before continuing, “I’m mistress of the academy, after all.”

I returned her coat as she stood to leave. “Of course, Headmistress Lourdes.”

I hadn’t even thought to ask what kind of a school she was running.

Seven

On returning to work I submitted my vacation request just before HR had a chance to inform me I’d been laid off. Maybe it was for the best. Regardless of what happened at the school, I needed a change. It seemed like my life had added many dimensions in only the last few days.

But I still had two weeks to wait. They were the longest fourteen days of my life as I wondered about the Headmistress and her school.

The day before I was to be picked up a box was delivered to my door. In it, I found a letter from Headmistress Lourdes:

Dear Juliette,

We’re so looking forward to your visit to the school. To help you feel more comfortable fitting in, please wear the enclosed uniform, which is required of all junior students. Please limit your use of makeup, as it isn’t allowed except for the upper division girls.

Lower-division students are also not permitted any personal belongings such as books or clothing, so please spare us the necessity of storing them while you are here.

I can imagine you may feel some concern about maintaining your anonymity; our driver will pick you up at the Rabbit Hole at 6:00 on Friday. Georgia is expecting you at 5:30.

Sincerely,

Lourdes Manchester

Headmistress

L’Academie d’Especial Jeune Fille

I unfolded the tissue paper to look through the box’s contents and found a navy-blue and forest green plaid skirt, white blouse, white bra and waist-high panties, white tights and black flats: the classic girls’ school ensemble.

I examined the skirt more closely. It had a bib whose top ended in shoulder straps that attached to matching buttons on the skirt’s rear waistband, on both sides of the zipper. The lingerie was equally simple: unadorned white cotton except for a delicate rosette on the front of the bra and panties.

The following day I arrived on time at the Rabbit Hole with my box and little else. Miss Georgia fussed over me, making sure everything was in place and tidy for my adventure. Although she paid extra attention to my grooming—she even curled my hair a bit—I felt she was withdrawn and I felt badly, like I might be hurting her for leaving. I tried to reassure her that I would be back shortly, but she didn’t respond. My excitement won over my worries about her.

I asked her what I should do with my wallet and keys; I had no purse and no pockets. She insisted I leave them with her—she would make sure they were kept safe while I was away. I figured this was okay but it did increase my apprehension as I left all identification and credit cards behind. I was releasing myself unequivocally to the school's care for the next two weeks.

I waited impatiently on the entryway couch for the car while watching the parade of the Hole's clients coming and going for their own adventures. For the most part, they didn't notice me. I hoped I looked so much like a girl that I was invisible to them. And maybe they found me a little threatening; like I was an innocent observing them in a place they couldn't tell their friends or family about.

A woman who looked like she was a bank guard for her day job came in, wearing a dark suit and tie, her short hair spiked with a shiny gel.

"You're Juliette?" she asked. To my nod she responded, "Let's go."

Miss Georgia walked me out to the shiny black limousine where the uniformed driver waited, holding the door. Despite her earlier distance, she hugged me, a little longer than usual. I was surprised that she would show such emotion but pleased that I had such an effect on her.

As the driver settled into her seat, I fastened my seatbelt and fluffed my skirt over my legs. I wondered how long a drive it would be and without anything else to do, I figured that she and I could have some sort of conversation. I realized then just how nervous I was. I had never felt so alone, so completely cut off from the outside world. Imagine, I wondered, what my coworkers would think!

The red leather interior of the car was mixed with chrome accents; it had an almost gaudy elegance. "It must be a very nice finishing school to have as nice a car as this one," I said in a loud enough voice for the driver to hear. I hoped I would be appealing to some pride she had in her job.

She glanced at me through the rear-view mirror. "Finishing school?"

I heard the door locks activate and a smoked-glass partition snake up behind the driver, sealing us off from each other. So she's not interested in talking to me, I concluded. Then I noticed that the door handles were missing and when I tried to roll down a window, I found that they didn't operate.

An hour later, darkness descended as the car was entering Friday evening traffic. I started to doze; scared, wondering what I had gotten myself into. I thought about trying to escape but without door or window handles, I didn't see any way out. And what if I did? How would I explain my school uniform? How could I jump from a moving car in my skirt and bobby socks? Despite my trepidations, I wasn't sure I could live through *that* embarrassment.

With nothing to do but wait I started exploring the little compartments around my seat. Ashtray, unused. In the glove box, I found a collection of rubbers, KY, and tissue paper. Having exhausted what little there was to explore, I settled into my seat and watched the traffic, wondered where the other drivers' lives were headed.

I felt a chill and looked down at my plaid skirt, my breasts holding my jumper and blouse out from my chest and obscuring my view of the buckle of my seatbelt. What in the hell had I gotten myself into?

Eight

A few rays of sunlight began appearing on the horizon as we wandered through miles of unnamed twisty foothill roads. Finally we turned onto a smooth dirt road identified by an overhead wooden sign: *L'Academie*. The gravel road wove through more hills and scrub oaks, across noisy cattle guards and over small bridges, until we reached a driveway paved in smooth cobblestones and bordered with willow trees. Beyond the trees was a hilly green lawn interspersed with garden plantings and bushes, all connected by bordered paths.

The driveway ended in front of an antebellum white mansion, brick with massive Doric columns that supported its peaked roof, above which was a widow's walk, defined by a delicate white picket fence. Above the front door was a rounded alcove deck in front of a center room, flanked by two sets of windows on both sides. A veranda with wicker chairs and small tables surrounded the house. There was even a love seat swing to the left of the front door.

The driver popped the locks on the door and helped me step from the car. From there, she walked with me up the steps, and rang the bell.

A young woman swung open the massive door for us. She smiled at me; at least she seemed happy to see me.

"All yours," the guard said; he then backtracked down the stairs to her car.

The woman, who was wearing a floral-print dress and white stockings, escorted me into the mansion. The foyer walls were tall and white, capped by ornate crown molding in the art deco style. Large oil paintings of landscapes and tall ships lined the corridor, at the end of which was a pair of carved doors with brass handles.

She knocked and we heard, "Enter," from within.

"Ah, Juliette!" Headmistress Lourdes said from her desk as I entered the room. The room was huge, almost cavernous. More like a ballroom than an office, with a parquet floor that looked like woven wood. The louvered windows behind her cast lines of shadows across her desk like the bars of a cage. The items on her mahogany desk were arranged with precision, around the green ink blotter: a pen aligned with one edge, a white and gold phone like from a past era to her left. I heard the doors behind me softly close.

"Hello Headmistress Lourdes," I said, curtsying slightly, before traversing the room to her. "Thank you for inviting me to your school."

In the shadow behind her monolithic desk, a girl was kneeling on a satin pillow next to the base of the chair, one side of her beautiful face resting against the Headmistress' thighs. She wore a pretty dress of black velvet, with a halter-top and a sparkling brooch at the V of her décolletage. She had a single strand of pearls around her neck and wrists. Headmistress was lazily stroking the girl's cheek and neck, like she was petting a favorite cat.