PIVOTAL ROLE

Kristy Leigh 2010/2025



1.

Tracy Sheffield walked along Coronation Drive, the afternoon sun casting long fingers of gold through the skeletal branches. The crisp air carried the faint scent of woodsmoke and drying leaves, a subtle reminder that winter was not far off. The street was quiet except for the soft rustle of leaves stirred by a gentle breeze, a whispered symphony for one.

Tracy was a shadow tracing the edges of the day, a figure shaped by half-formed secrets and a yearning that whispered beneath the surface, waiting for a chance to bloom. He — or perhaps *she* — carried secrets folded deep inside, feelings that didn't quite fit the shape others expected. And today, those hidden truths felt closer to the surface than ever.

The ivy clustered walls of Lainsbury Academy loomed ahead, the most prestigious

college of its kind in this part of the hinterlands. With a student population the size of a small town, it had played a central role in Tracy's life for the past nine years.

It would continue to do so for the next six.

Tracy's hand brushed the cool iron railing as she climbed the steps to the music department. The last rays of sunlight spilled like molten gold across the red brick, turning shadows long and tender. Somewhere inside, a fragile thrill fluttered — a secret kind of hope that mingled with the tightening in her chest.

It was late in the day, and Tracy had an after school appointment with Ms. Helena Ramsey ("Helen" to those in the know), her ultra-cool, totally with-it gothic-hippie homeroom teacher. She had a good idea what the meeting would be about; the rumor mill had been running overtime ever since the Big Announcement last month. Some great, unspoken mystery loomed on the horizon — an enigma wrapped in whispers and half-truths, likely to pull her into its orbit. And Tracy Sheffield, already balancing more than most, felt the ground shift beneath her feet.

2.

She *should* have felt proud.

Being chosen for a pivotal role is an honour in any production, even one so 'humble' as Lainsbury Academy's school concert. She should have felt flattered, should have felt ecstatic. But what she *truly* felt was simple *curiosity.* Curiosity with a touch of anxiety. And that was the strangest part, all things considered.

Tracy had been treading the floorboards since her sixth birthday, headlining the programme in pantomimes, dance recitals, and mannequin parades without number. Stage fright wasn't the source of her trepidation. No, something else was fuelling her apprehension, something entirely unrelated to her choreographic skills.

She initially reasoned that she'd been chosen for her background in dance and movement, which *theoretically* gave her an advantage over all the other hopefuls in the dance club. But at the end of the day, it was only a *slight* advantage. And that was why her choice seemed so baffling. There were at least three others who could have taken the part. Syd Chambers had studied classical ballet. Scott Bowers was the district ballroom champion, and Johnny Slash had won medals at the state finals. All three were eminently suited for the role.

Of course, 'Miss Helen' wouldn't have chosen any of them; in point of fact, they'd never even been in the running. At the end of the day, they just didn't *look* right. It

had to be Tracy, because nobody else could have possibly fulfilled the requirements. The reason should have been obvious, *blatantly* obvious in fact, but she didn't care to admit it to herself at the time. *Couldn't* admit it to herself, might have been more accurate.

All the same, she'd been openly intrigued when the show had been announced a few weeks back. They were presenting an Olde Tyme Music Hall at the end of November, a musical extravaganza which would incorporate half the student body. The climax would feature a *Moulin Rouge* number harkening back to the nightclubs and cabarets of nineteenth century Paris, slated to be the highlight of the production.

Lainsbury Academy was renowned for its theatre department, and no expense had been spared in terms of costume, lighting and set design. Ms. Ramsey had promised the local press a riveting performance of spectacular proportions, and nothing would prevent her from keeping her word. Only problem was, Lainsbury Academy was an all boy's school.

And Tracy was the only one capable of dancing the *French Cancan.*

3.

"The cancan? But...Ms. Ramsey — I'm a boy."

Tracy could feel her cheeks literally glowing with embarrassment. Her head spun with a feverish blend of shame and excitement. She knew her homeroom teacher extremely well, they'd been together since the fourth grade. She wouldn't force her to go through with this against her will (though there was always the possibility of coercion). Tracy could be certain of *that* much at least.

"Sorry, I hadn't noticed," the teacher replied, smiling to herself, "all the same, I'm afraid there's not much alternative."

Tracy was standing by her desk in the staff room, attempting to negotiate a role of lesser importance, presumably one which didn't involve a dress and ten pounds of petticoats. Ms. Ramsey was sitting in a computer chair, absently drinking a coffee. Nestles' cafe *au lait;* All of France in a Cup.

"Anyway," she continued offhand, "I've already spoken to your Mother, and she's given her OK. Seemed rather pleased by the idea, as a matter of fact."

Yes, Tracy could well imagine her Momma's shrill excitement at the news; Eleanor

Sheffield had always been a lifelong devotee of the arts. Worse still, Mom and Ms. R were as thick as thieves, having worked together on half a dozen local productions. She decided to press on despite the hopelessness of the situation. There was too much at stake to give in without a fight.

"It's a *girl's* dance, Ms. Ramsey. Nobody's going to believe..."

"Oh, I'm sure they *will,"* Helen answered, calmly sipping from her Starbucks mug, "Tracy, you've done all this before. It certainly won't be the first time you've worn a dress on stage. Remember the Christmas panto a few years ago?"

"Yes, but this is...*different,"* Tracy spread her hands helplessly. She'd be dancing the cancan *en solo,* required to have to raise her skirt and show off her underwear to roughly half the town. Images of frilly white panties and long black stockings filled her head.

"I guess you're right," Ms. R agreed reasonably enough, "the cancan's a tricky and rather complex routine. That's why I chose you. We need the best, and you're the one, kiddo."

"Why can't one of the girls from Saint Brigit's do it?" Tracy asked, casting about for a loophole. Saint Brigit's College was the Catholic girls' school down the road; the two academies often collaborated on their annual drama festivals.

"Can't spare any," Helen explained conversationally, "they'll all be busy up at the Fringe Festival. Seems like you're out of luck, Tracy. Good thing you have a fantastic pair of legs," she added, teasingly.

A deep, rosen blush invaded Tracy's features. It was true, she had an *excellent* set of gams, the envy of practically every woman in Lainsbury County. Physically, she was in remarkable shape, thanks to her Mother's insistence that she study dance and movement.

All the same, it did little to ease her mounting trepidation; the thought of flashing her underpants before a packed auditorium made her head spin with a kind of ... guilty pleasure. She pictured the stage with its bright lights, the sea of faces waiting in the dark. What would it be like to raise her petticoats over her waist, to let the flutter of lace and ribbons catch the air before the crowd? The idea was thrilling — an intoxicating dance of daring and delight.

Am I actually thinking of going through with this?

She glanced around the staff room, hearing muted chuckles from the other teachers. Were they laughing at her, enjoying her obvious discomfort and embarrassment? Why wouldn't they? She was a child after all, her feelings didn't matter in the least. Grown-ups could be so cruel sometimes, especially when they had enough power to pull rank...

Except — they *weren't.* Not really.

In that moment, the room seemed somehow brighter, less threatening. The lingering staff went about their business, a silent chorus to this smalltown drama. They knew the show depended on Tracy stepping into this role, and none of them said a word.There was no mockery here, no ridicule, just whispered comments and appraising glances. If anything, it was an atmosphere of tacit approval.

Tracy's thoughts raced ahead to the routine itself — the quick steps, the fluttering skirts, the laughter and cheers. She imagined the garters on her legs, the whisper of lace against her skin, the sudden flash of her ruffled girlpants as she kicked high into the air. The thought made her flush with a mixture of boldness and delight.

"Do you...*honestly* think I'll be okay?" she asked hesitantly

Ms. Ramsey's smile deepened. "Of course you will, Tracy. You're the only one who can do it justice. Trust me on that."

The teachers nearby shared another quiet laugh, the kind that held no cruelty, only a shared appreciation of the moment's sweetness. Tracy glanced up at her teacher, cheeks tinted soft pink, and nodded her assent. She couldn't quite bring herself to speak the words aloud, but her expression alone spoke volumes.

"Well then," Helen said smartly, turning back to her desk with a business-like demeanor, "I guess it's settled then. Rehearsals begin tomorrow at three-thirty. You can work on your *pat en l'air.* See you then?"

"Yes m'm."

"On your way then."

Tracy felt a mild tap on her bottom as she turned towards the staff room door. There was no shame, no fear, no heart-pounding sense of urgency (although she knew that *might* come later). Her anxieties were settling down to some point between apprehension and growing excitement. This had all gone much better than she could have possibly hoped, much better, in fact, than she had any right to

expect. She'd almost made it out to the hallway when she heard the voice, tugging at her ear from across the room.

"Oh, Tracy?"

She looked back over her shoulder, eyebrows raised in expectation, wondering what *else* was needed to close the deal.

"Don't forget to wear your *prettiest* panties," Helen said, eyes sparkling with hidden mischief. And that was all it took. The entire room erupted in mirth, teachers rocked back in their chairs. Tracy hid her lips behind a slim, coy hand, hoping nobody heard the innocent giggles welling up from her belly. Their laughter followed her all the way down the corridor.

Tracy stepped out into the late autumn sunshine, the cool air filling her lungs like a promise. Her heart felt buoyed by a secret joy that perhaps, just perhaps, was the beginning of something wonderful—something that would change everything.

4.

The walk home that afternoon was somehow lighter, less burdened by dread than with a fizzing curiosity. Tracy's mind played with the idea of the cancan — those flaring skirts, the bright lights, the crowd's murmuring hush before the first kick. What would it feel like to be the one all eyes were on? To bare her *panties* in a rush of crinoline and hear gasps, applause, laughter? The very thought sent a thrill darting through her.

She chose me, Tracy mused, turning left on Lethbridge Avenue, *Ms. Ramsey chose me.*

The choice had been no trifling coincidence; she'd settled on Tracy long before announcing the role. It had been something of a gamble, the proverbial calculated risk, but she'd had her reasons — reasons whispered quietly in the way Tracy moved, in the soft curve of her jaw, the graceful arch of her spine. It wasn't just that she danced well. It was something deeper, something woven into the very fibers of her being.

Tracy looked like a girl.

Assigned male at birth, she'd never felt quite at ease with the 'masculine narrative.' Her body told a different story — one written by invisible currents in the world, by chemicals in the air and water which had altered her DNA *in utero.* Her body, a

delicate symphony of hormones, danced to a different tune, favoring the gentler rhythms of oestrogen over the thunderous drum of testosterone.

Doctors had spoken of this quietly, of chemical pollutants which crept into the environment and insinuated themselves into unborn lives, shifting the scales of nature with a subtle, unseen hand. Genetics, they said, had stitched a unique pattern into Tracy's blueprint — a pattern that painted her with soft lines and fragile grace.

She'd endured a lot of mean-tempered ribbing over the years (because — who *doesn't?)* but she'd learned to ignore the transphobes long before Ms. Ramsey decided she was going to flash her underwear before the entire town. There'd been a couple of instances where the taunting almost got out of hand, but then the rehearsals started in earnest and things began to settle down.

Well...*almost.*

The training had been brutal to say the least. The acrobatics alone required *hundreds* of hours of practice and repetition. The routine was far more than a simple quadrille; it was a storm of complexity. Fortunately, she was already well-versed in dance, her body fluent with movement and memory. If the cancan was a tempest, then Tracy was ready to summon its full fury.

In a world that often demanded masks and silence, Tracy's choice was an understated revolution — a dance that would crack open the sky and let in something new. Something shimmering with possibility.

5.

It was around six weeks into rehearsals (and less than fourteen days from opening night) when Ms. Ramsey pulled Tracy aside one afternoon, handing her a bulky package with the words *Lainsbury Dancewear and Accessories* stamped across the front. The moment her fingers touched the multicolor parcel, a wave of excitement coursed through her bloodstream. She had a good idea of what it contained — visions of French lace started whirling through her pretty blonde head.

"Don't worry, I'm not asking you to try it on right now," Ms. Ramsey said with a knowing smile, reading the nervous thrill flickering across the girl's face. "Take it home this evening and see how it fits. There are a few items you'll need to... uh, get *accustomed* to, so you might want to start practicing in full costume from now on."

Tracy's heart leapt at her words. *Full* costume? The idea spun like a secret dance whispered just for her. What mysteries awaited in that package, waiting to

transform her beneath the stage lights?

The parcel was soft but surprisingly heavy as Tracy shifted it under one arm. She shot the teacher a questioning glance, wondering what she was going to find when she got home. Helen indulged her with a faintly amused smile.

"Women's underwear," she explained matter-of-factly before she could even ask, "a bit more complicated than what boys usually wear. You might want your mother's help to get everything right."

A moment of hesitation caught Tracy offguard, imagining her Sainted Mother fussing over lace and clasps. She opened her mouth to protest, but excitement overcame whatever objections she might have had. "It won't be anywhere near as bad as you think," Ms. Ramsey said softly, her voice a steady anchor as she turned and walked back into the auditorium, leaving Tracy alone in the hallway, clutching the promise of transformation.

6.

"I...have to wear all *this?"*

Momma had spread the costume out from one end of the living room to the other. Gleaming satin seemed to cover every available surface. The sofa was absolutely inundated with frills and flounces; unidentified pieces of lingerie decorated the coffee table. A small mountain of petticoats occupied one of the armchairs, threatening to spill its nebulous mass over the carpet. Tracy stared around in utter amazement, her cheeks tinting with a fine, high colour. There were things she'd never seen before, things with hooks and straps and clips that made her pulse flutter just looking at them.

Eleanor Sheffield viewed her daughter with a kind of wry amusement.

"Don't look so surprised," she laughed, picking up a handful of delicate black lace, "everything seems about the right size. It may feel a little strange at first, but you'll get used to it after a week or so." She held the garter belt out towards Tracy with an offhand gesture, long suspenders dangling enticingly from her right hand. The girl's eyes widened in mute protest.

"Momma —"

"Don't be silly; it won't hurt just to try it on. Anyway, you *have* to wear garters when you're dancing the cancan. It's practically a national law."

"Mom, I *can't* wear something like that."

"Why not?" Eleanor asked, eyebrows raised inquiringly.

"I ... well ... it's ..." Tracy's mind had gone suddenly blank; a thousand different emotions seemed to be struggling for control of her mind. She cast a glance around the room, taking in that avalanche of shimmering white corsetry. "I just *can't.* They're ... they're so ... so ..."

"Pretty?" Mum asked, eyebrows still raised.

"Well…yeah."

"And what's so wrong with that?"

Tracy shifted nervously, torn between the shame and the secret joy swelling inside. Part of her craved to feel that silky web of garters pressed against her skin, to be swept up in the glamour and spectacle, to surrender to the dance with no reservations. But it was almost impossible for her to put it into words.

"They're *girls'* clothes, Mom," she finally replied, down casting her face, "and I'm not really..."

Eleanor's fingers brushed her cheek, soft and steady. "It'll be fine, honey. You'll look beautiful. I promise."

Tracy met her gaze — her voice and touch wrapped around her like a protective cloak. This was her mother: strong as tempered steel, yet tender beneath. How could she say no?

With a reluctant (yet oddly hopeful) sigh, Tracy shrugged her shoulders.

"Come on," Momma said, her hand gentle on her cheek, "let's get you dressed."

7.

She stood naked before the chevel mirror they'd set up in the living room, her body a sleek arabesque deepening twilight. The weeks of exhaustive training had paid off *incredibly* well; her torso was lush and lean and supple, her figure slim as a willow. Her eyes roamed over her lithe, svelt form, finding not the slightest hint of masculinity.

She sensed her Mother's presence behind her, shuffling discreetly through decks of

price tags and wrapping papers.

"Here."

Tracy stepped into a pair of gleaming satin panties, the gossamer fabric gliding over her flesh like an unspoken promise. Her heart fluttered in near-rapture, her skin tingled with sweet liquid fire. A chill finger traced a line down her back leaving her breathless with delight.

Her Mother's voice, again:

"Arms out."



Eleanor's fingers wove their deft magic, clipping her into the skin-tight lycra brassiere, an intricate web of French lace and floral trimmings. She caught her reflection in the mirror, not quite believing what she saw.

The living room gradually transformed along with her, becoming a hushed, quiet sanctuary where something new, fragile, and beautiful was taking shape. Silken remnants lay scattered like petals around them, Tracy stood amidst the soft chaos, cheeks still flushed but heart slowly steadying.

Eleanor moved with practiced ease, gentle hands brushing away strands of hair as she helped Tracy slip into the layers of costume — the delicate torsolette with its hook-and-eye enclosures, the adjustable garters attached with quiet patience. Every touch was careful, full of unspoken understanding, as if she knew the courage it took to reveal a secret long buried beneath years of silent wishes.

Tracy's breath caught as she felt the cool silk of the stockings glide over her bare legs, the sheer fabric whispering promises against her skin. It was strange, thrilling, and frightening all at once, but her mother's presence was a steady warmth behind it all, like a lighthouse shining through a sudden storm.

"See?" she said softly, straightening her seams and smoothing out the *denier*. "You look like a dream."

Tracy hesitated, eyes lowered. "Really?"

Eleanor lifted her chin gently. "Yes, *really*. You look the way you've *always* meant to be."

The words settled over her like a gentle rain, washing away some of the sharp edges of doubt and fear. The mirror caught her reflection, and for the first time, Tracy saw not a boy awkwardly trying on borrowed dreams, but a girl stepping into her own light — soft, trembling, luminous.

"I'm...kind of scared," she admitted in a small voice.

Momma smiled, a quiet, knowing smile that held all the love in the world. "That's okay. Being scared means you're about to do something brave. And you won't be alone. I'm right here."

Tracy's eyes shimmered, a sudden surge of love flooding her chest — not just for the costume or the dance, but for the woman who saw her, *truly* saw her, and held her close without question.

In that moment, the boundaries between mother and daughter blurred, woven together by whispered reassurances and shared hope. The costume was no longer just fabric and lace — it was the beginning of a journey, a rite of passage bathed in the quiet light of acceptance.

And as her mother fastened the last clasp, Tracy knew she was ready.

8.

Opening Night:



Tracy lingered backstage, poised and breathless, the thrum of the orchestra pulsing through the floorboards beneath her heels. Her costume shimmered under the low lights—a riot of red satin, cinched at the waist with a glossy black belt and layered with frothy white petticoats that rustled like gossip. Vermillion feathers crowned her hair in a flamboyant plume, bobbing with every nervous breath. Long black gloves hugged her arms to the shoulder, sleek

and theatrical.

Her face was a porcelain mask — powdered smooth, flushed with a delicate rose — and her lips shone like ripe cherries, freshly kissed by Momma's careful hand. Her hair was woven into intricate French braids, tight and gleaming, each strand coiled with precision, framing the face of a young woman far more dazzling than anyone could guess.

Ms. Ramsey hovered in a flurry of motion, fussing over Tracy's costume. "Hold still, kiddo, your garters aren't straight," she chided, tugging at the ruffled skirts and smoothing the satin ribbons that clung to delicate lace. Her voice was a mixture of excitement and teacherly command, a queen bee overseeing her star performer.

Through the thick velvet curtains, muffled sounds of the restless audience drifted in — low murmurs, shifting chairs, the scrape of footsteps on worn wood. Tracy's eyes flickered to the side, peeking through a narrow slit. The theatre was packed to bursting; every seat occupied, every face turned toward the stage. Word had spread like wildfire through the town: a beautiful young girl was going to dance the French Cancan, and the entire community had turned out to see her.

"Ready?" Helen asked, running a last minute check over the girl's scarlet outfit. Carmine sequins sparked beneath her fingertips. The countdown had begun, the orchestra was already tuning up for the Grand Finale.

"Yes. Ready," Tracy replied without even a trace of hesitation.

"Good! You're up next. Wait for my signal."

Helen Ramsey vanished into the wings.

Tracy waited.

Momma leaned in close, her warm breath brushing Tracy's ear as she gently blotted the glossy sheen of her lipstick. "Perfect," she whispered with a proud smile. "You look just like the star you are."

In that shimmering moment — bathed in the soft glow of backstage light and anticipation — Tracy felt the stirrings of something new and fierce. She was no longer just a boy caught between worlds; here, behind the curtain, she was the dazzling young woman she had always known herself to be, ready to lift her skirts and dance her truth before the world.

Backstage, the theatre walls seemed to breathe with their own kind of expectancy — the air warm with makeup and nerves, pulsing faintly with the hush of a thousand held breaths beyond the velvet curtain.

***

Ms Ramsey stood at the podium beneath a golden arc of footlights, her voice rich and theatrical as it rang out across the hushed auditorium:

"And now, the moment you've all been waiting for… closing tonight's performance with a flourish straight from the heart of Paris, our very own Tracy Sheffield dances… *The French Cancan!"*

***

The audience erupted, a rumble of applause swelling like wind through autumn trees, all whispers and shifting weight as faces turned toward the curtain. Behind the drape, Tracy stood tall — spine straight, breath shallow, skirts gathered loosely in gloved fingers. The ruffled lace of her petticoats quivered like feathers in a breeze.

She could barely feel her feet on the floor. The lights had a heartbeat, and it matched her own. Her lips, touched in glossy crimson, parted in a silent breath as she stepped into her mark.

Then —

A surge from the orchestra pit: the opening bars of *Orpheus in the Underworld* burst forth, all brass and string, sharp and joyous and absurd. The curtains yawned open with theatrical grace, revealing her like a secret finally shared.

The twin spotlights roared to life, blinding white, and the world vanished behind their glow. Her legs quivered beneath her, every muscle taut with anticipation. She raised her petticoats, treating the crowd to a show-stopping view of glaring white panties and black suspender stockings. The air was heavy with expectation, the weight of the audience's gaze pressing in from the shadows. But the audience was not just any crowd — they were hungry, eager. Word had spread about this daring act, and every seat in the theater was occupied. The pressure was intense, but somehow it felt right. This was her moment.

In that instant, Tracy *danced.*

Danced: not as a boy in costume, not as a student completing a school assignment,

but as someone wholly herself — legs slicing the air in perfect rhythm, hair flying, petticoats flaring in radiant bloom. The crowd, dazzled, leaned forward like sunflowers to light.

It started with a quick step to the side, then another, each movement sharp, precise. A swirl of frills and lace followed her every motion, the crowd gasping as she spun, knickers flashing in the limelight. Her heart beat in perfect rhythm with the music now, the anxiety evaporating into the fluidity of the dance. Every gesture — every flick of her petticoats — felt like an exhale she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

The audience's response was immediate: gasps, then a crescendo of whispers, some in awe, others in disbelief. Tracy couldn't help but steal a glance toward the wings, where her mother stood, smiling proudly. There was no shame, no embarrassment anymore, just the raw, pure thrill of performance. She was both the artist and the art, lost in the rhythm, the motions, the fleeting pleasure of freedom.

She kicked higher, stretching her garter straps to the breaking point, her heels hitting the stage floor with a staccato CLACK. Every eye in the audience followed her, not just watching, but feeling the surge of energy that radiated from her every step. She felt the music carry her, her limbs moving fluidly without effort, each kick, each twist, each twirl coming with an ease that seemed almost preordained.

Laughter, delighted clapping, and cheers filled the space — waves of sound rising in chorus as Tracy's performance reached its apex. She was *beautiful,* undeniably so. The crowd recognized it in the way she danced, in the way the light caught her petticoats as they flared out from her waist. The crowd's admiration was palpable, filling the air, weaving around her like a tangible force.

But amidst the adulation, there was something deeper. A part of her — perhaps the one that had been terrified moments earlier — was basking in the warmth of *belonging.* This was precisely what Tracy had needed her entire life: simple acceptance. In this moment, in this performance, she had found it.

There was no shame in the way she moved, no fear of the way she was seen. She was, for the first time, entirely comfortable in her own skin, even as the world around her seemed to hold its collective breath. She wasn't just dancing for the crowd; she was dancing for herself.

The dance reached its climax with a breathtaking Royal Flash, exposing her ripe, pantied *bottom-cheeks* to the clash of a cymbal. The lights dimmed as Tracy struck

her final pose — a swath of lace, a glittering twirl. Her pulse raced like a runaway stallion, a joyful smile tugged at the corners of her lips. She was drenched in light, glowing in the aftershock of her performance.

And then, silence.

A single, endless moment before raucous applause shook the walls to their foundations. Tracy stood, heart thumping with exaltation, hands trembling as she took a small, graceful bow.

The mod took to its feet, venting its admiration and joy. She could feel their gaze like a soft caress, and for the first time that night, her nerves completely unraveled, leaving only a quiet satisfaction behind.

Her time had come. Nothing would ever change that; whatever happened from this day forward, she would never forget this moment of change and triumph.

As her Mother had said two weeks before, she was finally the girl she was *meant* to be.

Epilogue

The air in the dressing room buzzed with a jubilant frenzy. Laughter, chatter, and the clinking of champagne flutes filled the space as Tracy sat perched on a velvet stool, still flushed with the heat of her performance. The scent of powder and perfume lingered in the air, a familiar, comforting cloud of excitement. Around her, the room seemed alive with motion — everyone talking at once, congratulating her, fussing over her.

Helen Ramsey was beaming, her face flushed with a mix of pride and exhaustion, clapping her hands in delight as she replayed the performance. "I knew it! I *knew* you had it in you, Tracy!" she declared, her voice nearly drowning out the others.

Tracy's head was spinning from the attention, but she could hardly remember a time when she felt so alive. It was the kind of joy that left no room for doubt, no space for second-guessing. She had danced up a hurricane, and the world had responded in kind. The sheer warmth of their admiration filled her like a dream, and she found herself sinking into it.

In the midst of the celebration, Momma was the calm at the center of it all, a steady presence as she helped Tracy out of her costume. Her gentle hands moved with practiced ease, unbuttoning the bodice and loosening the straps of the corset. The

moment was an intimate contrast to the wild celebration around them. Tracy's breath slowed as her mother's hands grazed her skin, steady and reassuring.

"Momma, do you think…" Tracy began, but the words caught in her throat. The question was unspoken, but the meaning was clear enough. *Do you think I'll ever be this happy again?*

Her Mother smiled softly, as if reading the thought behind Tracy's eyes. "You've made me so proud tonight, sweetheart," she whispered, her voice low and tender, meant only for the two of them. "I've never been prouder of you."

Tracy's heart fluttered, a delicate pulse of warmth spreading through her chest. Her mother's voice, so full of love, made everything else fade away. She was no longer a girl in costume, one who had once dreaded this moment for so long. She was herself, wrapped in the pure affection of a bond that could never be broken. She closed her eyes for a moment, pressing her cheek against her mother's shoulder, imprinting this moment into her memory; the joy, the pride, the indescribable sense of *arrival.*

Her tummy swirled with sweet liquid warmth as she climbed out of her red lace corset. Standing up in her glinting satin bra and virginal white panties — an act she would have deemed impossible only a few short weeks ago — she leaned slightly forward, adjusting her sheer black stay-up with a delicate touch of her fingers. She was getting pretty good at this (although she still enjoyed her Mommy's sartorial ministrations).

"Future lingerie model," Helen declared with a sweeping gesture.

The room erupted again with laughter and exclamations as the Lainsbury Musical Society continued to clamor around, showering Tracy with praise. There was a softness to the way she held herself now, a deep, unshakable bliss that came from knowing who she was, as well as whom she had beside her.

It was then that the door to the dressing room creaked open, and young Syd Chambers, his shirt half-untucked and a wide grin on his face, stuck his head inside.

"Hey, Tracy!" he called, eyes twinkling. "There's a reporter from The Everdale Register outside, says they'd like to do an interview with you."

Tracy felt a sudden jolt of surprise, followed by a wave of excitement. An *interview?* She hadn't even thought about it — too caught up in the euphoria of the

moment. And yet, here it was: her moment of fame. Syd leaned in further, giving her a quick thumbs-up. "They said something about taking a photo, too. Something for the front page."

Tracy turned to her Mother, eyes wide with near astonishment. She'd come so far over the past couple of months, from the anxious young *tranzie* on Coronation Drive to the stunning young woman in front of them now. The stage had been her proving ground, but her Mother had always been her constant. No, she'd never felt this happy before — and it never could have happened without her crazy homeroom teacher and *equally* crazy Mom.

The photographer was waiting outside, his camera poised. Tracy and Eleanor walked toward the door, twining their arms about each other, silently reinforcing their mutual devotion. The warmth of her Mother's embrace, the proud gleam in her eyes — it was the kind of bond that transcended words. It was an unspoken agreement between the two of them, a silent promise that no matter where life took her, Tracy would always — *always* — be loved.

The flash of the camera lit the room, capturing an image which would set new records in the tabloid industry: Tracy, utterly resplendent in bra, knickers and stockings, and her Mother, a radiant beacon of love and pride. Time seemed to pause, spiraling out to eternity, and all at once, Tracy saw a lifetime of infinite possibilities opening up before her. The photograph (now immortalized in Page Three glossies across the country) would always remind them of this night — of the love they shared, and the dreams they had fulfilled, together.

As the evening drew to a close, Tracy Sheffield understood that there would be no going back, no return to the boy she'd once been. All of that was history now, fragments of a past that had lost all meaning. She was exactly where she was meant to be, and perhaps more importantly...she knew where she *truly* belonged.

The End