

FINDING LADY KATHERINE

By Sofronia Anne Strong



ILLUSTRATED BY BRIAN DUKEHART

A 'HER TV' NOVEL

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FINDING LADY KATHERINE

By Sofronia Anne Strong

Chapter 1

Karl was not sure quite how it had all happened.

Yes, he remembered each step in the process perfectly well from the first cinch of the corset to the last refinement of his comportment, but it all had a surreal character to it as though his transformation had happened to him in a time warp, as though he hadn't really been involved. It seemed to be happening to someone else. It would be a while yet before he fully comprehended how and why Karl had become Lady Katherine, or Kitty, as everyone called him now.

It was just a lark to begin with, a part in a school play, a silly bit in a farce at that. If there had been anything the least bit serious about the whole thing he was sure he never would have gotten involved to begin with, but in a boy's prep school it was traditional to the play girl's roles. Everyone thought it was great fun. The autumn staging of three one-act comedies with all parts played by the boys was a long tradition at Hill Academy.

It would have been absurd to say that Karl was effeminate or even less than manly, either in his appearance or demeanor. He was a boy of sixteen, blonde, wide shouldered and narrow tripped. He hung between that delicate boyishness and emerging adult manhood that makes good looking boys of that age attractive. He was a bit shy without being withdrawn and there was a sensitivity to his nature that people found appealing, but no one would have thought him girlish in the least. There was certainly nothing in Karl's own attitude about himself that gave him any second thoughts about his manliness, especially when he had his arms around Stephanie, or Joyce, or any of the several girls he grappled with in the back of his car.

The drama coach had to have an eye for boys who might succeed at being girls on the stage, except for those roles that were meant as pure parodies of women, and there were always some of those. Mr. Jones had spotted Karl with a practiced eye. He was one of those fair-skinned lads who, with a little expert work could be made into a very presentable female on his stage.

The first of the three fall plays was an inane farce called Gas, Air and Earl and took its humor from the efforts of a social climbing American mother to marry her daughter off to what she believes is an English earl, a hapless young man who is, in fact, a gas jockey. Figuring large in this is the mother's aristocratic lady friend, Katherine, the Countess of Peck.

Mr. Jones visualized Karl in long gloves, a pearl choker, coronet and a full length gown. Instantly he realized he had his Countess Kitty. *Now*, he thought, *it was time to pull the strings and apply the pressure.*

The boys in the drama club all knew that it would fall to some of them to become girls for the fall plays, but, as might be expected, each liked to think it would be someone else who would be tapped to appear in dresses and tresses. Once cast, however, all the boys tended to make it all a lot of fun, which is what it was meant to be.

When they met for the first read through on Thursday, Mr. Jones simply asked Karl to read the part of Countess Kitty. Karl blushed. There was some good-natured shoving about and kidding until Mr. Jones asked the star halfback to read the part of Mrs. Snodgrass, the ambitious American battle-ax. That role was a broad parody.

By the end of the read through it was over. Karl was a countess, Lefty Albright was destined for an appearance as an upholstered matron and little John Steenison as the ingenue daughter. John had been a forgone conclusion. He was one of those tiny delicate boys for whom make-up and a wig hardly were needed to establish his bona fides as an ingenue.

By the opening of school Karl was already being addressed in the halls as “your ladyship”, Lefty had been nicknamed “Mom”, and poor John had been dubbed “Sis”.

It was this way every year. It was just part of the fun, but Karl and Lefty only hoped that the monikers wouldn't stick beyond the six weeks of rehearsal and the performance.

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Karl grappled with the binomial theorem. He was tutoring in algebra, his weak subject. He always had trouble visualizing the x's and y's and sorting them onto the correct side of the equation. He pondered how strange it was that he could learn whole pages of poetry or dialogue in minutes, but he couldn't balance equations.

Attending his Saturday math tutorials dressed as a lady had been Mrs. Parson's idea. When Mom and Sis helped him dress up to go to his math tutorial he felt kind of embarrassed and, on that account, tried to get out of it. Before he transformed himself from Karl to Kitty he wanted only to be Karl, but strangely, once he was dolled up, and making a very passable doll, at that, it really felt good. He felt at home, warm and fulfilled when he finally brushed on his lipstick and posed before the full length mirror.

Mrs. Parsons was a patient tutor and he appreciated her help. Somehow she thought that he concentrated better, was less annoyed at having his Saturday morning pre-empted. Somehow it was all mixed up with the play too. Karl didn't understand it, but he went along with it and got his feelings scrambled each week as he labored over his equations in his smart dresses and flowing locks. It was just uncomfortable after an hour or so in the panty girdle and bra he wore for his tutorials. The dress was fussy and the wig cumbersome and hot.

Why, he wondered, did the sight of himself transformed into a pretty girl, thrill him so?

He seemed to deny the thrill. Overtly, he was not admitting that he liked it. He hadn't come to that yet, so he complained and objected, but it was only to prevent himself from acknowledging that he liked being Kitty, that he made a fuss. He liked wearing them, but then, in a way, he didn't.

Karl finished up the algebra problems in the workbook and went over them with Mrs. Parsons. He had got them mostly right for a change.

“Cecily used to wear that dress for dancing class,” cooed Mrs. Parsons, pouring tea for each of them, after the lesson. “I do hope you like it. I always thought it was terribly pretty, you know.”

Karl blushed and sipped at the lapsang souchong. He wished Mom would come and get him; take him home so he could be out of the dress.

But, sipping tea with Mrs. Parsons with the feel of the lace edges of the petticoat against his silken covered legs felt so delicious he didn't want to leave. Karl was confused.

When he was got up as Kitty for his tutorials he hated it, until he got there. After the lesson he couldn't wait to get home, but wished he could stay with Mrs. Parsons and remain in the pretty frocks she always had for him. Karl cursed the day he had been made to play Lady Peck, and then he blessed it. Karl felt his life spinning out of control.

“Come on, Mom? Where are you? Get me out of here,” he shouted desperately to himself as Mrs. Parsons poured him a second cup and pushed the dainty tea sandwiches toward him. She arrayed his blonde tresses on his shoulders and cooed at him.

“I think you really do love it so, dear, don't you? Don't be shy now. You make such a very lovely Kitty, don't you?”

Karl blushed, admitting that he did, and wondered why.

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It was at dress rehearsal, when he was finally in full regalia as Countess Kitty, that the tall, stately elegant and aristocratic lady reflected back at him hit Karl with full impact. In a terrifying flash he realized that he not only made a very impressive countess, but that being one thrilled him to his bone marrow. It was that part that terrified him, and he swore to keep that to himself and never let that feeling wash over him again. The image wouldn't leave his mind, however. He longed secretly to see himself just once more in pearls, coronet and ball gown, to feel again that inexplicable thrill he had at rehearsal and in performance.

What, he wondered, had made it feel so good? Why, he wondered, did that frighten him so?

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When the curtain came down at the close of Gas, Air and Earl the house was in an uproar. The play had been outlandishly funny, not merely because of the three boys in the girl's parts but because it was a funny script and the cast had gotten into the spirit of the theatre and done an outstanding job of putting it on. The cast had been all smiles of self-satisfaction as they took repeated curtain calls, Karl dropping full court curtsies in his long elegant gown, his tiara flashing in the lights.

The big surprise came when ushers dashed onto the stage and presented each of the bogus ladies with a huge armload of roses for which they had to make more bows.

It caught Karl off guard - *being given roses? True, it was traditional, but still...*

The cast party commenced immediately in the school's great reception hall and Mr. Jones insisted that everyone from all three plays attend, still in costume. Karl, Lefty and John looked dismayed. Mr. Jones only smiled and said it was traditional. They realized it was, but Karl hadn't thought about standing around in his hyper-elegant feminine trappings without the shield of the footlights and the isolation of the proscenium stage.

At the party, parents and friends were all over them, congratulating them on their performances and on their costumes.

Karl began to get nervous as various friends, parents and faculty became what he thought was a little too effusive in their praise of his female impersonation. Reeling from it all, he was finally able to sink onto a bench in the trophy corner just in time to have Tess plunk herself down beside him.

Tess was Karl's real passion.

He always got weak in the knees when she got close to him. It wasn't just that she was a lovely girl, it was the smell of her, her skin. It was everything about Tess that just melted Karl. For this festive evening she wore an ensemble of green taffeta and black lace, with white bare shoulders. Karl, even though he was encased himself in a long array of black silk and teetering in satin pumps, had been melting merely at the sight of Tess, across the room.

Splaying her skirts around her as she sat, she smiled glitteringly at him, took one of his white gloved hands in both of hers and kissed him wetly on his rouged cheek.

"Ohhhh. I loved it I just loved it. You were really neat. What a marvy lady. What a countess! You're a better Kitty than a Karl."

Karl blushed, brightly, suddenly, glowing red.

"Oooh, even better," Tess burst forth in a peal of giggles.

Karl shifted uncomfortably in the confines of his rigid corselette and didn't have the faintest notion of what to say. He suddenly realized why girls often went rigid with confusion when he complimented them.

Tess sensed his discomfort and patted his hand solicitously.

"I'm sorry, Karl. I should have been more thoughtful. It's just that you were so elegant, so convincing up there, so into the part I had trouble the whole time trying to remember it was you. I just wanted to tell you how good you are. Then when I came in here and saw you, still in that gown and those gloves I was amazed again. I realized it wasn't just staging. I saw that you really make a very remarkable lady. It just took me back, that's all. It's OK! It's Karl I like so much, sweetheart. I had no idea Karl would make so amazing a lady. Come on!" She jumped up, grabbed him by the hand and dragged him through the door to a small office off the trophy room. She flung her arms around him and smothered him in kisses. It wasn't the first time. Karl and Tess had been an item for a while. As they embraced, crushing one another, satin against taffeta, their long tresses mingling, Karl felt a thrill deeper and more intoxicating than he had ever felt in Tess's embrace before.

“Ohhh....how delicious,” she cooed. “What kind of girl must you think I am, nuzzling up to a countess like this?”

“My kind of girl,” Karl countered, pulling her against him and off of her feet with both fully gloved arms crushing her to him. “Just the kind of girl I like best. It's just too bad if you are in love with a countess, my dear little thing. I can't help it if you are the kind of girl who goes fawning over aristocrats. You seem to have a thing for countesses. Well, it seems you've found one. If you expect to advance yourself socially, mind your manners, young lady, or you shall fall from my favor.”

He let her loose and she backed away curtsying deeply. “Yes, your ladyship. Of course milady. Thank you so much your ladyship.”

Karl struck a grand and elegant pose with an elevated chin and disdainfully waved her away with his black lace fan. “You are excused,” he commanded with icy hauteur.

They both fell to the floor in a cascade of giggles and guffaws.

Later, in the back of Lefty's car, with Karl returned to his male persona, Tess and Karl's impassioned groping was punctuated with further titters and giggles.

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Tess saw to it, thereafter, that it wasn't the Kitty name that stuck to Karl after the play. People, mostly girls, kept addressing him as “Your Ladyship”.

Karl told Tess to tell them to knock it off, but it didn't do any good.

Lefty became Lefty soon enough thereafter, but poor John had been just too charming, delicate and fey as the ingenue. He was permanently stuck with “Sis.”

It drove Karl nuts. If it wasn't, Your Ladyship, it was, Milady, or even, Your Grace. Karl looked at Tess sternly and admonished her to call her friends off. He even made veiled threats and shook his fist in Tess's face.

When he wound down she smiled demurely, lowered her long lashes, curtsied while backing away and merely said, “Of course, just as you wish, your ladyship.”

His bluff called, Karl gave it up and resigned himself to being addressed as a lady of the realm. He reckoned they'd tire of the little game soon enough.

They didn't!

Chapter 2

The plays had played the first weekend in October and apart from the persistent reference to him as, “Your Ladyship”, Karl had pretty much buried all the feelings and sensations which he had enjoyed and struggled with during his triumphant portrayal of Lady Peck. He had finally put the great pleasures surrounding his first foray into femininity down, convinced they were just the success of the play.

He was immersed in junior varsity football and keeping his grades up. The rest of his time was spent in trying to corner the delectable Tess, who was being coyly elusive, but not unattainable.

The Hill School and Norton Hall, where the daughters of the same families were schooled, were only a mile apart, but during the week they might as well have been in

different countries. This made the weekends precious as the Hill boys and the Norton girls interfaced in an ongoing dance of dates, meetings, gatherings and fun.

The next big traditional two-school gathering was the Halloween costume Party, traditionally staged at Norton Hall. The girls asked the boys to this one, and Karl waited patiently for the word from Tess. Tess, with perverse glee delayed her invitation until Karl concluded that he would be staying home this year. Finally over burgers and cokes at the Sub Shop, just two weeks in advance of the affair, Tess finally dropped the word.

It wasn't quite what Karl wanted to hear, however.

"You will come to the masquerade with me, won't you?" Tess whispered into Karl's ear as they snuggled in their booth after the movie. "I've missed you, Kitty," she breathed. "It may be our last chance to go out together, you precious doll."

Karl sat bolt upright, choking on his coke.

Tess began to titter, as did her girl friend, Monica, seated across from them with Lefty.

"Whoa! Wait a minute," sputtered Karl. "Hold on there, just who are you inviting to the costume party?"

"Why you, Kitty darling. I want Kitty to come. Kitty is such fun. I haven't seen her since the play. I want to see her again, don't you, Monica?"

"Yes, oh yes," Monica rejoined, gleefully. "Come on Karl, say yes, come as Lady Kitty. You're great as Kitty. It'll be the best costume there. You'll win the prize, for sure."

"Please girls...come on....Kitty happened. Kitty is over with. Just let her be. I don't want to do that over again...."

"Well... if you just have to be Karl, you can find someone else to ask you, then." Tess's voice had a hard finality to it.

"And that's not likely," added Monica. "I can't think of a single girl at Norton that would ask Karl if he had turned Tess down."

"Looks like you're stuck, Your Ladyship," Lefty pronounced. "They want Lady Kitty or they want no one."

Karl glared at him.

"How come me, and not you? How come they aren't asking for your Mom thing you did in the play? I haven't heard of anyone asking John to show up as Sis yet. What's with me and the Kitty thing?"

"They just like you better as one of the girls, pal. There's just something about you Karl, something so kind of delicate...."

Karl threw a handful of paper napkins at him.

Tess and Monica glared at each other, knowingly, full of suppressed laughter.

Karl slumped down in the booth.

“OK...OK...I know when I'm licked. So I come to the masquerade as Kitty, any particular kind of Kitty?...I mean not the costume from the play. I'm not doing that again. That's too much....

“But, sweetheart, that's the only Kitty we know, I mean it's Lady Katherine who's so neat. There really isn't any other Kitty, is there?” Tess was boring in like an auger, delightfully teasing her beloved, watching him squirm. There was no malice in it, just the fun of ragging her boyfriend after all the teasing he did of her.

“Well, you're going to have to settle for a different Kitty. I'm not doing the Seventh Countess of Peck, all over again.”

“OK,” Tess abruptly agreed with a smile and a little shake of her shoulders. Oh, Lord how it amused Karl when she did that kind of cute little girl thing. It was at the same time so funny and so girlish. “We'll just find another neat little get-up for the party. That'll be fun, finding another kind of Kitty, won't it, darling?” She pecked him on the cheek and squeezed his hand. “I love this boy,” she announced.

“Especially, when he's a girl,” Lefty announced. “I'm not sure I understand that, Karl ol' buddy, but I wouldn't fight it, not as long as Tess sticks with you. I mean, what's the difference if you have to mince about in skirts. Everyone will just say you like to please little Tessy. Like wouldn't any guy be a girl if his chick liked it?”

Karl lunged at him but Lefty dodged him.

“Would you stick around if Monica invited you to the masquerade done up like the “Mom” character again, eh...Mom?”

“Sure, but she hasn't and she wouldn't, would you Monica? You girls just like Karl in dresses and tresses. Real men like me don't make a real cutey like Karl does.”

“Oh, I don't know,” Monica said, “What do you think, Tess? Should I ask the big linebacker to the masquerade as his femme self? He could maybe come as my Aunt Maude.”

Lefty looked.... scared, suddenly.

Karl grinned.

“As long as you girls get to do the asking why don't you make us all come as girls. Invite the whole of the Hill Academy to show up in dresses and tresses. Oh, hell, how do I get myself into these things?” he moaned. “How do I get to be the one guy in school who has a girl friend that likes him as a girl? Just for you, Tess, and just this once. I'll come as Kitty for you, but after that, no more.”

“We'll see,” she rejoined. “We'll just see. In the meantime we can figure out what kind of Kitty we want for the dance.”

The theme of the dance had been announced as “The Return to the *Fin de Siecle*”, but it hadn't dawned on Karl just what that implied for him or any of the rest of them. For the moment he was wondering at what kind of magic Tess had that had enabled her to get him to agree to another public appearance as Kitty.

After all, he thought, it was a costume party and it was Halloween, and it had obviously delighted the delicious Tess, so what the hell....

Chapter 3

The x's and y's never wound up on the right side of the equation for Karl. Searching for the unknown in the rate-time distance equation, the unknown that would tell Karl when two speeding trains would collide between point A and point B and enable him to divert one of them, always wound up in the wrong place. Karl's algebra problem workbook was scattered with train wrecks, plane crashes, overpaid shipments of fruit and bridges that collapsed. Algebraic mayhem, Karl's father had called it, and wondered how he ever hoped to be an engineer without mastering math. Karl muttered something about maybe not becoming an engineer, but not in a voice which could be heard. His father's choice of careers for Karl was not negotiable.

Saturday mornings thus belonged to Mrs. Parsons, the math teacher, who received Karl at 9:00 o'clock and kept him until 12:00 noon, showing him how to keep the trains separated, the planes aloft, and the bridges connected to their abutments through the magic of the balanced equation.

Karl liked Mrs. Parsons, but he didn't like Saturday mornings in her little study. He buckled down, however. A bad math grade threatened his sports eligibility, and hockey season was not far off, and that really mattered. It seemed that the whole of every Saturday had been spent with Mrs. Parsons this year. Aside from teaching math, Mrs. Parsons was also the costumer for the drama department. Prior to the play Karl had needed to remain after his tutorial as she sewed and fitted the long elegant black satin gown for Kitty. She had taken, he thought, unusual care with the costume its complex underpinnings, trappings and accouterments. The whole time she made comments to him about how unusually well it became him, how easy it had been to fit him, and other remarks designed to make him feel good about his effeminate role playing. When she had, at last, finished with it, and he had gotten into the full regalia for her final approval, she had seemed deeply pleased and self-satisfied. Even her final remark, as she gave it her final imprimatur, had unsettled him.

"Karl," she had announced, "you make one of the loveliest ladies I have ever seen. You are one of those marvelously lovely boys who make an equally wonderful girl. I hope you appreciate that."

Karl had been too stunned and confused to do more than nod his acquiescence and wonder what in the world she meant by that. He really did like wearing the Kitty costume. Somehow it made him feel warm and wonderful to be so feminine and elegant, but he thought it was just the satisfaction he took in playing the role so well. In another way he felt terribly awkward and out of place in all the lace and silk, heavy make-up and long piled tresses. After the play Karl decided that as delicious as it had been, he really didn't want to play at being a girl again.

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Tess and Monica sipped tea and munched cookies in Mrs. Parsons' den. Mrs. Parsons studied a drawing Tess had given her.

"It's a saloon girl, Mrs. Parsons. The theme for the party is the end of the last century, and I think the red satin corset with the black ruching works perfectly with the black net hose. and I love the big feathered hat and the pointy-toed button-up boots.

It's just classic. I mean it's real tarty and real theatrical, just as a good costume should be. I've got the boots from my grandmother's trunk. Can you do the rest of it, Mrs. Parsons?"

"Oh? yes, I think so. You're right, it should be quite striking, quite daring and make a real sensation. It'll probably be quite uncomfortable for a whole evening, though, what with all those stays and boning."

"Oh, I'm not worried about that," Tess, waved off the objection breezily. "If you can make it, I can wear it. What fun, I'm going to be the sassiest little tart to ever make a party. Mom and Dad are having fits about it, but just for once I'm going to get to spend an evening as one rude broad. Whoopee!"

Mrs. Parsons smiled indulgently and poured more tea.

"Well, that's it then. I have my work cut out for me. Your little saloon girl outfit and another really grand gown for dear Karl. What does he think of the outfit you have picked for him to wear, Tess?"

Oh, he hasn't seen it. I just told him I was bringing the sketches to you and he should expect to start fitting after his Saturday tutorial."

"Oh my goodness, Tess. Don't you think Karl should have some say about what he's going to wear? I mean, after all..."

"Not at all, Mrs. Parsons. Karl wears what pleases me, at least he does if he wants to have a Tess. Don't worry, he'll like it if only because it pleases me."

"Where did you get the idea for this wonderful costume, Tess? It's utterly period and supremely *fin de siecle*."

"Well, he didn't want to do Kitty from the play again. The party theme is the gay nineties. I figured that if Kitty had been the Seventh Countess of Peck, then this time she should be the Fifth Countess of Peck, the original Kitty's grandmother."

"Did you explain any of this to Karl, dear?"

"Oh, yes. I just didn't show him the costume sketches."

"And what did he say?"

"He just said that if he had to attend as a lady it didn't much matter what the period or what the costume was, he would just try to play the lady again, just to please me. Isn't he sweet?"

Mrs. Parsons frowned.

"I wonder just how sweet he's going to feel when I lace him down in a boned corset and he finds yards of fishtail train trailing along behind him. Have you thought of that, Tess? It's one thing to get a boy up as a countess to play a part in a farce. I think it's quite another to drag him to a dance in full Victorian feminine regalia. He might really have objections. This costume calls for a corset, a bustle and a train. That's a bit much even for a girl in this day and age."

"Leave him to me, Mrs. Parsons. I want him to win the best costume prize, hands down. If he doesn't like it he has me to comfort him."

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“Countess Kitty rides again, I hear,” shrilled Karl's little sister, Becky Sue. Becky was a certified little sister, registered snot and perfect pill. “Karl's going to put on a dress and go to the Halloween costume dance at the Hall. Tess even picked out his dress. It's all over school. Oh, Karl, you're such a sissy. Tess has really got you this time.”

Mother stared Becky into silence and looked over her glasses at Karl. “I hate to give Becky's natterings any credence, darling, but is there anything in what she says? Are you going to the costume ball? Did Tess ask you?”

“Yeah, Mom. Tess asked me. You know how I am about Tess. I wouldn't miss it. I mean it's going to be a great party.”

Karl's father put down his fork. “Who's going, though? Our own Karl, or his Countess Kitty alter ego?”

“Well, I didn't have much to say about that,” Karl explained. “Tess didn't exactly invite Karl. She sort of only invited Kitty. So, I mean...like Kitty goes to the masquerade ball, or Karl stays home....sort of.”

“It doesn't sound like any kind of 'sort of' to me. It sounds like an absolutely,” his father remarked wryly.

Mom got back into it. “So, just to be with Tess at the dance you have agreed to costume yourself as a girl again. Why does Tess want to go out with you as a girl, Karl?”

“I dunno, she says she just likes me that way. She says I make a great girl, and it's a lot of fun.”

Becky couldn't pass it by. “He does, Mom. You saw him in the play. He blew everyone away with his Countess Kitty. It was the talk of the school. He's gorgeous, Mom. He's a better girl than a boy. Why don't you just put a dress on him and send him to Norton Hall? No one would ever know the difference. Face it Mom, Karl's just a doll.”

Karl threw a slice of bread at Becky, who ducked it.

“You don't make much of a girl, yourself, Becky Tomboy. I may just put on a dress and beat the shit out of you, just to keep it fair. I could beat you in a beauty contest any day of the week Class Tough-ass. You wouldn't know a peplum from a petticoat. Try wearing a dress yourself, sometime before you turn into one of the boys already. You're fourteen already and you haven't got as much boobs as an oak tree, sister smart-ass.”

The two of them were on their feet, ready to have at one another with the tableware, when Dad slammed his fist down on the dinner table.

“What the hell has gotten into this family?” he demanded to know. “I've got a son who runs around with some chick who wants him dressed up like a girl and a daughter who screams like a fishwife and dresses like a migrant farm worker. Now, shut up, both of you. Becky, your next stop is going to be charm school if you're not careful and, as for you Karl, if you persist in this sissy stuff you could just well wind up there yourself. Now everybody just settle down and start being civilized.”

A long, thick silence hung over the dinner table for a while.

Finally, Mom put the question to Karl again. "Are you going to the Norton Hall masquerade as the Kitty character, Karl?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Tess asked Kitty to come and I really like Tess so I said I'd dress up like Kitty. I don't mind, Mom, really. It's kind of fun. It was last time and Tess really likes it. Is that OK?"

"Certainly, dear, as long as both of you enjoy it. It's certainly harmless enough, if you're sure you don't mind. Have you given any thought to a costume?"

"Not really. Tess said she had something picked out for me. Mrs. Parsons is going to make it. I'm supposed to find out after my algebra tutorial on Saturday."

"It's an 1890's thing, Mom. The whole theme is Victorian. they're all supposed to dress up like great grandma and that kind of stuff," Becky shrilled.

"So?" replied their mother. "I think that sounds rather like fun, Becky dear."

"Oh, ish! Women weren't even allowed to be people back then. I'll bet she puts Karl in some overstuffed mountain of lace with a big bosom and a bustle. Karl, you're such a wimp. You'll look like an upholstered draft horse. I wouldn't be caught dead...."

"Should I take that to mean that you haven't invited anyone to the costume ball, Becky dear?" Mother asked, grinning.

Becky looked stunned.

"Well?" mother repeated, waiting.

"She wouldn't go," retorted, Karl, seeing his opening. "She'd have to wear a skirt, Mom. They didn't let girls wear pants back in those days. Becky would rather die than wear a skirt, wouldn't you, brother Becky?"

Karl's mother stared at him.

Becky stuck out her tongue.

"That'll do, Karl," she admonished him. "As long as you haven't asked a boy to escort you, Becky, perhaps you would like to accompany us. Your father and I are chaperoning the affair. I am doing a remake of one of my grandmother's dresses for myself and your father is renting a Victorian evening suit for the occasion. Perhaps you can come as our little Victorian school girl, Becky dear. Karl has a point. An evening as a pretty girl and a proper little lady might be a good experience for you. I can look in grandmother's trunk for something for you, Becky, dear, I think you might find it fun to try out a confection of ruffles and ribbons. It would be a new experience, wouldn't it?"

"You wouldn't," Becky sputtered. "I won't go! You can't make me! Oh, ish and pew!"

"We'll see dear," was mother's soothing reply as she grinned at Becky's reaction.

"Wow!" rejoined Karl. "My little sister masquerading as a real girl. This I gotta see."

Mother stared them both down to silence as she served dessert and poured coffee.

Father sat back and stirred sugar into his coffee with a resigned look on his face.

"I don't know about this family," he remarked. "I've got a son who is going to a ball as a countess in a grand ball gown and seems to like it, and a daughter who has a Missy fit at the idea of attending in a dress. Carol, how did we get into such a bizarre situation?"

"Yes, it is rather strange, Fred, but that's the way it is. I think we'll just have to play it out and see where it goes."

"It's going nowhere," shouted Karl. "This is my last and final outing in a dress. That's it!"

"I'm sure you mean that Karl," replied his mother, "but the word `never' is best avoided, I think."

"Me too," echoed Becky. "And I'm not even going to this stupid dance. Daddy's right. It's weird. I'm not going to go to the stupid thing in some dorky outfit. No way! I just won't. I don't care what you say." She scowled and put on a pouty lip and a defiant look, crossing her arms across her chest.

"As I said, dear, the word `never' is not a very realistic one to use."

Chapter 4

The binomial theorem had been put to bed for the weekend by Saturday noon. Mrs. Parsons fixed Karl and herself a grilled cheese sandwich and they sat eating them in the sunlight which filled Mrs. Parson's cheery breakfast nook.

"You must love Tess a great deal, Karl."

"Sure, Mrs. Parsons, like I think she's just the most scrumptious thing yet. Why do you ask?"

"Well, there aren't many boys who would be willing to turn themselves into a girl just to satisfy the whim of a girlfriend, however neat they thought she was. I think you're quite remarkable, Karl. Have you seen what she is having me make for you for the masquerade ball?"

"No Ma'am."

"Well, you are about to. I certainly hope you can handle it. Not many modern girls could wear an outfit like that and deal with it."

"Why, what's wrong with it?"

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with it. On the contrary, it's perfectly right. That's the problem. Ladies attire in your great-grandmother's time was not meant to be comfortable. It was meant to be elegant and was egregiously feminine. *Fin de siecle* lady's clothing was rigidly prescribed for each occasion and lady's evening toilettes were exceedingly complex."

"It's OK, Mrs. Parsons. It's what Tess wants, so it's what I want. She's going as a saloon girl, I guess, so what can be worse in whatever she's picked for me? Let's get on with it. If I can play the Seventh Countess of Peck, I reckon I can play the Fifth Countess of Peck."

"I like your attitude, Karl. You're quite a guy. Why don't you go into the back bedroom and skin down to your jockey shorts? We'll start fitting you for the big night."

Karl complied, not a little thrilled and dismayed by what he thought might be in store for him. His feelings were becoming more and more confused. Dressing up as an elegant countess and honing a feminine persona as a part in a play had been a fascinating challenge. He had been quite taken aback at the success of it and a little worried about how much he had enjoyed it. Now that he had an opportunity to play the lady a second time he had second thoughts. Still it was a thrilling prospect. He was a little concerned about what he had heard he was to wear this time, but it was still just all in fun so he stripped down and stepped out into Mrs. Parsons' dressing room.

Mrs. Parsons was awaiting him with a stiff bundle of stuff in one hand.

“The costume I am making for you, Karl, has been lifted from the society page of the New York Times in 1887. It is modeled after a gown worn by Miss Melissa Dow at a dinner she gave in June of that year. Because it is from 1887 it is more appropriately referred to as a Bustle Period gown in Barton's Historic Costume for the Stage. However, it would not be unfashionable to wear such a dress during *Fin de siecle*.”

Karl stared dumfounded at a voluminous array of silks and laces that hung upon Mrs. Parsons, dressmakers dummy.

“That?...” he asked, pointing at the massive gown, “I...I.. wait a minute...I didn't think....I mean that's not the dress I'm supposed to wear is it?.. I don't think...” He trailed off staring dumbly at the massive array of 19th century couture.

“I was afraid of this. I told Tess it seemed a bit much, especially for a boy, even for so clever a boy/girl actress as you Karl. You don't have to wear it if you don't want to, dear. I wouldn't blame you. While the gown is perfectly exquisite, I can understand why you might feel overwhelmed by it. Do you want to just tell Tess that you'd rather not wear it and decline her invitation? There'll be other parties you know.”

Saying “no” to Tess, especially after saying “yes” and more especially for such a marvelous event as the Halloween Costume ball was the last thing Karl wanted to do. However, as he stared at the complex, ornate ball gown he felt, at the moment, that appearing in public in it was something he wanted to do even less.

Mrs. Parsons waited for an answer.

Karl decided he needed more information.

“What's that thing standing in the corner?” he asked, pointing to a freestanding device of metal bands, ribbon ties and tiered flounces cascading down its backside.

“Why, that's the bustle, Karl,” Mrs. Parsons answered, with a broad smile. “It ties about your waist, over the outside of your corset and provides the necessary shape to the skirts of the gown and train at your rear. The gown won't work without it.”

Karl stared back and forth from the dress form to the bustle, gaping.

“Corset?...There's a corset, did you say? What do you mean a corset?” He felt things were getting worse by the moment. Mrs. Parsons allowed the stiff bundle she held in her right hand to unroll and dangle in front of him. He saw a square, stiff, boned contraption of pink satin, ruched and decorated with lines of black lace with long garters and string laces. He couldn't imagine how it was worn, but the idea of having it on him was not very appealing.

“Corsetry was *de rigueur* in the *Fin de siecle*, Karl. Surely you must be aware that women escaped the dictates of the corset only in your grandmother's day. This corset will draw your waist down to the obligatory hourglass shape to which the gown is fitted.” Mrs. Parsons put the corset down on a table and lifted two other garments for his inspection. “These,” she continued, “are your drawers worn beneath the corset with a camisole, and this is your corset cover which is worn over your corset and beneath your bustle.”

The drawers were of pale blue silk with overlapping of fabric to conceal an opening at the crotch to allow for a seated toilet, and decorated with narrow bands of white lace. They were tied below the knee with tiny ribbons and flared into a flounce-cuff below the ties. The camisole had wide lacy shoulder straps and a lace bodice. It too was made of delicate blue silk, decorated with narrow bands of lace.

Karl stared at these delicate, historical underpinnings in stunned silence.

As Mrs. Parsons held the full length camisole aloft he saw it even had a large silk bow sewn to the skirt about half way down. With its lace edged shoulder straps, lace bodice and ruffled hem it was virtually an evening gown in itself.

Karl wondered why it was so complete as a dress in itself when no one would ever see it.

“I...I had no idea....I mean when Tess asked me to play another countess I thought it would be kind of a lark. I didn't think it would get so complicated.. I mean...I just don't think I can wear all that stuff. Who decided on all this? Did Tess really pick this out? I mean why does she want me to go this far with it? It's just for a masquerade party. Maybe something simpler.”

“It was Tess, Karl. It was her idea, but she came in with your mother and her friend Monica and we all had a conference about it where I agreed to do the dressmaking and fitting. I thought you must know all about it. I'm sorry Karl. I certainly don't mean to force anything distasteful on you.”

“Mom? My Mom? She picked this out?”

“The actual costume, yes, she did. Tess had the idea but I understand that it was your Mom who actually dredged up the photo and story about Miss Dow. I'm sorry, Karl, but I thought they had kept you fully apprised. Shall we get on with it? Just let me lace you into the corset. I'd like to get a preliminary fit today so I can go ahead with the final construction of the gown. We only have a little better than a week Karl.”

“No, I don't think so, Mrs. Parsons. It's too much...really. I thought it would be fun, but I don't think I can handle all that stuff. I'll have to think about it.”

Karl got dressed, and feeling sheepish and guilty left for home as Mrs. Parsons admonished him to let her know if he changed his mind.

Karl didn't think he would.

Chapter 5

Karl got by with it until late afternoon. He had been hiding out in his room watching TV and wondering how to break it to Tess that he had decided not to be the Fifth Countess of Peck for the masquerade party. He was worried about his mother's in-

volvement, not knowing quite how much she really was involved. Was she just giving Tess a hand, or did she really mean to get involved? If so, that worried him.

Getting hungry, Karl went down to the den to wait for supper.

Becky looked him over carefully. Karl didn't like it much when his little sister paid any attention to him at all. It usually meant that something bad was brewing. Becky stared and stared. Karl ignored her. Suddenly she was on her feet running for the kitchen.

"Mom....Mom. He's not wearing it. He's taken it off, Mom. Make him wear it. Make him put it back on. I wanna see, Mom!" Becky was shrilling all this in her best shriek. Karl hadn't the foggiest idea what she was shrieking about.

Mom came from the kitchen wiping her hands on her apron.

"What's with her?" Karl demanded to know. "What's got her going this time?"

"She thinks you're not wearing your corset, dear. Have you it on?"

"What corset? What's she talking about? Of course I'm not wearing a corset. I don't wear corsets. She's lost it Mom. Shut her up."

"Oh, dear, it was my understanding that after the first fitting for your costume today that Mrs. Parsons would advise you that you should keep your corset on in order to begin training down your waist for the dance. Did Mrs. Parson forget, or did you just decide not to comply?"

"Neither! She never said... I mean I never got that far."

"What does that mean, dear... never got how far?"

"Well, like.. I mean I never had a fitting. I decided I didn't want to wear the costume, so I just came home."

"I see!" Karl's mother's voice was glacial. "Well, that's your privilege. You don't have to go. Tess will be very disappointed."

She turned on her heel and stalked back to the kitchen.

Becky stuck her tongue out at him.

He threw a throw pillow at her and wondered just how much trouble he was in.

Becky called Karl to the phone. Tess's voice was three degrees chillier than his mother's. It was not its usual mellow fluid lilt. It was like the grinding of knife edges.

"You needn't bother to pick me up tonight. I have another date. In fact, you needn't bother me again. I have no time for a boy who goes back on his word to his girl. If you aren't going to be the Fifth Countess of Peck I don't want to know you. You're just vile, Karl, and I don't want you to bother me ever again."

She slammed down the receiver with sharp finality!

Karl was doing a slow burn. He wished he had never gotten tangled up with any girl. Sure they turned him on, but finally they were all like his little sister, snotty bitches. He cursed the day he had let them put him in Gas, Air and Earl and especially cursed the moment he had found how much joy it had given him. He sulked through dinner.