Casting

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Hollywood is a jungle. Make no mistake about it – they are out to eat you up. There is not dark foliage to hide behind – they hide behind smiles. It is camouflage – nothing more. They want your flesh. They feed on it, and when they are done, you are lucky if there are bones left. Then maybe your parents can recognize it is you and take you back. Because that is what parents do.Alex Dobbs did not even have that. He was an orphan. One of hundreds who have nobody to stop them catching the bus to California and trying their luck in the casting lines. Sure, portfolios and agents will get you in front of somebody a bit further up the line, but Hollywood still likes waifs and strays. It is not just tradition – people without families are less trouble. Nobody is looking at the contract; nobody asking where Little Jimmy is when you work late, nobody is breaking the producer’s balls if things go wrong, or if things go right and people get greedy.Casting the way it used to be. Not at the gates waving for attention, but down the road at the soda shop, or juice bar they call it nowadays. A guy or a woman from casting turns up and says: “You, you and … you, that is if you want to be in movies?”And sometimes, just sometimes, you might find somebody who has just the right look to be a fit. Forget talent. Recruit from the drama schools for that. They want faces, and they can paint on the smiles or the tears further down the track.Alex had a great face. It was youthful. He could have played somebody as young as 12 although he was 16 at the time. Good-looking too – in a pretty boy way. But for waifs and strays it is how they look now.Bonnie French from casting went down to the juice bar looking for something specific. She had been going through thousands of portfolio looking for a face. She had images sent to her from across the country and from Canada and England. But the fact she as looking for was just down the road.“Hey Kid, what’s your name?” she said, barely able to control her excitement. But that is one thing that you can never show. If they know they are right for the part they will start getting ideas.“Alex,” he said. He did not even have a juice. He had a glass of water from the spout for free.“Are you looking for work in the movies? I may able to put some work your way. Would you be interested? Can you come down to the studio, like now – immediately?”Alex had done a few stints as extra – kid in the park, kid on the street. He would take that, but he had an idea that this might be something more. He said: “Sure”. This was what he wanted.There was a show running that you may have heard of called “Jaspers Lake”. It was just high school drama with at home drama sub-plots – you will know the thing. It was yet another success for the Calloway Brothers, identical twin producers. It had a solid following in the teenager and pre-teen age groups, and some of the key performers were becoming rising stars. People like Charlaine Gower. Charlaine Gower was the other side of casting. A rich kid from Beverley Hills with a father in property making money and a mother also in property but losing at it. As a kid she did not want to be an actor, she wanted to be a star. Her parents wanted for her what she wanted. That meant acting classes, portfolios and managers paid to harangue casting directors. She got the role despite all that bullshit, because she was not half bad. She played a spoiled brat, and she was a natural.It was decided that her home life on the show needed a subplot, and the series writers had come up with something that the producers loved. She needed a younger brother – 14 to her 16 – and he had to look like her. He had to be close enough so that he could pass himself off as her for a crucial part of the story. It would screen over at least 3 weeks, and after that the brother would drop into the background but stay on the payroll.As Bonnie explained it: “The is ongoing work with limited appearances, but initially you will be required to work intensively and have lines to deliver.”This was the big break Alex was looking for. Lines – a speaking part.Alex did not like Charlaine, but he concealed it. She was the star. He was the add on. The best policy was to be willing but not forward.“Have you had acting lessons,” The director, David Stepanov, asked.“Sure,” said Alex. Like every movie he had ever seen. And he watched the interviews too. He knew what “method acting” was, and “the Meisner Technique” as well. Nights in front of the mirror had honed his skills. Now they just need to be put on display.“This is your sister Delia,” David said, reintroducing Charlaine to him. “You are her brother Timothy. In this scene Delia is asking you to fill in for her so she can be two places at once, Okay? This is just a rehearsal but can we have make up over here please? And get the Delia wig over here too.” \*\*\*Ellie Greenbriar rushed over. She did not like doing slap dash rehearsal makeup like that. She liked people in the chair. But it was a rehearsal, and a challenge. She needed to make this boy look like Charlaine Gower. But she immediately realized that this would be incredibly easy. The truth is that Charlaine’s eyes were a little close together and her nose a little wide, but that was fixed with makeup. Delia was meant to be more attractive than Charlaine. It was a look that Ellie had down pat. But it occurred to her that this boy actually looked more like Delia than Charlaine did.She did her work. She was good at it. “That’s incredible,” said David. “Well done Bonnie. This kid has the look. It’s uncanny.”Ellie looked across at Bonnie. She was looking at her. That glaring look that sometimes made it hard to be together on the same set. But Bonnie looked away and at the boy in the wig.“Yes,” said Bonnie. “I knew it when I saw him.”Good job, Bonnie,” said David. “And great job Ellie.”Bonnie saw the makeup girl smiling at the director. She had to step away. She had to excuse herself with a story about calls to make or work to do. It still pained her that the man she had loved was now this woman, with that simpering flirtatious smile.Outside in the sunshine the world was real again. Bonnie could treat everything that goes in those sound stages as unreal. But one thing was real in there. Her man still. Butchered by the surgeon maybe, but still him, somewhere under that hair and pretty clothes. She needed a drink, but it was still before noon. She was drinking too much, and she knew it.

She sat down in one of the leafy shelters the studio set aside for quiet contemplation, although all the did was bring the memories back.

When they met he was doing mainly prosthetics. He was an artist and he sketched and sculpted. He was not like other men. He seemed to be deep and sensitive. Now it seemed that these might be his more feminine characteristics that might have drawn her to him.

He seemed ready for a relationship. He told her that he had been avoiding attachments, but he did not say why. They shared some drinks and a couple meals, and following that there was a Sunday they spent mainly in the park. They ended up walking hand in hand. They went back to his place, which was really an art studio with a bed. They made love and it was special.

It seemed to be the start of something great. He must have felt that too. For a while anyway.

But when it came to talk of the future he revealed that being deep was holding a secret, and being sensitive was to shield the truth from people it might hurt.

“You are a typical man,” she said. “You shy away from a commitment.”

“You are wrong on all counts,” he said. “I am not typical. I am not even a man. And I am ready to make my commitment, but it is not want you want to hear.”

She had to sit through it. There were tears – she cried too. Just like two girls sobbing together, talking about being there for one another. But she could not stand to see the man she loved slowly being consumed by somebody else – slowly becoming Ellie.

But then her cellphone rang, burst her melancholic bubble for a moment, returned her to the studio grounds.

“You have sent me an orphan and a minor!” It was the director. “He has told me the whole story.”

Bonnie gulped. This was Hollywood. A hero one minute, and dirt a minute later. She mumbled something.

“Listen, you have to take this kid in. We can’t leave him living on the front lot. You need to take him home, until we can get a solid contract. This boy is gold, or at least gold-bearing clay. I have spoken with Ted and John Calloway. They want him contracted. You need to become his guardian.”

\*\*\*Alex looked around the apartment. He was still wearing a costume from the rehearsal. His only clean clothes were what he saved for the juice bar. Somehow, they had got lost in wardrobe. He had picked up his sports bag on the way, but Bonnie suggested that it should be burned along with its contents.

“We can get away with stuff from wardrobe,” she said. “But you will have to change. Those clothes are on film now and must be preserved for continuity. You can shower. I have nothing for a boy here, but you can just wear a robe while I find something.”

On the street he used the swimmer’s showers at the beach, but the chance for to stand beneath a real shower pleased him. He had turned a corner that day, and he knew it.

To say that he was an orphan was not strictly speaking correct. His father might be alive – somewhere. His mother was very much alive. She had filled his head with dreams of making it in the movies, or at least television. She had tried herself and failed. She had parents who had taken her back in. But they were dead now, and she had spent what they left her on a film project that turned out to be a scam.

Dreamers are easily taken advantage of. That was a lesson he had learned. She had been destroyed. Her dream was over, but yet his still continued.

That is the draw of show business. It defies logic. In a way he knew it, but it is a drive that brings life to a person. Anything is possible in show business. You just have to take the opportunities as they arise. Do not question them – just grab them.

Bonnie had a spare room but it was full of her surplus clothes. She was a woman who knew that in Hollywood presentation is everything. A casting director needs to be professional, and look professional. She needs to be on set sometimes, and attending parties at other times, moving in the rights circles to find the talent or explore connections.

There was a robe laid out on the bed. It was a woman’s robe. He put it on. He looked in the closet and in the drawers for something to wear. In the underwear draw were some black underpants – too functional to be called panties, they would work even though they gave no room for his junk which had barely developed.

She had jeans too, with some embroidery but still jeans, and tee-shirts that he could wear.

“Are these OK to wear? Just until I get something?”

“Sure,” she said. “But you are on the cast. You can just pick up stuff from wardrobe. It all has to be signed out, but when continuity is done you can keep it. I have to buy all my stuff because I am not on the cast. Not that I want to be.”

Not any more any way. She had come to Hollywood with ideas like his, but she had found her place, and it was not in front of the camera.

She looked at the boy in her clothes. They were a perfect fit.

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Alex and Bonnie were at the production office early as requested. Something was up. The associate producers were in the office early too, and they appeared more active than usual. David Stepanov was waiting for them. Just the three of them and a production assistant taking notes.

“I want to tell you that this happens sometimes, Alex,” his eyes lined up the kid directly. “Just promise me that it will never happen to you. Just promise me that you will look after yourself and listen to Bonnie. The world is a shitty place, Kid. It will fuck you over, believe me. I have seen it.”

Alex shook his head in puzzlement.

“It’s Charlaine,” David started to explain. “Drugs or some fucking thing. Younger and younger. What is wrong with this generation? Not you, Kid. I have faith in you. But she has let us down. She has let the show down.”

“What has happened to Charlaine?” said Bonnie. For such a professional this director seemed to confuse others too easily. He was clearly distressed.

“She’s out. At least for three weeks. Maybe more. In the middle of production. These guys have been rushing around looking at changing shooting schedules, but then it occurred to me that we might have somebody to stand in. Somebody in the cast who might be able to pass as Delia for a few weeks. It is just an idea, but I am putting it to both of you. What do you say Alex? Can you be Delia?”

Alex looked across at Bonnie. She looked uncertain at first but then she turned to him, looked closely and nodded her head.

“You mean like, instead of Tim pretending to be Delia, I play Delia?” Alex looked back at David in disbelief.

“We can adjust makeup and use filters, but yes – that is what I am saying. You even had her voice right in those episodes pretending to be her. People even thought that the role of Timmy was being played by Charlaine dressed as a boy. Did you hear about that? I even heard that it might have been considered as award material, but then I explained that we had a young guy who looked just like her. Amazing, huh? You did good there, Kid.”

“What about the role of Tim?” asked Bonnie. She might have spotted a potential recasting.

“He had only a few brief appearances for the rest of the series. You can double role and dress as him or it may be easier if we just write him out.”

“That doesn’t sound too good for Alex’s future on the show,” said Bonnie. She had been given the task of looking after this young actor, and she knew how these things can go. Cover for somebody and lose your own position in the cast.

“Look, Alex, in this studio going above and beyond is never forgotten,” David said directly to him. Then he turned to Bonnie and said: But you’re right. Strike a deal for him, Bonnie. This is your job. You are looking after the talent.”

“Extra pay, and something on the credits.” It was more a suggestion than a demand from Bonnie.

“We still have to show Charlaine on the credits. But you’re right, if this gets found out we will need a female actor credited as the stand in. So, come up with a name for me to add to the credits. “She” will be well paid I can assure you.”

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“It’s not really my role, but I can offer you some help in this,” said Ellie. “You see, I used to be a boy, once upon a time.”

Alex was surprised. The makeup lady gave no clue that she was anything other than a woman. They talked as you do when you sit in the chair for some time at the beginning of the day and sometimes between shoots. She had mentioned her work in monster movies in the past, but those were contract jobs, and a studio job working makeup for multiple shows gave Ellie the stability she needed.

All that she had ever wanted was a simple life – a woman’s life. Bonnie could never understand. Why should she? It was sad, but it was probably inevitable. What Ellie wanted was to be a woman and to have a man, but she knew that girls like her needed to wait for the second.

“Sure,” said Alex. “I looked at some of the videos of Tim playing Delia and I can see I am still Tim, but that did not matter then.”

“You can’t pretend to be a woman,” said Ellie. “You have to be a woman. I understand that you are even being credited as a woman?”

“The director said that the credits cannot show a male name against the role of Delia, so Bonnie has chosen the name Giselle Parker.”

“It’s a beautiful name. Very feminine. Bonnie is good at things like that.” Ellie smiled at the memory that popped up in her mind, of when they were a couple. “You need to be Giselle. Giselle is an actress, and she can perform the role of Delia. Don’t copy Giselle. Be Giselle and make the role of Delia your own.”

“How can I be her like you say?” Alex liked the sound of the words, but like some scripts he had read and spoken, he did not quite understand.

“Maybe you should try living Giselle 24/7 over the time that you are filling in for Charlaine? David has already spoken to me about hair extensions in place of a wig. It is certainly worth doing if this is going to go on for weeks.” Ellie had put the wig in question in place and was brushing it. Alex had already discovered that it was uncomfortable.

“Like you mean that when I leave the studio I walk around the streets as Giselle? Like method acting?”

“No,” said Ellie. “Not acting at all. Being Giselle.”

“I am not sure what you mean,” he said, but losing the wig seemed like a good idea.

“You just have to stop being Alex for a bit. You might even like being a girl. I do.”

“But I guess you have always wanted to be one,” he said.

“Not always,” said Ellie. “I think that when I was very young I did, but I denied those memories. I convinced myself that I didn’t want to be a woman and I lived a large part of my life like that, but you are right, suppressing a need can never destroy it. People say that there is a desire to be somebody else inside of all of us. Perhaps you can reach back and find that?”

“I always thought that I wanted the life that my mother never had,” said Alex wistfully, as Ellie did the eye makeup.

“Let me help you to be like her, then,” said Ellie. “Now you are ready. So, go onto the sound stage and be Giselle acting as Delia, not Alex. And when you are done come back here and I will put in those extensions and you can go home as the new you.

\*\*\*“I am bringing in Heather Downes to deal with this scene,” said David Stepanov. “Nobody does awkward intimacy better than she.”

But that had not always been the case. Heather Downes had not always been Heather Downes.The problem with Frank Downes was his impatience. It now seems a very masculine trait. But perhaps it colored the work that he did. His action scenes were often described as “frantic”. The fast pace was his trademark as a second director. A director would often have his scenes recut to drop the pace back in line with the overall tempo of the movie.It was that impatience that was the cause of the accident. The truth is that he was short-tempered with female performers. In those days he had few to deal with – just the occasional female actor in a scene, or her stunt double. In this case lead actress had stepped aside and the stuntwoman had moved in. She (the stuntwoman) was supposed to be good. They had run through it 17 times and the film was about to roll for the third take. It was just not good enough. And the lead actress was waiting and whining.

“This is real steel,” the stuntwoman said. “These are real sharp edges, and you lose a finger down there and it is going to be ground up into pulp.”But he needed the machinery in motion. There was just too much to build a set, so they were on location. This fight scene was important and it was over to him. He wanted it done right. Sometimes you just have to show them how it is done."Here, hold my coffee". It can now be remembered as the last words Frank Downes spoke. Because when he woke up in hospital 40 hours later, he was not him anymore.Nobody goes from being a man to a woman in a few days, not even if their manhood is sliced off and drops into an industrial crusher to be reduced to mincemeat. To change requires the realization firstly that your life can never be what It was; and secondly that it therefore must be something different.The first realization was immediate: The doctor’s words, the reach towards the groin, the “phantom penis” searing pain. There was grief and there was anger, but there was also the realization that blame could only lie at one door: the trailer with his name on it.Then, before the surgery there was the warm but unlikely reassurance that he could be rebuilt, like the old six million dollar man. Perhaps he could function as a man with clever surgery and male hormones. He would never father a child. The whole studio would know by now. Could he ever find a woman who would take him? If he did, the life might be bearable. But then his liver collapsed.“It’s a rare condition,” the doctor said. “Your body is rejecting male hormones. In fact, to help it to recover we have needed to use other hormones to cancel those by slow release. It will just be temporary, but we cannot operate while your liver is compromised. I’m sorry.”

Why do doctors say that they are sorry? They give the facts, so just give them. This is not sorrow – it is pity, and he already had that in ship loads.

Whether of it was the loss of maleness or the introduction of the very essence of womanhood into the bloodstream, even if only temporarily, was never truly understood, but there was a strange peace to be found in the sexless existence. It was as if Frank’s crazed desperation and need for action had gone and been replaced with a quiet serenity that was somehow deeply fulfilling.

Quite how she became Heather Downes still remains unclear. It was as if the knowledge that a person is so deeply changed that they can or should change everything, was behind it. Or was there something deeper? Was the impatience with, and disregard for women that was a hallmark of Frank Downes, that was behind it? ”I don’t want to be rebuilt as Frank. That guy has done himself in.” The surgeons were confused, but so was their patient. Consent was required.

Lying in a bed gives time for thought. Frank had tried to change. Directors were getting exasperated. Work was drying up. People wanted sensitivity. Frank had none of that, until he ceased to be Frank.

“Could you rebuild me as a woman?” It seemed a remarkable question. It forced some consultation, but the surgeons came back with a positive reply: “Actually that surgery would be much easier. We could even try to deliver you some sensitivity in that area.”

Sensitivity. It was to be the hallmark of Heathers Downes’ work. If it had been Alex facing this element in the script, when Delia faces here first sexual encounter, then it might have been impossible. But it was Giselle, and she was ready. In a way the uncertainty called for was hardly acting, but Giselle was ready, including for a screen kiss if that was required.

“I am told that you are trans, Giselle?” Heather said to her. “So am I”.

Was it really true? For either of them?

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“This is like history repeating itself,” said Bonnie. She was watching Giselle painting her toenails. She remembered that her man had done this, saying that it was something he could hide in his shoes, before he became Ellie.

“What do you mean?” asked Giselle. She looked at her roomie and confidant with those big eyes, a fall of soft shiny brown hair brushing her cheek.

“I have seen this happen before,” Bonnie said. “You are becoming a woman.”

“I need to be a woman for this role,” said Giselle, concentrating on her smallest toe. “I am living the life, just like Ellie suggested. It makes everything easier. It is so much easier for a a girl to play Delia, don’t you think?”

“You need to be careful. I don’t trust Ellie. She stole my man from me.”

“But she was your man?” Giselle could see a tear forming in Bonnie’s eye. An angry tear.

“It doesn’t seem that way,” said Bonnie. “We were together until she arrived, and now we are not. She may have thought that we could have been a threesome, at the start. But then she wanted all of him. She took all of him.” And the tears were flowing now.

Giselle got off he chair and, being careful not to damage her work, she moved onto the couch to put her arms around Bonnie. She loved this about being female – being able to express love and support in a physical way.

“Maybe there were never three?” she said, and she pulled Bonnie closer. “Maybe there was just you and Ellie and the man she pretended to be never really existed?”

The question was left hanging. They enjoyed a moment of quiet embrace – two women together.

“Sometimes it seems like there are two of me,” said Giselle. “I am on the cast twice. Giselle playing Delia and Alex playing Tim, although Timmy has not made an appearance for some time.”

“Are you Okay with all of this?” Bonnie was genuinely concerned.

“I just thought of it as extending myself as an actor,” said Giselle. “But since that scene with Greg Longman, I am not so sure. Something has changed.”

“You know that I am here for you,” said Bonnie. “Talk with me about it.”

“I never thought that I was gay, but now I am not sure.” Giselle’s eyes wetted slightly. “Greg was having problems so Heather told him that I was trans – just like any other girl but in need of surgery to correct a birth defect. She had told me before that she might have to do that – just to get him to relax. His whole attitude changed. He told me how sad it was that I had a “genital deformity” and that I was clearly female. And then when he kissed me … I was … female, I mean. We were acting, but we were a man and a woman acting. Heather was whispering directions, but it was all about how our skin felt alive to another’s touch, and sharing the heat rising in our bodies. It became so real.”

“But it wasn’t real.” Bonnie felt she needed to bring her charge back to earth.

“The moment was,” said Giselle.

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Those young lips parted but lingered close. The camera held the moment. David shifted in his seat, from a slight arousal. It was brilliant.

“That is fantastic,” he said. “I was told that you are good, but that is great. Kids watching this show will be talking about Delia’s on-screen for weeks.”

“I was working with real talent,” said Heather. “Greg is good and Giselle is somebody very special. She has a vulnerability that was missing in Charlaine. Charlaine is a skilled performer, but she is as hard as nails. Giselle is closer to the character I think.”

“I am not sure that I want her back,” said David. He leaned back in his chair beside hers, in front of the editing monitor, just the two of them in the small room. “There are other issues. There has been publicity about her personal problems. Our show is a wholesome show, and Delia is meant to be a wholesome character. And the studio has an out for drug abuse. We don’t need her.”

Heather was winding back to look at the scene without sound. He looked at the back of her head – soft hair wound up, a tendril falling beside her ear, a perfect lobe with a dangling earring.

“I am not just a fan because she is trans,” said Heather.

“Is she? I mean, this kid Alex walks in to be my office, and he is clearly a guy. Then we put him in a dress – we did that – and now he is wearing girls clothes 24/7. But is he trans … or rather, is she trans?”

“She has a lot to work out,” said Heather. “Are you going to offer me a drink?” She pointed to the bottle of bourbon. There were two glasses.

“Sure,” he said. “I have heard about your story. You were not trans, right? It was an accident?” He poured out the liquor. The smell of alcohol warmed the small room.

“Well, look at me. I took to this far too easily,” she said accepting the offered glass and warming it in her manicured hands. “I have worked things out. Was I always trans? Quite possibly. I was just too busy, and too angry to acknowledge it. There was an anger in me that drove my work. I expressed myself in violence on the screen. That was my thing. It was fury. What was behind that? Was I always just a frustrated woman inside a man’s body? And then one day, my manhood was gone, and after the pain there was just peace. I found peace.”

“And happiness?” David watched her lovely lips on the glass, and her smooth throat take down the first gulp.

“Somehow I feel that will happen,” she said. “I think that it will come from love. That is how I express myself these days. Love and intimacy.”

“I never met you before … before,” said David, awkwardly. “But I am glad in didn’t. I only want to think of you this way – a beautiful woman.” He raised his glass to her. She grinned.

“I love being a woman,” she said.

“Is there a man in your life,” he had to ask, but then he faltered. “Please forgive me for asking or presuming. Or perhaps there is a woman in your life?”

“I understand men better than most,” she said. “Perhaps because of experience. For most women men present a challenge. They desire them but they worry that men do not understand the damage that they can do. I don’t have the same concerns, but that does not make me any less a woman.”

“I could never doubt that,” said David. “But it is an interesting perspective. I have always thought that good directors need to have a wide understanding of the human condition. Everybody is different. No two characters will react the same. A director needs to know, or at least have an idea.”

“Are you going to test me?” she said.

It seemed as if he knew what she wanted. It seemed as if the words were no longer needed, and that their mouths were there for another purpose completely.

Those mouths locked together, as did their arms.

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Bonnie did not recognize the number calling her, but she was in the habit of answering: “Hello, this is Bonnie French.”

“Bonnie, it’s Ellie. Please don’t hang up.”

Bonnie just held the phone away from her ear, as if poison can travel by microwaves. But she was still listening.

“I have been talking to Giselle,” said Ellie. “She is special that one. She is pained that we don’t talk. I am too. We have been through a lot, but that life is over. I was just wondering if you might consider starting over … as friends.”

She was still listening and hoping that she would not have to speak. But felt compelled to say something. She said: “I care about Giselle. I would do anything for her.”

“Well, you could do her a favor, and me one too … and perhaps yourself a favor too, if you are free tonight?”

She wanted to say that she was not free, but she was. “I will have to check.”

“Ted Calloway has invited me out for dinner and you know that he and his brother John are supposed inseparable. Well, he has asked me if I have a friend, and I thought of you. I thought that a direct connection with the producers might help with your career. I can tell you that it will certainly help Giselle. Under your care she is a rising star.”

There was a part of Bonnie that wanted to shout down the phone: “She is Alex not Giselle! She is male like you are male!” But she did not do that. Giselle was not male. Not anymore. It was becoming clear to Bonnie. And with that, it seemed that the time had come to accept the reality.

“What time do you need me?” Bonnie said.

“They are flying us to Vegas leaving the studio in an hour,” said Ellie. “Come over to my trailer and I will do your hair and makeup and then we can go round to wardrobe to get something to wear.”

“You’re kidding!” said Bonnie with feigned shock, for she was already walking in that direction. A meeting with the Calloway brothers was something she had been trying to arrange. If Ellie were the devil herself she would say yes, but somehow the thought of being along side her and not confronting her seemed to change everything.

Within minutes she was knocking on the door and seeing Ellie in curlers and makeup. There is something about curlers that makes any memory of a man beneath them disappear.

“We don’t have much time,” said Ellie. She showed Bonnie to a chair.

“How did you get a date with Ted Calloway?” Bonnie asked.

“He knows all about me, if that’s what you are wondering?” Ellie could not hide it. She was gushing. But she was a professional and the woman in her chair needed to be at her best. “You know that Heather Downes has been sharing direction with David, and now we have Giselle – it seems like there are a whole team of transwomen on “Jasper’s Lake” – me included. He was just curious. But he wants to take it further.”

“So, John Calloway is not looking for a tranny as well?” It was meant as something nasty, but Ellie was not in a mood to take it as that.

“Tonight we are both women,” said Ellie. “You can keep your secrets but I have been open with Ted. I am a fully functioning but sterile woman but I was not always a woman. I work for the studio and I know that he is a big wheel, but I am not interested in being anything other than what I am. He likes that. Now let’s put your hair up.”

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“What is wrong,” said Greg. “I have told you how I feel about you. Why are you crying.”

“Because Hollywood relationships don’t last,” Giselle sniffed. “That is what I want, but they don’t. Maybe you have fallen for Delia. She is a real woman. I’m not!”

The tears were really flowing at this point, so Greg knew that it was time to put his arms around her and hold her close, kissing the top of her head on the center parting of her beautiful hair.

“You are a woman,” he said. “I should know.”

Her hands were clutching a wet tissue close to her chest, but she was forced to respond to his embrace. She slowly put her arms around his broad strong back. She could feel the power in his body, and the weakness in his own.

They were at David Stepanov’s beach house up the coast. It was the perfect spot. Only the week before he and Heather had shared the weekend together. Heather had suggested that they take the keys and just get away – somewhere private.

Who could imagine somewhere better? It was close to the road but screened from it, by a wall and by natural cliffs and outcrops. The house was set among the rocks above the small private bay which had a shingle beach with surf crashing but room to stroll along the full length at most tides. The house had all the amenities, but chief among those was the bed – a classic California king bed.

They had slept in it the night before. Giselle had given her virginity the night before, such as it was. She longed for a vagina to give to him, but in the present absence of that she had prepared herself to be taken where she could be. There had been discomfort, but followed by the joy of his joy, and discovering the true meaning of surrender and of physical love.

Now it was the day after. The ‘where to from here’ day. It had started well, in the hazy cloud of post-coital bliss, but as logic entered the room it brought darkness and uncertainty. How many words of love turn out to be meaningless? They can seem like words in a script. You say them as if you mean them, but once on film they mean nothing.

“I just don’t want to be without love,” she said, still holding him tightly with head buried in his chest.

He gently pushed her away so that he could see her pretty face. He pushed a lock of hair away from her eye to focus on both.

“I have talked to David,” he said. “We are in similar positions, he and I. We have fallen in love with a special kind of woman. It happens.”

She pulled his face onto her lips. They were hungry for each other. She was now alive – a sexual creature. He lifted her with ease and carried her back to that bed. Young lovers can never get enough.

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Epilog

Make no mistake, Hollywood is a jungle. But a jungle can be a beautiful place, full of variety and excitement. There are dangers, but there is love too, if you are lucky enough to find it.

Many run from this place, but those who stay are best equipped if they adapt and find support in others. Maybe this story is a rarity. As far as it goes it is a happy story, but who knows what the future holds?

For Giselle it will involve surgery, supported by her leading man Greg. The studio agrees that her origin story will be secret. Studio publicity has already leaked the fact that the romance on clear display on “Jasper’s Lake” is a romance in real life as well.

David is less concerned about Heather. Her story is widely known in the studio. Theirs is a professional as well as a personal partnership, and will be marked by the work they can do together.

As for the Calloway twins and their new women, those men have always been regarded as a little odd. The fact that a double wedding is under discussion is a talking point in itself. It seems almost tawdry to point out that the brides were once married to one another.

The End

© Maryanne Peters 2021*Erin’s seed: “Teenage Orphan is hired to appear in a movie as brother of the female star and ends up being used as a stand in for her sometimes because the resemblance is great. He discovers he likes dressing as a girl and being treated that way - has her own career... complications optional.” When I suggested it needed three parallel stories, with one an accident, the “Hold my coffee” line is hers.*