

PRINCESS SOPHIE
by Paul Watson
For and starring Sophie

That night, Sophie lies in bed, trying to get comfortable. But whichever way she tosses or turns, the thick belt digs into her, making rest all but impossible. She scowls. "Fine. You win, Mr Magician." She unbuckles the belt and lets her legs find their own comfortable position. She rolls her torso the other way, taking up the whole bed as Steve isn't there tonight. It is, to her annoyance, surprisingly comfortable and she's soon drifting off to dreams she'll half-remember, and completely deny, of being on stage under the magician's 'tender' care.

She wakes and panics briefly as she struggles to sit up, before remembering why she can't. She looks over at her legs, reaching over to touch her waist. Her legs shudder at the touch before they roll back under her torso. She fumbles for the belt, grumbling about having to do stomach crunches just to stand up.

Getting dressed is...interesting, which is the polite form of how Sophie describes it. Her top half is straight forward but the belt means she can't bend forward far enough to pull her jeans up and, when she takes it off, she has to raise her arms too high to be comfortable. So, grumbling and cursing the whole time, she finds a skirt instead, affixing the belt firmly in place. She looks at herself in the mirror, the wide belt around her waist, "Great. I look like a weightlifting trad wife." she sighs, "Well, this is me for the week, I guess. At least I have enough skirts and dresses to last at school." The belt feels more solid, more secure, than the collar, so she's not worried about accidentally falling out as she busies herself about her day, but sitting too long isn't comfortable. So when she's marking, she undoes the buckle and has to find a cushion, or two, to keep her at the right height for the table as her legs adjust to walking without so much weight on top of them. She's not sure why she's doing that. It's not like it's a party trick she'll be showing off. As if.

She tries walking on her hands, I mean, she might as well while she has the chance, right? But, even at half her body, it's too much weight and really, really awkward. Fortunately it's not far to fall.

Repeatedly. So much easier in those internet stories that she definitely doesn't have bookmarked.

The journey to work is somewhat easier then with the choker, thank Heaven for small mercies, and the excuse she cooked up on Sunday of having hurt her back so needing extra support gets accepted by everyone but Nat, who gives her a knowing look.

"Not collared this week. Did you get magically cured?"

"Kinda."

"And is that belt, that looks to be the exact same style as your collar, so you don't fall in half after your handsome magician left you like that?"

"I never said he was handsome!" she blushes anyway, "Anyway, I told you, it's to support..."

"Yes, that's what you told me." Nat replies with a dismissive wave of her hand, "But given the trick you played on me last week..."

"That wasn't a trick!"

"Sure, sure, it really happened, whatever. You can see why I'm suspicious."

"You're always suspicious."

"Not true, Soph, sometimes I'm sleeping." An early bell rings, "And we need to scoot. You can 'surprise' me later."

"But..." but Nat's already started off down the school corridors to class and Sophie runs to do the same.

The relative peace and quiet lasts until she's alone with the class, "Miss Jones! Miss Jones!" hands wave in the air for attention.

"Yes, Shawna." she asks, squatting down by the chair, already knowing where this will go.

"Miss Jones, where did your necklace go? Don't you need it? Why isn't your head falling off, Miss?"

"The magician who did it to me took it back. My head doesn't fall off any more." She makes a note of the ripple of disappointment that flows through the class.

"Does that mean no more Headless Story Time, Miss?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Awwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww."

"But you're cured, Miss?"

She nods. It's not quite lying if you don't say it out loud.

"Ok. I'm glad you're better." and then things return to the ordinary chaos of supervising young children and trying to teach them.

Lunchtime, and the chaos of the classroom is replaced by failing to avoid Nat, "So..."

"So?"

"Soph, you do not play innocent nearly as well as you think you do. What's really up with the belt?"

"What do you think's up with it?"

"I think you're going to pretend you got sawn in half and now you're in two pieces."

"Pretend?!" she unbuckles the belt and straightens her arms, lifting her body off her hips with a significant tremor. "How's this for pretending?"

"You are sooo easy to provoke."

Sophie scowls as she lowers herself back down, cinching the belt.

"Is that why the skirt?"

Sophie nods. "I'm lucky I was able get my panties on."

"What does Steve think of this?"

She shrugs, "He hasn't noticed."

"He...hasn't noticed??? How hasn't he noticed?! You're in half!"

"Keep it down! I don't want everyone to know!"

"So..."

"He's been working."

"All weekend?! And last week?"

"Oh, you believe me now?"

"I believed you then, but it's funnier to give you a poke now and again."

"I'm glad my misery is amusing to you."

"Endlessly. And Steve?"

"He...didn't notice."

"Uh-huh. So, when are you dumping him?"

"Dumping him?"

"Girl, if he doesn't notice..." she gestures, "...*this*, he is not paying nearly enough attention to you. Or *any* attention. Like, at all"

"I know."

"So?"

Sophie sighs, "Yeah, you're right."

"I know."

"I'll tell him when he's back. And then I'll have to find a roommate. Damn it."

"Roommate?"

"He pays half the rent."

"Well, if you really need it that bad, your place is much nicer than my dump."

"You?"

"Don't sound so shocked. It's not like we're getting married."

"You are aware of all the 'and they were roommates' jokes, right?"

"Sure. Just think how many heads we can make explode by making them."

"I guess."

"Come on, two young women about town, what can go wrong? I'll even come along to the show and keep you safe from your magician."

"He's not my magician."

"Not yet."

“Not ever.”

The next day has no Steve, so no confrontation, and, also, no resolution. He's now expecting to be back on Wednesday. It's almost enough to make Sophie break up remotely. Almost.

Wednesday does not start well. Sophie has to rush into school because she missed the bus. She doesn't mention that she missed the bus because when she woke up, she, somehow, managed to put her legs on backwards and then fell over trying to walk the wrong way. She double doesn't mention this to Nat, not because she doesn't know about the halfies situation like the rest of the staff, but because she doesn't want to put up with the mocking and laughing.

Mid afternoon, as she's sitting at the desk in class, the belt undone to avoid it digging in, Roger trips over his own shoelaces and starts, quite reasonably, wailing as he sprawls on the floor. Sophie moves instinctively, leaping up from the chair. Her torso falls forward onto the table as her legs run around the desk. Roger's mishap is immediately forgotten (except by Roger) as all of the class realise what's happened. Sophie turns a lovely shade of burgundy as her legs walk back to the desk and she drags herself onto them, securing the belt.

She ignores the questions until Roger is up, with a scraped elbow and knee but no serious injuries, and escorted to the first aid station.

Then, once she's back in the room, she has to explain. “But, Miss, you said you were cured.” Shawna protests.

Sophie has a hard time looking into those wide, betrayed eyes. “I was cured...of the problem I had. My head doesn't come off any more.” she pulls on her head to show that, “But, he cut me in half, right across the waist, after he'd done it.” she chops her hand across her waist to demonstrate.

“That's not fair!”

“No, it fu...no, it isn't. But, just because he's a mean magician, I didn't want you to worry about me. And certainly didn't want you copying this. It's dangerous if you don't know what you're doing.” The children nod soberly.

“Does that mean we can have Half Miss Jones Story Time?”

“I...” she looks over the expectant faces and quietly sighs to herself, “ok, you can have half story time. But no talking about it. Secret stuff, right?”

Grinning, they all faithfully promise. Sophie pulls a chair out, sliding her torso back onto it and kneeling in front of it. The reading goes well until Billy touches her waist and almost gets a lesson far too mature for the class. Instead, he just gets shooed back in a slightly breathless voice.

That night, Steve finally comes home. He doesn't notice the belt. She waits until after dinner.

“Steve...we need to talk.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“Yeah, a bit.” she sighs, “It's not working.”

“What's not...”

“Us. We're not working.”

“What?”

“You're never here. I've been going through...a lot the last two weeks. And you didn't even notice.”

“You didn't tell me!”

“Also true. But that...kinda makes the point, doesn't it? I'm going through stuff and I don't...can't talk to you about it. What kind of relationship is that?”

“That...doesn't sound healthy, no. So what do we do about it?”

“Do? We just...part ways, I guess. We don't work as a couple. Doesn't mean we have to stop being...”

“Are you really giving me the 'can we just be friends' speech? This isn't a Richard Curtis movie, Soph.”

“No. If it was, we'd have a series of incredibly unlikely coincidences that push us together rather than apart. And you'd be Hugh Grant.”

"I'd make a very good Hugh Grant."

"No, you really wouldn't. And I'm going to struggle to be mistaken for Julia Roberts."

"Andi McDowell?"

"Her hair's too curly."

"Michelle McCutcheon?"

"Too dark and way too London."

"So, as we're not in a Richard Curtis movie,...where do we go from here? I don't think I can handle being flatmates if we're not together."

"No, that would be...awkward at best."

"Yeah, awkward. I...well, as you said, I'm not here much so it makes sense if I move out."

"And the flat's in my name."

"And the flat's in your name. It will take a bit to find a new place. Do you want me to..."

"Oh, no, no. I don't want to throw you out! It's just..."

"We don't work."

"Yeah. We don't. Friends?"

"Sure. Friends, I guess."

Thursday arrives, leaving Sophie still low from the previous night, however reasonable everything had been. Nat greets her immediately, "So, you told him then?"

Sophie grunts in reply.

"It went that bad?"

"No. It went...ok. No one got mad. He's moving out. We're...friends."

Nat hugs her, "It'll be ok."

"Yeah. I'll be fine." she wipes her eye.

"And, at least with you like this, you don't have to miss out on getting oral."

"What?!"

"Oh, don't tell me you haven't thought about it."

"I'm not as..."

"Yeah, you are. You just fight it more."

"Or embrace it less."

"Or that."

"I can't even go to the loo right now without it being a whole thing. Never mind..."

"What?"

"You think I can get the skirt off without taking the belt off?"

"Ohhhhh, ewwwww." the bell rings, "Showtime. Get your game face on, girl."

Friday, and Sophie's a little more composed, maybe even a little happier as the weekend draws near and with it her chance of getting back to normal. Nat insists its because she'll be seeing her handsome magician again, which Sophie has to firmly, repeatedly and, according to Nat, completely unconvincingly refute. Unfortunately, Nat's grandmother's 'had a fall' so she needs to beg off accompanying her tomorrow. Sophie isn't sure whether to be disappointed or relieved at this development.

Saturday comes and mostly goes. She takes the ticket and heads to the theatre, determined to...she's not 100% sure what she's determined to do, but she's determined. She takes the seat as directed and has an idea. She undoes the belt and lets her legs sit at the adjacent chair. And then she waits as the show begins.

As expected, the spotlight finds her for the finale. She glares up at it and walks half of her towards the stage. The audience cheer. "Sophie, could the rest of you come up, please? It'll be hard to do this with only half an assistant."

"Sorry, can't really get that far like this. If only someone had thought ahead when he left me like this. All week!"

"How about if I put you back together first?"

"Well, I dunno...."

"Oh, well, if you're happy like that, I'm sure we can..."

"No, that's fine." she whistles turning her legs around and very carefully walking them back to her. She pulls her torso up, sliding onto her hips, feeling herself melting back together. She twists her torso a couple of times, stretching to make sure she's really in one piece once more, slings the belt over her shoulder and makes her way to the stage. It's only when she's on the steps that she realises she could have just raced for the exit like a sensible person. Too late now. She steps onto the stage and holds out the thick belt. "Here. This is yours. I won't be needing it any more." she glares up at him, "Will I?"

"Thanks, but I don't think it's my colour." The magician takes the belt and tosses it casually into the air. Sophie, like the audience, waits in vain for it to respond politely to gravity.

Instead the magician brings out a glittering tiara, although from where isn't clear, a creation of silver lace rising to a point. Sophie looks at it in equal parts appreciation and suspicion. "What's that supposed to do?"

"Well, our trick calls for a princess..."

Sophie responds with a very eloquent cocked eyebrow.

"And so you should at least look the part."

"What *else* does it do?"

"I'm hurt."

"Not yet." she mutters. "But I'm working on it."

"It just makes you look...Princessatorial."

"That is not a real word."

He shrugs as if its inconsequential and holds out the tiara. Sophie takes it. It looks her size, which is suspicious, but not quite as suspicious as the box was last week. She places it on her forehead and everything goes white in a flash of blinding light. When her vision clears, she can't feel her t-shirt and skirt. Spots dance in front of her, the audience applauding so she looks down at the sleeveless silvery gown covering her, opera gloves glittering along her arms. A bit low-cut but still surprisingly classy. It actually looks pretty good. She looks pretty good. She twists to make sure. Low back but nothing showing. Yes, this is actually nice.

"There. You look wonderful, doesn't she?" The audience roar in approval, "Properly princessatorial."

"Still not a real word."

"Still don't care." he hisses back.

"Can I keep the dress? It'll look great when the kids do Cinderella."

"Well, Cinders, if you go to the ball..."

"By which you mean take part in your trick."

"Exactly."

She looks down at the dress again, seemingly conflicted. The audience weigh in, overwhelmingly on the positive side. "It is very nice. So, I guess, you've got a deal." she holds out a hand that sparkles in the stage lights.

"Excellent. No backing out when you see what it is."

"Oh, that's reassuring."

He turns her to the cabinet at the back of the stage. It's a rectangle on four very long thin legs, probably starting at mid-thigh and ending at her neck. The front looks like it splits down the middle to open like a wardrobe.

"I'm getting into that?"

"Hopefully. Or I'll have a very angry audience." the audience shouts on cue. The assistants push the cabinet, which looks a little too short for them, but perfect for Sophie.

"Almost worth it."

"No takesie-backsies."

Sophie sputters as she swallows the laugh and walks up to the cabinet. The magician opens the

door, revealing the top has three holes and the base having two. He pulls out the front sections and Sophie backs in, stopped by the gown between her legs. She raises a questioning eyebrow. "Didn't think this through, did you?"

"It'll work." He puts his hands on her thighs, pushing back as her eyes widen. Her neck rests in the middle hole above, the gown pinched between her legs. The magician slides the stocks back into place, trapping the gown as well as her legs between them. Sophie tries to tug it more comfortable but it's stuck fast. "Hands up here." He taps the top of the cabinet and Sophie moves almost hypnotically to place them there, the stocks closing comfortably but tightly around her. He closes up the double doors.

"What does all this..." her hand tries to wave at the box, "...have to do with being a princess?"

"It's called the Disembodied Princess."

"Disemwhated?"

He smiles, lifting up a very long flat divider blade. "Disembodied." he lines it up against the lower edge of the cabinet and shoves it through. Sophie gasps at the sharp stabs through her legs, the warm feelings following like a pleasant, numbing balm, and a light, airy, empty feeling filling her body inside the cabinet.

"How do you feel?"

"Weird. I can't put it into words properly." she pauses, tilting her head, "Even made up ones like Princessatorial."

"Rude." he shoves the second blade through the roof of the cabinet.

She gives another yelp, her hands spasming as the blade cuts through her wrists in turn, the airy feeling intensifying. There's a very soft sound of cloth falling that she really hopes doesn't mean what she thinks it means.

The magician walks around behind the cabinet and opens the doors there, a light breeze from the air conditioning flowing through her.

He moves to the front and flings the door open to reveal the interior of the cabinet, formerly occupied by Sophie's body from her neck to her thighs, now only occupied by a puddle of silvery cloth. He reaches in, Sophie whimpering a little as his hands pass through where she should be, and lifts up the gown. "Well, will you look at that, Cinders forgot her underwear."

The audience laugh. What's left of Sophie colours.

"You made me that outfit!"

"And you didn't protest."

Her response dies in her throat. She didn't. Why didn't she? While she's confused and pondering what that says about her, he closes up the cabinet. She can feel the gown clinging to her. The magician walks around and opens the door again, revealing the gown back to its proper place, clinging to Sophie's body, but with no sign of the body to which it's clinging. The audience cheer at the strange sight. Sophie still feels weird but at least she feels like she's clothed once more. The magician unlocks the stocks and lets her out.

"Hey!"

"What?"

"Where did I go?!"

"You're right there. Everyone can see you. More or less. And hear you."

"Bits of me are here." she waves her gloved hand, the glove moving as if the invisible arm were still there. "Where's the rest of me?"

He smiles his annoying smile. "Disembodied, Princess." and sends her back to her seat with more questions and a pair of tickets for next week's show.