

MASQUERADE BALL

by Paul Watson

Malice Mansions Hotel, an exclusive private resort set back in the woods, far from civilisation. A place of dark walnut panels and richly carpeted floors that swallow sounds to ensure nothing disturbs their exclusive guests. And like many rich, exclusive country hotels, it is ideal for celebrations that demand privacy for the participants. All-ticket affairs of the rich and famous where no one ever speaks of what goes on behind the closed doors. One such event is the annual Halloween Masquerade Ball. Unfortunately, for Clarice, Carrie-Ann, Jasmine and Charlotte, they are still in assorted Ivy League colleges and so far too young to be invited to whatever bacchanalian rituals go on at such events.

Carrie-Ann looks again at the doors to the Danse Macabre ballroom, which remain resolutely closed to her and the others, brushing her ash-blonde hair back from her face. "Why do they even drag us out here if they just expect us to sit around while they have all the fun."

"I know, girl, I know. Like, if they're going to treat us like children, they could at least have let us go somewhere else where there's a cellphone signal." Charlotte agrees, her platinum curls falling over a deep Valley tan.

"They don't trust us at all." Clarice sulks, hands in her pockets, her pixie cut of spiky blonde hair giving her the most rebellious look of the quartet.

Jasmine nods along, smiling serenely to herself, a dark-haired beauty in the crowd of blondes.

"Like, what's so special about a bunch of old people like our parents having a masked dance?"

"You know that's not what they're doing in there"

"Like, what else would they be doing?"

"According to rumours, they spend a lot of time fu..."

"Oh, please God, Clarice, do not put the image of my parents having sex in my head. Like, gag."

"Still, we're adults now. We should be invited if they're going to drag us out here."

"Like, for sure."

Carrie-Ann sighs, "Yeah, we're all far too pure and innocent for whatever goes on in there." The other women stop, staring at her. She deadpans for a few more seconds before she doubles over in laughter and the others join in. "I'd do anything to get in."

"Anything? Even..." Clarice moves her fist by her mouth, sticking her tongue into her other cheek to bulge it out.

"Eeewwwwww. You're disgusting, Clar!"

"You're being suspiciously quiet, Jas. Normally you'd be talking our heads off about...something right now."

"Would I?"

"You know you would. So spill."

"Well, you'd do anything to get in?"

"I..."

"Because Daddy couldn't make it this year. But he still got his ticket in the mail."

"So?"

Jasmine smiles more broadly, "And he doesn't have it. Or know that I took it."

"You took it? You have a ticket."

"Uh-huh. I promise to tell you all about it once I..."

"Oh, like, no way. You're not ditching us, girl."

"It's an admit one only. No hangers on, not even plastic mommies allowed."

"Uh-huh. But you've got a plan to get around that, haven't you?"

Jasmine looks around conspiratorially. "I might have. If you're really willing to do anyyyyyything to get in."

"Jas, quit being a cryptic bitch for once."

"Not here. My room. Just let me get something sent up." she walks towards the desk clerk, a thin reedy little man with wisps of hair across his balding scalp.

"Like, what do you think she has planned?"
"No idea. But knowing Jas it'll be something warped."
"Look who's talking, lizard-lady."
Clarice puts a finger-v to her lips and flicks her tongue out.
"Eeewwwww."
Jasmine returns and they sashay to the lift.

Back in Jasmine's suite, the others cluster around, demanding, begging, wheedling answers, but she tells them to wait until her mysterious something gets sent up.

Tense minutes, mediated by alcohol from the minibar later, the bellboy knocks with a colossal trunk that barely fits through the door. Jasmine tips him and he effortfully pushes it into the suite.

"Where did you hide that?!"

"Probably up her cooch."

"Hey, Clar, if you don't want to get in, you can always fuck right off."

"I could. And maybe I'd mention that you were sneaking these girls in and spoil everything. Be the good girl for a change."

"You wouldn't!"

"You would, you bitch!"

"Fine, fine." she pulls out a key and unlocks the trunk. The dark lid opens and reveals crinoline and lace in huge abundance.

"Like, what am I looking at here?"

"Costumes." Jasmine pulls out a huge bouffant wig of white hair, a hand-held feathery blue eye-mask, a voluminous blouse in slightly off-white and finally several sections of wood-famed crinoline. "Here's mine. Yours are still in the box."

"What are you going as?"

Jasmine places the the towering wig on her head, "Marie Antoinette. And you get to eat cake."

"So what are we..."

"Oh, my gawd." Carrie-Anne pulls out a white basque, followed by thigh-high stockings and garter belt, white opera gloves, lacy panties, stiletto heels and a pretty bow for her hair.

"You're my attendants, of course."

"Of course. And just how do we get in if there's no plus ones? Never mind plus three?"

"Under the skirt, of course."

"Hey, Clar, you'll like getting close to her like that."

Clarice gives her friend the finger, before looking at the pieces of gown. "Ok, let's see if that works."

Ten minutes of work assembles the frame around Jasmine and the others crouch under it. "Well, it's cramped, but I guess it works. If, you know, you can walk out the door in it!"

"It'll be fine. Look." she peels off one of the panels, slipping down and out, leaving the skirt standing there like a camping tent. "We'll put it on in the corridor and walk right in. Assuming you can all keep quiet until I give you the signal."

"And then?"

"Then we find a quiet corner and I let you all out. Just make sure you're all wearing your masks."

"Masks?"

"It's a masked ball, duh."

"Like, shut up, Carrrie-Ann!"

"They're pretty strict about the masks. Prevents all sorts of kiss and tell stuff if no one knows who's who. Also it will mean they won't know you're not on the guest list."

"Ok, so where are the...aha!" she digs into the trunk and pulls out three masks. "Ok, so we got...cat, angel and devil."

"Clar will want the cat. She's always looking for pussy."

"And that remark means Carrie-Ann gets the mean girl devil, while Charlotte is our little sweet angel."

“Cooooool.”

That evening, Marie Antoinette steps out of the lift, giving her skirt a swift slap with her fan as she approaches the door, holding up her mask around her eyes. Any giggling ends. She hands over her ticket, standing as if she deserves to be allowed inside and doesn't like this time-wasting foolery. The doorman takes the ticket, looming over her as he checks it. He nods and she floats inside, her voluminous skirt dragging on the floor.

She enters the ballroom, “Wow!” the cavernous space is lined with candles and chandeliers, the dark wood looking comfortably warm in the flickering light.

“Wow what? What's going...”

“Quiet.” she hisses, whacking her skirt with the fan. “You'll get us caught.”

Jasmine looks around for a secluded corner, the masks around her ranging from simple domino masks to full-face concealing animal masks, the costumes ranging from simple evening gowns and suits to baroque edifices that even put hers to shame or, at the other end of the extreme, creations of lace and gauze that leave less to the imagination than a showgirl's rhinestones. She heads towards the shadows of the raised stage, away from everyone. “Ok. Last stop, everyone out.” she pulls aside the front panel of her skirt, allowing the cat, angel and devil to slip out, adjusting their masks as they stand up.

“Wow!”

A cough sounds behind them. All whirl to find Ghostface in a long black cloak and robe standing behind them. “And just what do we have here?”

“Why, good sir...” Jasmine starts, “Just my ladies-in-waiting and I taking a brief sojourn around the...”

“Ladies-in-waiting who don't have tickets, I'll wager.”

“Why, how very dare...”

“I'm afraid we take security at these events very seriously. All of you are going to have to come with me.”

The girls immediately start arguing, protesting, calling in favours, but he remains unmoved. “Yes, I do know who your parents are. We'll be speaking to them about this...lapse. But, as I said, we take our security very seriously and you'll need to accompany me.”

“Like Hell.” Clarice turns to run.

“Stop.” and she does. “Turn around.” she complies, her mask as expressionless as before but her face working overtime in shock and confusion behind it. “Now, when I said you'd accompany me, I meant it. Whether you do it voluntarily is another matter.”

“Like, what are you going to do to us?”

“Well, obviously you'll need to be punished. For now, follow me.”

“P-punished?”

“Exactly. As I said, we take our security very seriously. You've been under surveillance ever since we had the warning on Marie Antoinette.”

“What?!”

“It wasn't me!” Clarice protests as the others turn on her.

Despite the protests, they follow him behind curtained area behind the stage, every attempt not to being made by a command they find impossible to ignore.

Backstage, “So, like, what punishment are we going to be given?”

“Well...”

“Pause.”

He stops talking as Carrie-Ann, Charlotte and Clarice freeze in place.

“Well, that makes things more interesting.”

Jasmine smirks, “Doesn't it? I see you got my note.”

“Your note? You turned yourself in?”

“Daddy talks in his sleep about this place.” she shrugs, “I needed to see it for myself. But, I know I've been such a baaaaaad girl and I need to be punished sooooo bad.”

"And the others?"

"We do everything together, so why not this?"

"And do they know..."

"That I've come into my power early? Of course not. Even Daddy doesn't know that."

"I meant about how we punish trespassers."

Her impish grin widens, "It didn't seem like a good idea to raise that ahead of time."

"I see."

"Shall I restart them so you can give us our punishment, Mr Ghostface?"

He steps back to stand in the same position and nods.

"Unpause." the girl's blink.

"Well, it's just through those curtains..."

"Onto the stage? So we're going to be humiliated in front of everyone?"

"Exactly."

"Great. Real good plan you had there, Jas. Just superb."

They step through an onto the darkened stage that suddenly lights up as Ghostface steps out behind them.

"Ladies and gentlemen, and assorted others, I'm afraid we've had a security incident to report."

chatter starts up among the crowd, "Nothing serious but these four have managed to enter this hall on false pretences and they need to be punished,."

The crowd agrees.

"I suggest we start with the ringleader, Marie Antoinette. And there is only one punishment appropriate for her."

"Is it cake?" Jasmine asks, trying to sound nervous rather than excited.

"Not exactly." Smoke billows up behind him as he raises his arms, a solid device forming inside, revealed as the smoke clears to be a guillotine, the blade already raised, a basket under the open hole.

"Aaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!"

"Char, Char, **calm down**."

"Calm down? They're going to kill us!"

"No, they're not. It'll be fine. **Calm down** and you'll see."

Charlotte stops screaming but remains wide-eyed, staring at the guillotine, her nostrils flaring as she breathes faster.

"Please, Madame, this way." she walks up to the guillotine, and her skirt bumps into the bench while she's still several feet away.

"Ooops. It looks like a problem. Guess I..."

Ghostface steps up to her, grabbing the top of her puffy dress. She whispers something inaudible and he tears it away, ripping open her costume and the front section of her skirt to reveal that the costume was apparently too tight to wear anything beneath it. "That solves that 'problem', your Majesty. Now, no more stalling."

Jasmine gulps visibly and approaches the bench. She steps out of her skirt, kicking it away and lies face down on the bench in her torn dress, her head poking through the hole that Ghostface quickly locks in place. He undoes the rope and holds the blade.

"On three. One..." the audience call out "Two..." and again, "and three!" he releases the blade.

Charlotte screams louder than Jasmine as the gleaming blade plunges down. There's a solid thunk, followed by Jasmine's severed head falling into the basket.

"Jas!!!!"

Ghostface reaches into the basket, pulling her head out. "Are you still alive, 'Jas'?"

She blinks, "I...think so?"

"Close enough. Now to keep you out of trouble while I deal with your conspirators." he walks to the front of the stage, smoke creating a pike stuck into the stage. He lifts her up and jams the spike through her neck. Her eyes cross, the metal gleaming in the back of her throat as her mouth opens and closes silently. "Now, you three come help me deal with her body in case it decides any funny

business.”

“What?”

But all three dutifully obey, glancing at their friend's severed head, reminding them of what might happen if they don't. With their help, Jasmine's body is soon displayed on a board, spread-eagled and restrained in place, her chest rising and falling despite the lack of head, her body on full display, the torn dress tossed aside as part of the process.

“And now we turn our attention to you three...” he gestures at three fold-out chairs appearing through the smoke. They meekly move to the chairs and sit down, still in their extravagant underwear. “Now, audience, who should be first?”

A series of cries come out, more a wall of noise than an answer.

“I heard devil.”

“No! No, no, not me, ple...” he pulls Carrie-Ann's mask up and off revealing smooth, blank, featureless skin where her face should be, her skull denuded of hair. He slips the straps of the mask along his arm.

He grips Charlotte's halo next and repeats the process revealing another blank face and finally he pulls the cat mask away from Clarice. He leaves all three feeling their faces, hanging the masks around Jasmine's body. He returns to the squirming girls. “And now for the rest of your punishment” Clarice's blank face turns towards him as if to say 'this isn't enough?' “You are all maskless. And without your masks, you have no will of your own. You are all mere faceless drones. You live merely to serve the people here, the real people, your betters. So get up, go into the audience and see to their every need and whim like good little drones.”

Slowly, one by one, Carrie-Ann resisting until last, they get out of their chairs and make their way off the stage to mingle with their betters, eager to serve them in any way they desire. It does not take long for those desires to include servants without clothes.

“Now, for the finale.” He takes up the devil's mask and places it against Jasmine's breast. When he pulls it away, Carrie-Ann's face looks out from the breast, eyes darting around

“What the...? How?! What's going...?” he quiets her with a bright red gag filling her mouth.

He repeats this on the other side, taking up the angel mask and adding Charlotte's face to the other breast, filling her mouth before she can scream. Finally he places the cat mask between Jasmine's legs, her severed head moaning as Clarice's face appears instead of her pussy. Clarice licks her lips and the body shudders before quaking as her mouth is filled by her gag.

“Feel free to have fun with the stage toy, or the drones, everyone.” He takes the pike over his shoulder and walks off stage.

Later, “We'll have to get some proper training set up for you. Fit it around your college schedules. See how powerful you really are. Introduce you to the right people.”

“Yeah, yeah, but before that, I need to be 'punished' some more.”

“I think I can arrange that.” he leans back in the bed, lowering her severed head back down to fulfil her punishment.