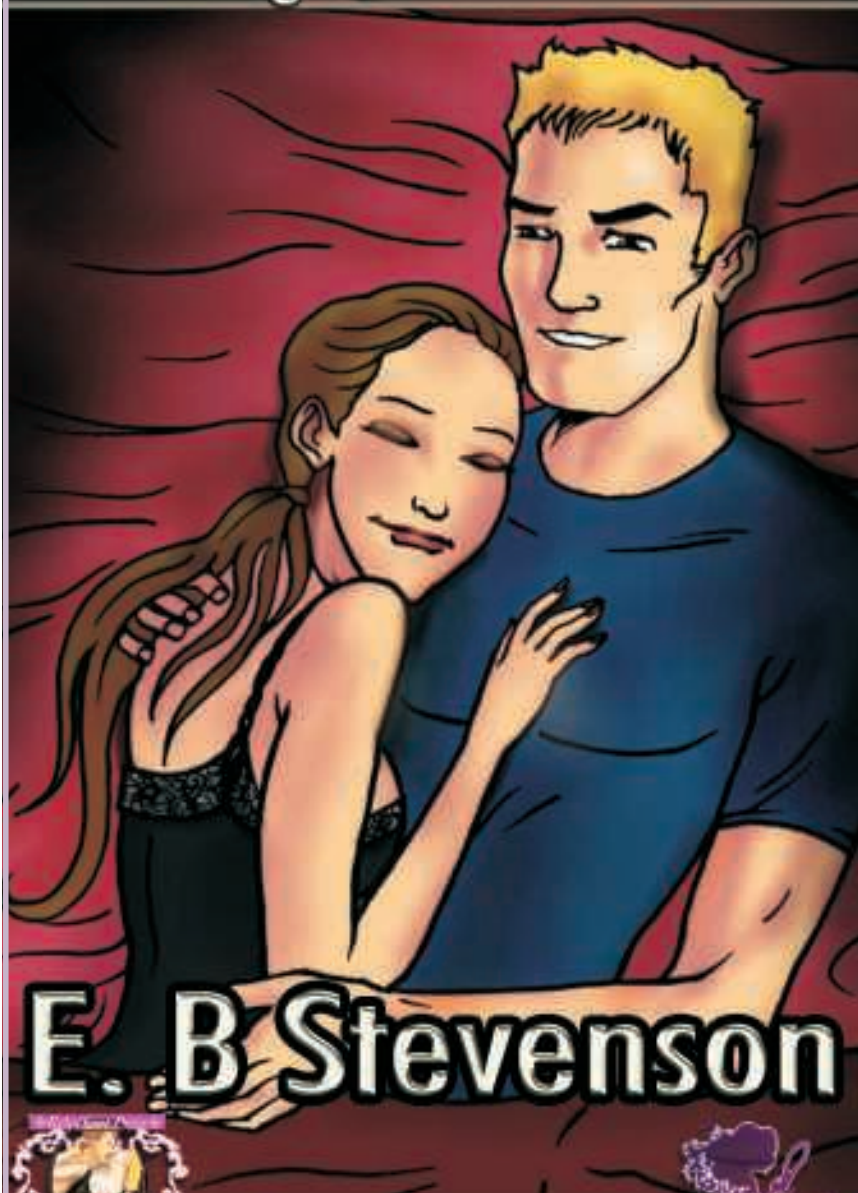


Becoming A Woman For Him



E. B. Stevenson



A "New Woman" Novel



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Persons seeking gender reassignment surgery, hormone therapy or any other medical and/or body-altering process should seek the counsel of a qualified therapist who follows the Benjamin Standards of Care for Gender Identity Disorder. This material is intended for persons over the age of 18 only.



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“BECOMING A WOMAN FOR HIM”

by E.B. Stevenson

One

At twelve years of age, I had a large number of friends; both boys and girls. That's to be expected when you're one of the top students in your class. Every class has a person in it who's smaller than most his or her age. Ours certainly was no exception. We had a boy in our class who was smaller than most boys his age.

It was toward the end of sixth grade; we were living in a small suburb of a major midwestern city. Being five-four with an athletic build, I was naturally one of the toughest guys in the class to the bullies, yet I was a nice guy to my friends and to the girls. I had been a friend of David Gaye since the second grade. We all knew that he was different; we accepted his eccentricities. He didn't seem to fit the male archetype; yet,

he didn't seem to fit the female archetype, either. He had celebrated his twelfth birthday two weeks before; he was only four feet, eleven inches tall with a slender build and short blonde hair. Some of the neighborhood boys picked on him because of his size; it was something that irritated my friends and me.

Late one afternoon in May, I was walking home from school with the Schultz twins, Nick and Nigel, Edward Dinwiddie, Rachel Keller, Lori Johnston and Missy Brown. Nick and Nigel were both five-three with average builds and short, curly black hair. Eddie was five-four with a larger than average build; his light brown hair done in a crew cut. Rachel was the tallest of the girls at five-three with an average build and shoulder-length blonde hair. Lori was five-two with a slender build and long brunette hair. Missy was five feet tall with a larger than average build and shoulder-length medium brown hair. David was in the middle of the group. Andy Sadler, who was in the eighth grade at the time and the neighborhood bully, approached us with his group of friends. Eighth graders Michael Francis, Kevin Gray and Philip March, along with seventh graders Tom Roberts, George March and Joe Stein, were with him. They looked more like a street gang than a rag-tag bunch of teenage boys.

“Look at what we have here! David Gay-bait and a group of wimps; you want to know how we should kill you,” Andy said devilishly.

“What the hell are you doing here, punk?” I asked him in a sinister manner.

“I'm here to knock off a few fags and dykes,” he replied.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but we’re not dykes! We like boys like Ted, Nick, Nigel and Eddie,” Missy added in a defiant tone.

“We like girls like Missy, Lori and Rachel. We’re not a bunch of freaking homos!” Eddie added angrily before reached into his backpack.

It was about the same time that Nick and Nigel reached into their backpacks for their brass knuckles. They always carried a pair of brass knuckles with them. I reached into my backpack to take out a seven-foot long steel chain. Eddie reached for his ropes and bullwhip. Little did we know that the girls were trained in Judo, Karate and Kung Fu; they were prepared for a fight.

Andy began by attacking David. He tried to defend himself, but he got a black eye in the process. Lori got him away before they began to tear at his clothing. I began to twirl the chain in the air, like a cowboy twirls a lasso. Eddie began cracking the bullwhip like a circus trainer uses one to get a dangerous animal back into his cage. Brothers Philip and George began to attack Nick and Nigel. They dashed off in opposite directions to sneak up from behind. Kevin looked like he was ready to take Eddie on in a duel to the death.

Not seeing the twins, Philip asked George: “Where are the twins? Did they chicken out?”

“No we didn’t, you bastards!” Nigel replied before he and Nick punched them in their backs with their brass knuckles. They relentlessly punched them until they were doubled up in pain. “Serves them right!” angrily yelled Nick.

Andy was now attacking Lori; she kept fighting back with a series of high kicks. He was determined to rip her clothes to shreds. “Take that, you pervert!”

she yelled while she was relentlessly kicking Andy, who kept fighting back.

Michael then rushed toward Rachel; he tried to assault her. “Michael Francis, you are nothing but a stupid pervert!” she yelled angrily before he threw a fist at her. She then put her martial arts training to use by sending a series of high kicks at him, hitting him in the head several times, and hitting his rib cage several times.

I then faced Tom, who was carrying a billy club. He was the only one who was armed. “Ted Thomas, why do you protect a shrimp like him?” he asked in a bullying tone.

“David happens to be our friend. We don’t care if he’s different from the rest of us. He’s a human being, and we feel his life matters as much as our own lives matter,” I replied, attempting to keep calm.

“Well, take this, you homo protector!” Tom yelled before he swung his club at me. I took a hit in the side. All I would feel would be a minor sting. I reached for my chain, and swung it at him. He tried to run off, but he tripped and fell on the root of a very tall tree. Lori ran up and stomped him on his chest with her left foot as hard as she could.

Eddie gave me a piece of rope; I tied Tom’s hands behind his back. “I’m going to let the cops deal with you,” I said to him, attempting to keep my cool.

“They’re going to deal with the lot of them. I just called the cops on my cell phone,” Missy added.

“Don’t these kids know that bullying is now a criminal offense?” Rachel asked me.

“They probably don’t. I can’t see why they would bully an innocent guy like David, except that he’s smaller than most of us in his grade,” I replied.

“I can’t see why, either. He’s such a nice guy, he doesn’t bother anyone, and keeps to himself a lot,” Lori added.

Eddie held Michael to the ground with his right foot. He had tied his hands behind his back, awaiting the arrival of the police. “You had to call the heat again!” Michael angrily said.

Missy had Andy tied to a tree; he was obviously humiliated. “Did you really have to call the pigs?” he angrily asked her.

“Don’t you ever call our police ‘the pigs’ again, or I’ll knock all your teeth out!” she angrily replied.

It was twenty minutes later that the police arrived. They took Andy and his gang into custody. I was taken into an interrogation room by a team of detectives, Harry Kohler and Stephanie DeRousse. “How long has this been going on?” Stephanie asked me.

“It’s been going on for a couple of years now. Mr. Sadler and his friends have been picking on Mr. Gaye because he is smaller than most of us. He’s a gentle soul and doesn’t bother anyone,” I replied.

“What has brought this on?” Harry then asked.

“It’s apparently because they show a very deep hatred to those who are different than themselves. Today, we decided to accompany Mr. Gaye home from school. All of us are sixth graders at Carter Elementary School. The instigators are seventh and eighth graders at McCarthy Middle School. They attacked Mr. Gaye before they attacked the rest of us; we

fought back in self defense,” I replied, being right to the point.

“We’re not going to press charges against you and your friends, since you did it in self defense. Andy Sadler and his gang are in big trouble,” Stephanie added.

“They probably didn’t know bullying is now a crime,” I said.

It was shortly after five o’clock that I walked in the door at my house. My father, Theo, and my eleven-year-old sister, Kimberly, were waiting. My seventeen-year-old brother, Eric, and my fifteen-year-old sister, Brittany, were at the library, studying for final exams. My mother, Corinne, passed away shortly before I started the fourth grade. “Ted, what’s this I hear about you going down to the police station?” my suspicious father asked me.

“Andy Sadler and his gang have been attacking David Gaye for the past couple of years. Today, they really wanted to finish him off. I decided to accompany him home from school today with the Schultz twins, Eddie Dinwiddie, Lori Johnston, Rachel Keller and Missy Brown. They began to beat him without mercy; his friends challenged us to a fight. We fought back; the martial arts training that the girls went through came in very handy, along with the skills we learned at the boxing club. They apparently didn’t know that bullying is now a criminal offense. Missy called the police; I went down with my friends so they could get our statements,” I explained.

“It’s very dumb to have someone attack another person just because he or she is different,” added Kimberly.

I was finishing my homework in my bedroom around nine o’clock when Brittany came into the

room. “May I have a word with you, Ted?” she asked me.

“I was almost finished with my English homework; you may speak,” I replied.

“I hear you and your friends went to the mat with Andy Sadler’s gang,” she said with a quizzical look.

“He’s been picking on David Gaye for the past two years. We decided we finally had enough of their bullying of him just because he’s smaller than most boys his age. We put the louts in their proper place: behind bars,” I told her.

“Did he know that bullying is now a criminal offense?”

“They probably didn’t know that the law changed at the first of the month; they did it anyway.”

“There’s more to David than just being short and skinny.”

“How’s that, Brit?”

“His older sister, Bella, and I are best friends. Bella and their big sister, Adele, have been dressing David in their old dresses for the past several years.”

“Are you for real, Brittany Michelle Thomas?”

“I am for real, Ted. When I was over at their house two weeks ago before Bella and I went to the outlet mall, Adele had him in her prom dress. She had already put a long blonde wig on his head, and was making him up to look like a girl. I was shocked that she would make him up to look like a girl!”

“How did this start?”

“It apparently started when he was four years old, when he put on a flower girl’s gown that Bella wore when their Aunt Gwen got married. They have been dressing him in their old dresses off and on since then, especially when their mother, stepfather and two brothers, Ben and Bob, are away from the house. He seems to be enjoying his sisters’ feminization of him.”

“This is the first I’ve heard of this!”

“I hope this doesn’t affect his gender identity later on.”

“Let’s keep this our little secret for now. The fewer people who know about this, the better.”

“My lips are sealed.”

After Brittany left my room, I continued my work on my English homework until I finished the last question on my assignment. I put my books in my backpack, took my chain out, and set it on my desk before I went to bed.

Two

Six years had passed since the day we took on Andy’s gang. The whole gang was still in Juvenile Detention as we were getting ready to graduate from Van Buren High School. David was only five-five by that time; he still had a slender build, but with his blonde hair done like those guys in Roman sculptures. He had become interested in high fashion; he was planning to pursue a career as a fashion designer. The Schultz twins were both five-eleven with athletic builds; Nick was the ace of the school’s pitching staff, winning twenty games in his two seasons on

the Junior Varsity team and the last two on the Varsity squad. Nigel was the team's catcher. Both of them had accepted baseball scholarships; they would be off to Florida State. Lori, by that time five-seven with an average build, was the pitching star of the softball team; she was also going to Florida State on a softball scholarship. She had been dating Nick since our freshman year of high school. Missy, five-ten with an athletic build, played basketball throughout high school; she averaged twenty points per game in her senior year. She was dating Nigel; she accepted a basketball scholarship at Florida State. Eddie had just accepted an academic scholarship to Yale, where he would pursue a law degree. Rachel had also been accepted at Yale, where she would study accounting. I was headed to Stanford to major in international business, with an eye toward taking over the export-import business my father and Uncle Roger started forty years ago.

The six of us got together at Sal's Pizza Parlor just a week before we graduated from Van Buren High to take a look back, and look ahead to what the future would have in store for us over pizza and soda.

"I'd take it you're planning a career in high fashion," Missy said to David.

"Yes, I am planning to try my hand at haute couture. I'm going to New York after graduation to work for a top designer. I hope to enroll at a school there to get my degree in Fashion Merchandising and Promotion," he replied.

"I've really been interested in the export-import business," I added.

"Didn't your brother Eric want to enter that business?" Nick asked me.

“He wanted to at one time, but felt that it wasn’t for him. He changed to Secondary Education; he’s now teaching English as a Second Language at a school in Oslo, Norway,” I replied.

“What about Brittany?” Rachel then asked.

“She looked at that, too...but she decided to study Psychology. She’s now in graduate school, and has applied to several doctoral programs,” I told her.

“What kind of patients does she hope to work with?” Lori asked.

“She hopes to work with either transgender or autistic patients,” I replied.

“What are you going to major in at Florida State?” Eddie asked.

“I’m planning to study Atmospheric Sciences; I hope to be a hydrologist or a meteorologist,” Nick replied.

“I’m looking at possibly studying American History,” added Nigel.

“I’ve already decided on accounting,” Lori informed us.

“I have it whittled down to two: Elementary Education or Nursing,” Missy then added.

“What area of the law do you hope to specialize in?” Nigel asked Eddie.

“I hope to specialize in disability, elder and/or real estate law,” he replied.

“May I ask your opinion on something?” David asked us.

“What would you like our feedback on?” Rachel asked him.

“I know I’ve kept this from you for so long, but I am ready to come out of the closet,” he replied.

“What do you mean by that?” Nigel asked.

“Ever since I entered my freshman year of high school, I’ve been dealing with issues involving my gender identity. I’ve been questioning whether I’m really a guy or a girl. Last night, after fighting it for the past four years, I finally had to confess to my family that I am a girl, unfairly trapped in a boy’s body. From the time I was four years old, I knew that I should have been a girl. I kept this a secret from you for far too long. I hope to start transitioning from guy to girl when I get to New York,” he sheepishly explained.

“How is your family taking your decision?” Missy then asked.

“My mother said the most interesting thing to me. She asked me why I didn’t tell her this before, and I replied that if I told them that I was transgender, I would be afraid they would disown me. My mother told me that no matter what I did, she would be behind me all the way. My sisters also lent their support should I decide to become a girl. My stepfather and my brothers were surprisingly supportive. I hope you will be just as supportive as my family,” he explained succinctly.

“No matter what you do, you have my total support,” I assured him.

“We will all be supportive, regardless of what you do,” Lori added.

He then gave us a look at pictures of himself made up to look like a girl, with a brunette wig and wearing his mother's wedding gown. "My sister Bella took this as part of a fashion portfolio for one of her Photography classes," he said.

"Is she planning to be a fashion photographer?" I asked him.

"She's already working as a fashion photographer in Paris," he replied.

When I got home from the pizza parlor, I was still letting David's revelation sink in. Kimberly, by that time a seventeen-year-old high school junior who's now five-six with an average build and long medium brown hair, asked me; "What are you thinking about, Ted?"

"It's David Gaye. He told me and my friends he's planning to become a girl," I replied.

"Ben told me about it on our date last night. He's very supportive, and looks forward to having another sister," she added.

"Brittany told me about his dressing up as a girl when I was in sixth grade. I kept it a secret from everyone for so long; I'm sure she didn't want anyone else to know until the time was right."

"Ben tells me that he's ready to go through the emotional and physical pain associated with transition."

"I know more about transgender issues than most people my age. I read a lot on the subject in my Psychology class during my junior year. I also knew that my teacher in that course has a friend who went through transition and surgery years ago. We got to meet her toward the end of the class. Her friend also

went through the transition from man to woman. She had gender reassignment surgery a year ago in San Francisco; she's now working as an attorney specializing in transgender law."

"When will he start his transition?"

"He plans to start after he arrives in New York."

When we graduated from high school a week later, we kept the news of David's plan to transition to a girl to ourselves. Eddie and I graduated one-two in our class; Rachel was the top girl in our class at number four. Nick, Nigel, Lori and Missy all graduated in the top ten percent of the class; David finished in the middle of a class of 350. We would all head off to find our careers.

Three

Another six years would go by after graduation from high school. I was by that time working for my father and Uncle Roger at their export-import business, Theo-Roger Exports and Imports. Uncle Roger is my mother's older brother. After graduating from college, Nigel and Missy also returned home, where Nigel was teaching American History at Suburban Community College, while Missy was teaching sixth grade at Carter Elementary School. I was best man when Nigel and Missy married a year ago. I was getting ready to take a trip to Thailand and Malaysia to buy some of that country's finest finished products for the business when we decided to get together for pizza at Sal's once again.

"How are your students treating you?" I asked Nigel.

“They’re treating me quite well, thank you. In fact, they ask more questions than I do,” he replied.

“These kids are a bit wilder than we were when we were in grade school, but we don’t have the bullying problem anymore,” Missy added.

“I remember when we had that fight with Andy and his gang of thugs twelve years ago,” I said to them.

“Where are they now?” Missy asked.

“Andy Sadler is awaiting sentencing in a murder case. He was convicted of first-degree murder in the death of a woman he was dating three years ago. Philip and George March are now at the federal pen in Terre Haute for their part in a trans-bashing incident in Atlanta four years ago; they’re serving thirty years apiece. Kevin Gray is awaiting trial on federal kidnapping charges; he kidnapped two sisters in Las Vegas, and held them in a vacant house outside Salt Lake City for three weeks before the police stormed it. He’s being held without bail at the federal courthouse in Salt Lake City. Michael Francis is now in the Witness Protection Program, living under an assumed name in rural North Dakota. He turned state’s witness against a man who was pushing illegal drugs to the Lakota Sioux nation in the Dakotas. Tom Roberts is now living in Australia, where he works on a ranch in the Outback. He went and got his G.E.D., and went to Australia when his probation expired. Joe Stein also got his G.E.D.; he went to the University of California to get a Criminal Justice degree; he’s now working as a paralegal in San Francisco while going to law school,” I explained.

“Have you kept up with David Gaye since we graduated from high school?” Nigel then asked.

“The last time I heard from him was just before I went to work for my dad and uncle. He was finishing

his sophomore year of college, and hasn't started his transition to a girl," I replied.

"He's now living part of the time as a guy, and part of the time as a girl," Missy added.

"What are the others doing?" I asked them.

"Nick is in graduate school, finishing his Master's degree. He works part-time for a television station in Tallahassee. Lori just got certified as a public accountant; she's working for an accounting firm, also in Tallahassee. They recently announced their engagement. Eddie just graduated from law school at Yale; he had just joined a New York law firm specializing in elder law. Rachel is now working for a top accounting firm in New York. They're also planning to get married," Missy replied.

"Rachel and Eddie will be getting married in the fall," Nigel added.

The next day, I would be off to Bangkok, where I found some of their best products, as well as arts and crafts. I even spent one night on the town with a transsexual girl named Winnie; I took her to dinner and she gave me a tour of the city. I would spend a week in Bangkok before going to Kuala Lumpur, where I found some fine pewter products for the business. I returned home two and a half weeks later, none the worse for wear.

Four

Two months later, I would have to make a return trip to Bangkok. A local Thai-American dance troupe had ordered some new dance outfits and gowns to replace costumes that are over thirty years old. They

had contracted with Theo-Roger Exports and Imports to pick up the shipment and bring them back to the United States. The girl I went out with on my last trip, Winnie, wanted me to pick up a couple of cocktail dresses in a size 12 before I left for Bangkok. A day and a half before I left town, I took a day trip to St. Louis to pick the dresses up from my cousin by marriage, Stephanie. She's married to my third cousin, novelist E.S. Thomas.

"What brings you to my shop, Cousin Ted?" she asked me.

"I've been asked to bring a couple of cocktail dresses to a friend in Bangkok," I replied.

"What's her name?"

"Her name is Winnie; she works for an export-import business in Bangkok. Like you, she's a transsexual."

"What's her dress size?"

"She's a size 12. I was wondering if you have one in blue and one in pink."

"We've got just the perfect dresses for her," Stephanie said before she went to the rack with party and cocktail dresses, and showed me one in pink with a medium skirt and one in royal blue with a shorter skirt. "These dresses are just perfect," I told her.

"What are you going to Bangkok for?" she then asked.

"My company has been contracted by a Thai-American dance group back home to bring some costumes they bought back to the United States. I'm leaving late tomorrow night," I replied.

After paying for the dresses with my credit card, I went to an Italian restaurant for lunch before returning home. The next day, I finished packing for my trip before going to the airport for the first part of my trip: a short hop to Chicago's O'Hare airport. I had a two-hour layover in Chicago before leaving shortly after eleven o'clock at night for the long flight to Bangkok. When the flight landed, it was shortly after one o'clock in the morning local time the next day. The first place I would head would be to the hotel, since I was tired from the long flight.

My first meeting would not be until two-thirty in the afternoon. A representative for the costume designer, a middle-aged woman named Kazumi Mishima, greeted me when I arrived at the designer's boutique near the downtown area. I had decided to wear my white suit and tie. Kazumi was wearing a blue dress and brown sandals.

"Ted Thomas?" she asked me.

"I'm Ted Thomas," I replied.

"I'm Kazumi Mishima, export representative. You're the man the company sent here," she added.

"I've been sent on behalf of the Thai-American Dance and Folklore Troupe to arrange shipment of the costumes to the United States."

"They placed quite an order. It's the first big costume order we've received since the one from the Thai dance troupe in Paris several years ago. In fact, it's the biggest one we've had in quite some time."

"They've wanted to replace their costumes for some time; some of their outfits are over thirty years old. The businessman who led the fund raising effort owns a Thai restaurant in town. Other patrons of the

arts pitched in with donations; even my father and Uncle Roger donated money to the effort.”

“This is the biggest order I’ve handled since I came to Bangkok from Tokyo five years ago.”

I spent some time inspecting the costumes with Kazumi to make sure they met the group’s specifications. After I gave her my approval, I asked her: “When do you plan to ship?”

“When do you plan to leave Bangkok?” she then asked me.

“I plan to leave in three days,” I replied.

“We’ll have the costumes packed and ready to ship on the flight you’re on,” she added. I gave her my flight information before I left the factory in back of the boutique.

That night, I had a date with Winnie. It was around seven o’clock she knocked on my door. Five-seven with long dark hair, wearing a gold lamé dress and matching high heels, she wanted to make a good impression on me.

“You look smashing, Winnie,” I complimented.

“You look handsome, Ted,” she returned the compliment.

“I’ve got something to show you,” I informed her.

“I think it should wait until after we have dinner,” she told me.

She took my hand; we held hands all the way down to the restaurant, where we were shown to a table in a secluded section of the restaurant. After we took our seats, I ordered a bottle of French wine. “What



brings you to Bangkok so soon after our last meeting?" she asked me.

"My company has been selected to bring back a consignment of Thai costumes to the United States; they're for a Thai-American dance and folklore troupe in my hometown," I replied.

"I didn't know you had a Thai dance troupe in your hometown."

"Our town's Thai immigrant population has grown fourfold in the last decade. Forty years ago, a group of Thai-American businessmen formed a dance and folklore troupe to bring a taste of Thailand to our part of Middle America. Their shows sell out every time; they've just finished a tour of New England."

"I'm also in the export-import business; we specialize in the importation of feminine fashions into Thailand, primarily from Europe. My mother and sister own the business; I've done my fair share of traveling, too."

"Have you been to the United States?"

"No, I haven't. My travel usually takes me to Europe, primarily to Paris and Milan. I recently went to Spain to pick up a consignment of bridal gowns to bring back to Thailand."

"I come here at least once a year; I've traveled all over the world in search of various items for retail outlets in the United States and Canada. My father and uncle started their business twenty-five years ago, after they worked for another similar business in Minneapolis."

"How long have you been in the export-import business?"

“I entered the business while I was still in high school; I started out in the warehouse. After I got my degree in International Business, I began my current job. My travels have taken me to such locations as Vienna, Nairobi, Rio de Janeiro, Abu Dhabi, Chennai, Tokyo, Copenhagen, and Tegucigalpa. I’ve even gone to places as close as Mexico City and Yellowknife to pick up local products. One trip last year took me to Saint Petersburg, Russia.”

“I’ve been in this business since I was eighteen years old. My mother started her business twenty years ago; she came to this country with my father before I was born. They had tried to set up similar businesses in China and Myanmar, but found the business climate there too hostile. My father went to work managing one of the hotels here in Bangkok, while my mother started her business. My work not only helped me get through college, where I earned my degree in International Business, but also through my transition from man to woman.”

“Have you had your operation yet?”

“I had mine three years ago in Phuket.”

Our waiter arrived five minutes later; we both ordered Thai stir-fry. Winnie ordered the vegetarian stir-fry, while I ordered one with beef from New Zealand. Since I’ve eaten Mexican and Cajun cuisine, I had no trouble with the spicy taste of the local cuisine. After dinner, we went down the street to see a dance performance featuring an all-transsexual cast. In Thailand, these women are called “kathoeys” or “lady boys”. One of them even wore a wedding gown and veil with a tiara. “That wedding gown is breathtaking,” I whispered to her.

“It is so beautiful,” she whispered in my ear.

We walked back to our hotel; it was around ten o'clock that we set foot back in my hotel room. "Would you like to see what I got for you?" I asked her.

"Certainly," she replied before I gave her a white garment bag; I encouraged her to open it.

"Oh, Ted...they're so beautiful!" she exclaimed with awe.

"My cousin, Stephanie, owns a bridal salon in St. Louis. She helped me select them for you," I added.

She took one good look at the dresses; she was really enamored with them. "They will be perfect for my next trip to Europe."

"When are you going back to Europe?"

"I'm going to Milan in a couple of weeks."

Once she finished that statement, we heard a knock on the door. "Mr. Thomas?" he asked in a strong Thai accent.

I opened the door to find a waiter from Room Service at the door. He had a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket with two champagne glasses on a pewter tray. "Someone sent this bottle of Dom Perignon '89," he informed me before I looked at the receipt and signed it.

"Winnie, someone sent us a bottle of champagne," I informed her.

I took the tray to a table close to the bed, and showed it to her. "I wonder who would send a bottle of French champagne to our room," she said as I picked up the envelope from the tray. I opened the envelope to see a note card. I opened the card; I was surprised

at what it read. "With my compliments, Stephanie Thomas," it read.

"Your cousin sent this to us?" Winnie asked me.

"She did," I replied before I saw the bottom of the note. She and her husband were in town for the release of one of his more recent novels in Thai.

We drank half the bottle of champagne before Winnie started to undo my tie and whisper romantic thoughts in my ear. I was beginning to feel a little amorous, myself. "What are you thinking about?" I asked her.

"I'm thinking about making this an evening neither of us will forget," she replied.

"How do we start?"

"Kiss me, handsome!" The next thing I knew, we shared a few tender kisses. We looked at each other for a moment before we shared a long, deep kiss. Each kiss was more passionate than the last. She was caressing me all over my back as we kissed; I caressed her back until she took one of my hands and moved it to the zipper of her dress. "I have a surprise for you," she whispered to me.

"What, pray tell, is that?" I asked her.

"Just take off my dress and find out," she cooed seductively. I unzipped her dress to find a black baby doll nightie underneath; she also had matching panties, lace-top stockings and a garter belt. "What do you think?" she asked me as I gazed at her body.

"You're a sexy girl, Winnie," I replied, whispering in her ear.

I decided to take off my clothes until I was only clad in my red boxers. I approached her; we wrapped our arms around each other before we engaged in another deep kiss. She continued to have her arms wrapped around me, while I filed my fingers through her long hair with one hand, and caressed her back with the other. We turned around while we were sharing kisses; the next thing I knew, she playfully pushed me onto the bed.

“What was that for?” I asked her, surprised at her move.

“I was only playing with you, Ted,” she replied before she sashayed toward me. She was caressing my face with her right hand, while I looked at her beautiful face. She had a wide smile.

“Would you like to make love to me?” she said in a seductive tone.

“I would love to make love to you, Winnie,” I whispered before I reached for the clasp of her garter belt to gently take it off. She took off her gold high heels before she sat down next to me, and removed her stockings. Then, I would lie down on the bed; Winnie would then climb into bed, put her legs between mine, and lustfully whisper: “I’ve waited for this moment all my life.”

I knew what to expect, as I remember making love to a beautiful fashion model on a trip to Paris nine months before. That time, the woman I made love to took her birth control pills before we made love. This wasn’t needed in Winnie’s case, since she was born male. She then lowered herself onto me; her size 36C breasts were up against my chest as we began to kiss. She could feel my manhood, still clad in my red boxers, up against her body. After we broke the kiss,



she reached down to take off my boxers, and take a look at my manhood.

“You have a very sexy body, Ted,” she whispered before taking my manhood into her mouth. She kept licking and sucking at my manhood until she could taste my essence. “Honey, you taste very good,” she cooed lustfully before I removed the breasts from the cups of the top of her nightie, and gave them some attention with my mouth and tongue. “Oh, Ted, you make me feel so feminine,” she moaned erotically.

After tasting her milk, she took off the top of her nightie. She would lie back down on the bed; I took my manhood and inserted it into her vagina. She wrapped her shapely legs around my waist as I began a rhythmic motion inside her. I picked her up off the bed, and continued my motion while standing on my feet. The curtains were closed on my seventh floor room as I continued to pound my manhood inside her. Before long, I could feel my liquid love letter pool inside her. We shared a tender kiss as we climaxed. We finished our lovemaking in the shower, where we cleaned each other up. I put my boxers back on, while she put her nightie back on, minus the stockings and garter belt. We fell asleep in each other’s arms.

When we woke up the next morning, the first thing that greeted my eyes was Winnie. After we shared a kiss, I freshened up a little before putting on my suit. Winnie had packed a fresh change of clothes in her briefcase; she put on a white blouse, lavender skirt, white stockings and white high heels. She treated me to a breakfast of assorted citrus fruits before we went to our respective jobs.

Two days later, I went to pick up the costumes; they were packed in eight military style trunks. Kazumi had arranged for a delivery truck to take

them to the airport; I had a two-thirty flight back to Chicago. I went to Special Services to check the packages on the flight before I checked in at the main ticket counter. I was surprised when I saw Winnie waiting for me at the gate.

“What brings you to the airport?” I asked her.

“Not only to see you off, but also because I’m waiting for a three o’clock flight to Hong Kong,” she replied.

“What are you going to Hong Kong for?”

“I’m attending a bridal fashion show there. I’ll be getting ideas on what Western designs we would bring into Thailand.”

“Is there a designer you have in mind?”

“There’s a new American designer on the scene named Darlene Gaye.”

“Gaye...the name sounds familiar. I went to school with David Gaye back home.”

“She’s showing off her first collection for the Asian market in three days.”

“Where is she based?”

“She’s based in New York, but her dresses have been shown all over Europe and the Americas. This is her first show in Asia.”

“Thanks for everything you’ve done, Winnie. I hope to see you on my next trip.”

“You’re so welcome, Ted. I hope to see you when you come back here, or even on a future trip to the United States.”

We shared one more kiss before I boarded my flight back to Chicago. It would be a thirteen-hour flight, but I would gain fourteen hours heading east. I was back in my hometown with the costumes by four o'clock in the afternoon; I presented them to the Thai-American Dance and Folklore Troupe the next day.

Five

Four years had gone by since that trip to Thailand. I was now part-owner of the business, after Uncle Roger retired. He bought a house with my Aunt Bridget in the mountains of central Oregon. My father continued to own half of the business, but was grooming my cousin, also named Roger, to take over the business. It was a cold winter's afternoon when I came to work at nine o'clock in the morning.

I had come into my office to look at the phone messages I got from the previous day. My father knocked on the door of my office.

"May I have a word with you, Ted?" he asked me.

"Certainly," I replied.

"You know that Roger hasn't been on a trip to Asia yet. Our cousin Stephanie has ordered some Asian-style wedding gowns for her shop from a designer in Kuala Lumpur. I'd like for you two to travel to Malaysia; it's a large shipment she's contracted with us to bring back."

"I'll call the travel agency."

I immediately made the call, and ordered two tickets for a flight from our hometown to Chicago O'Hare,

then connect onto a flight for Kuala Lumpur. I also reserved two rooms at a hotel near the Petronas Twin Towers, and a Mercedes-Benz for our rental car. After finishing making the travel arrangements, I got a text on my cell phone. It was Winnie, telling me she will be in Kuala Lumpur at the same time. Roger came into my office and asked, "Who was the text from?"

"It's from Winnie Chong; she works for an export-import company in Bangkok. She'll be in Kuala Lumpur at the same time we are," I replied.

"I've been carrying on an E-mail correspondence with a woman named Margot van der Veldt for the past eight months. She is one of Miss Chong's best friends; she also plans to be in Kuala Lumpur while we're there," Roger added.

"Where is she from?"

"Margot is originally from Rotterdam; she's been living in Bangkok for the past two years. She works for a Dutch export-import company as one of the buyers in Asia; she's looking to come to North America, though."

"Tell me more about her."

"She's twenty-six years old now; she has a degree in International Business from Cambridge. Most of her family still lives in Rotterdam, although she has relatives in the United States. She's a tall girl; five-ten in stocking feet with long brunette hair. The only thing she doesn't have in common with Miss Chong is that Margot was actually born female."

"You probably know that Winnie was born a boy."

"I know that; she has a sweet spot for you, from what Margot tells me."

We left home on a Saturday morning on the short commuter flight to Chicago O'Hare; we had a layover of three hours before leaving on the eleven o'clock flight to Hong Kong. Thirteen hours later, shortly after two o'clock the next afternoon, we were on the ground in Hong Kong for a ninety-minute layover there before boarding another flight for Kuala Lumpur. We were in Kuala Lumpur in time for dinner. We checked into our hotel rooms, which were next to each other on the third floor.

I decided to rest the remainder of that day, since Winnie wasn't due in town until Monday morning. Margot arrived in town two hours after we did; she checked into the hotel and called Roger on her cell phone. They went to dinner at an Italian restaurant in town. He wore a pair of khakis and a white button-down shirt with brown dress shoes; she was in a floral print dress with white flats.

"It's great to meet you at last, Roger," Margot said as she sat down across the table from him.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Margot," he said as he picked up the wine list.

"How did you get into the export-import business?" she asked him.

"My father got me into this business. He started Theo-Roger Exports and Imports with my Uncle Theo over four decades ago. My cousin Ted bought my father's half of the business a few years ago; I'm preparing for the day when I buy out Uncle Theo's half of the business," he replied.

"How does Ted know Winnie?"

"Four and a half years ago, he was in Bangkok to bring a lot of arts and crafts back to the States. She gave him a tour of the city. When he returned two

months later, they went out on a date and had a passionate night in his room. They've kept in touch ever since."

"I'm sure he knows she's a transsexual."

"He knows that she was born a boy. The only thing that matters to him is the woman she has become."

"So, where did you go to school?"

"I did my college work at the University of Minnesota; I have a degree in International Business. I did my MBA work at Harvard."

"I got my International Business degree from Oxford; I went for my MBA to Stanford. I was looking for a challenge when I graduated from Stanford, so I took my job in Bangkok, and started working with Winnie."

"Have you ever wanted to work in the United States?"

"I would love to work in your country. I've picked up most of my experience importing European formal fashions for women into Southeast Asia. Most of our customers are concentrated on Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore; however we are getting more business from Vietnam."

"I'm now learning my trade from Ted; he has been all over the world, working on bringing arts, crafts and fashions into the United States. We've been retained by our cousin's bridal shop in St. Louis to bring a shipment of Malaysian-designed and made bridal gowns into the United States."

"Are you related to the novelist, E.S. Thomas?"

“E.S. Thomas is my cousin. The bridal shop we’re bringing the gowns to is owned by his wife.”

“I’ve met your cousin Stephanie on several occasions. She’s one of the best in the bridal business; I also admire her work with transgender brides.”

“I didn’t know what to think when he first began dating her. He had been without a girlfriend for thirteen years when he first met her. When she told him she was born a boy, he assured her that it was the woman she had become he had fallen in love with. Six years before they met, Stephanie had gender re-assignment surgery. They’ve enjoyed a very good marriage so far.”

“Have you heard of a bridal fashion designer named Darlene Gaye?”

“I’ve heard of her; I knew a guy named David Gaye when I was younger.”

“She’s becoming a buzzword in the bridal industry. Her designs have been worn by brides all over the world.”

After having Thai stir-fry for dinner, they walked around town. “Have you been to Rotterdam?” she asked him.

“I’ve been there once, bringing a consignment of midwestern food products into the Netherlands.”

“Did you have time to tour the city?”

“I didn’t get the chance to, Margot. It was a business trip. Maybe I can take my next vacation there.”

“If you do, may I come with you, Roger?”

“You certainly may; I really would like a Rotterdam native to show me the town.”

When they arrived back at the hotel, Margot and Roger were holding hands. When he came to her room, on the fourth floor, they were holding one another. “How would you like to join me, Ted and Winnie for dinner tomorrow night?” he asked her.

“I would love it,” she replied before giving him a kiss.

“I’ve had a wonderful evening, Margot.”

“So have I, Roger.” The next thing either of them knew, they shared a long, tender kiss.

I was still asleep when he returned to the room around midnight. I had a dream that he had a wonderful time with Margot. I also didn’t know that he asked for a six-thirty wakeup call. I was surprised when the phone rang around six-thirty in the morning.

“Did you ask for a wakeup call, Roger?” I asked him after I got off the phone with the front desk.

“I did,” he replied.

He also ordered breakfast delivered to our room; it was a fruit basket with a huge kettle of hot water. Roger made himself a cup of hot Earl Grey tea, while I opted for the Arabic coffee. We had to meet Winnie and Margot in the hotel lobby at nine o’clock.

Margot opted for an antique white floral print dress, while Winnie was in a yellow sarong. “You girls look great!” Roger complimented.

“Why, thank you!” Margot returned the compliment, blushing while looking at him.

“I’m with Roger; you look fantastic, Winnie,” I then complimented.

Roger and I took the girls’ hands as we walked to the parking lot. Winnie rented a brand new Mercedes; she drove us to the designer’s studio. When we arrived, we walked into a beautiful studio set up like a bridal salon. We were greeted by a young European woman, five-eight with a slender build, blonde hair and wearing a white dress.

“May I help you?” she asked me in a Scandinavian accent.

“I’m Ted Thomas; I have a nine-thirty appointment,” I replied.

“Mr. Thomas...Miss Chan will be with you shortly,” she added.

“What part of the world are you from?” Margot then asked.

“I’m from Sweden. My name is Anna Andersson,” she replied.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Anna,” Roger said to her.

“Where are you from?” she asked us.

“I’m from Rotterdam,” Margot replied.

“I’m from Bangkok,” added Winnie.

“We’re from a small town in the central United States,” Roger then added.

“I own the company arranging for the import of the gowns into the United States,” I informed her.

We sat down and read the bridal magazines for a few minutes before an Asian woman came out of the office. She was five-three with a slender build, her long hair tied back, and wearing a red pantsuit. “Mr. Thomas?” she asked me.

“Ted Thomas, at your service,” I replied.

“I’m Melissa Chan; it’s a pleasure to meet you,” she said while we were gently shaking hands.

“Allow me to introduce my cousin, Roger Holmes; this is his first trip to Asia. These two ladies work for an importer in Bangkok; Winnie Chong and Margot van der Veldt,” I added.

“I’ve worked with importers throughout Asia; you and Roger are the first ones to bring our designs into the American interior,” Melissa told us.

We were taken to a room in back of the main gallery, where we were shown to four comfortable chairs. We sat down as Melissa directed several models to show off her latest collection. The gowns were, to say the least, beautiful. As soon as the private fashion show was over, we signed our receipts to bring a consignment of her gowns into our respective countries.

“Will you have any difficulty with customs?” she asked us.

“I don’t see any problems getting the gowns into Thailand,” Winnie replied.

“I also don’t see any problem getting them into the United States,” I added.

“We didn’t have any problem when we got a huge consignment of Darlene Gaye gowns into Thailand from the United States,” Margot then added.

The four of us walked down the street to a Japanese restaurant for lunch. We didn't have much of a stomach for sushi, so Roger, Margot and I opted for teriyaki chicken. Winnie ordered teriyaki vegetables. We split two bottles of sake.

"How are you related to Stephanie Thomas?" Winnie asked me.

"Her husband is a cousin. E.S. Thomas is the son of Dad's older brother; he's a best-selling romance novelist specializing in period romance novels. He met Stephanie several years ago at a book signing; they began dating within a year. They're now married and have an adopted son," I replied.

"Stephanie is a transsexual, like Winnie. She entered the bridal business while she was transitioning from man to woman," Roger added.

"She's one of the most beautiful plus-size women in the world," Margot told us.

"When was the last time you saw her?" Winnie then asked.

"It's been several years; I was at her wedding," I told her.

The four of us were able to relax that afternoon; Roger decided to get a swim in while I lifted weights and rode the stationary bicycle in the weight room. Margot and Winnie spent some time in the hot tub. Both girls wore one-piece swimsuits; Winnie's was navy blue, while Margot's was fuchsia. After Roger and I finished our workouts, we joined the girls in the hot tub.

"How long have you lived in Asia, Margot?" I asked her.

“I’ve lived in Asia for the past sixteen months; I’m based in Bangkok. I’m here to get some experience. I hope to return to Europe or come to the States some day,” she replied.

“I’m pretty sure we’ll have something for you if you decide to come over to the United States,” Roger added.

“Thailand has taken some getting used to, unlike some of the places in Europe I’ve been to. I didn’t have as hard of a time learning French, German or even Polish than I did learning Thai. Before I came to Southeast Asia, I traveled mainly to Paris, Berlin or Warsaw, bringing that country’s best products to either Asia or back home to Rotterdam. It also took me a while to get used to the spices of the national cuisine; it’s sometimes spicier than the Mexican food I sampled while I was in Berlin, or the Cajun cuisine I sampled in Paris,” Margot explained.

That evening, the girls took us out for Italian food. We each had linguine with red sauce, along with a dinner salad and breadsticks. The four of us split a bottle of wine, imported from Italy. “Do you get this back home?” Winnie asked me.

“Yes, we do...and plenty of it,” I replied.

“In parts of the United States, especially in the Northeast and Midwest, we have so many Italian restaurants that we can’t count them all with our fingers and toes. We have so many variations to choose from...Sicilian, Tuscan, Roman...even Venetian. It’s all good,” Roger added.

“I know the family that owns this place; they’re from Milan. I went to Cambridge with their daughter, Sophia,” Margot then added.

We got back to the hotel around eight o'clock; we had to be in bed early, since our flight would leave at eight o'clock in the morning. Our wake-up call would be around five in the morning; we arrived at the airport around six o'clock to go through security and make sure the consignment of wedding gowns was loaded aboard the aircraft. This time, we flew to Honolulu; we arrived on Oahu ten hours later, around ten in the evening. We connected on the midnight flight to Chicago O'Hare; it would be another ten hours before we arrived, at three o'clock in the afternoon. The consignment of gowns cleared Customs in Honolulu; Roger decided to return home while I stayed overnight in Chicago. The gowns were already put on ten racks for shipment via truck by the time I came back to pick them up early in the morning. I rented a delivery truck to drive the gowns to Stephanie's bridal shop in St. Louis. I left Chicago around seven o'clock in the morning; I pulled into the back of her bridal shop around twelve-thirty in the afternoon. Stephanie, in her mauve pantsuit, was awaiting my arrival.

"Do you have some extra help?" I asked her.

"Melissa and Patti will be out shortly; they're seeing customers," Stephanie replied.

"So, how's the bridal business?" I then asked.

"Business is good right now; we're early in the spring bridal season," she replied.

I started by unloading the first of ten racks of wedding gowns that I brought into the country from Malaysia. She looked at the first rack, and exclaimed; "They are so breathtakingly beautiful!" She personally took the first rack into her salon, while I started unloading the rest. Melissa and Patti came out of the salon to help with bringing the racks from the rear

parking lot inside the salon. After I unloaded the last rack, Stephanie invited me in for tea.

“How long have you been in the export-import business, Ted?” she asked me.

“I joined my dad’s business after I graduated from college. I’m now part-owner of the business,” I replied.

“Eric’s been wondering about you. He’s been so busy with writing and teaching English, he hardly has time to see anyone other than me and our son.”

“I’ve been too busy to find a steady girlfriend, although I don’t find a shortage of women to take out to dinner when I’m on the road.”

“I was wondering why you’re still single. I thought you would be the type to settle down and marry at a young age.”

“I didn’t even know I was the romantic and passionate type until I visited Bangkok four years ago, and fell for a girl named Winnie.”

“I met Winnie Chong when I went to Bangkok two years ago. Eric was there for the release of two of his romance novels, translated into Thai. She’s one of the best in all of Southeast Asia, as far as export-importers are concerned.”

“What’s he working on now?”

“He’s working on another period romance, this time set during the Revolutionary War, about a couple who gets persecuted because of their heritage, and has to escape to the wilds near the Mississippi River. He’s also teaching three English Composition and two American Literature classes at Webster Uni-

versity. The only thing he seems to have time for is his family.”

After having tea with Stephanie, I drove out to the airport to return the delivery truck to the rental agency. I left on the three-thirty flight to Chicago O’Hare before hopping a regional jet back home, arriving back in town before six o’clock. After all that traveling, the only thing I could think about was having hamburgers and onion rings. Another long trip was behind me.

Six

Just six months after returning from Kuala Lumpur, my father finally decided to retire. Roger bought out his half of the business; we would be in need of six new export-importers. One of those we were able to bring over was Margot; she got more money than she was making in Bangkok. She would be closer to her family in the Netherlands; she also has cousins in New York and Chicago.

Our hometown suddenly became very labor-unfriendly. Since our warehouse workers were unionized, we decided that it was time to pull up stakes and move to a labor-friendly state. After our home state passed anti-union laws, Roger, Margot and I decided it was finally time to leave home. We had outgrown the warehouse that we owned in our hometown for over four decades, and had to find a much larger one. We found one on the north side of Chicago. We also found out that many export-import customers were doing business in New York, so Roger and I decided to set up an office in New York. Roger remained in Chicago to run the warehouse, while I opened the New York office inside the Empire

State Building. I moved from the small apartment I had in my hometown to a house on Long Island.

It was eight months after that trip to Malaysia that my new office was ready in New York. Before moving in, I conducted business from my Long Island home. On the first day, I arrived at eight-thirty in the morning. My new assistant, Nancy Santini, greeted me. Five-seven with an average build, along with shoulder-length medium brown hair and wearing a white pantsuit with a navy blue blouse and navy blue flats, she spoke with a New York accent. She looked younger than her forty-six years could attest to. Her desk had pictures of her husband, Pete, who owns a pizza place five minutes from my front door, and their four children, spread out across it. "Good morning, Mr. Thomas," she said as I walked in the door.

"Good morning, Nancy; are we ready to go?" I asked her.

"We're ready," she replied. The first thing I did was to call everyone to the conference room to go over the plans for our operation, and our expectations for the twenty people who would work from this office.

When I came out of conference at ten o'clock, Nancy gave me my mail. When I sat down at my desk, I went through my mail. One piece caught my eye. The only thing I found on the envelope was a return address in Greenwich Village. I opened it up to find an invitation. I took it out of the envelope, and opened the card, which said: "You are cordially invited to a fashion show previewing Darlene Gaye's collection for next spring on Friday at six o'clock in the evening." The invitation said it would be at a department store auditorium in Manhattan.

I decided to wear my maroon suit for the occasion. It was five-thirty on that Friday that I walked into the

store, and was directed to the auditorium. When I arrived, a petite blonde-haired woman who didn't look a day over eighteen years old greeted me. "Your name?" she asked me.

"The name is Ted Thomas," I replied.

She pointed to my place on the seating plan before saying: "Ah, yes! Right this way, Mr. Thomas." The seat I got was on the left side of the catwalk. I looked over the program and saw Darlene's picture on the front. She looked vaguely familiar to me. Her hair was still blonde, but it was now long. Just before the start of the bridal fashion show, a willowy blonde sat down next to me. She was wearing a white linen dress and a pair of white sandal high heels. She took one good look at me, and was very surprised. "Ted Thomas?" she asked me.

"Yes, I'm Ted Thomas; you look vaguely familiar to me, ma'am," I replied.

"I'm Darlene Gaye; you might remember me as David," she told me.

"You're quite a beautiful woman now, Darlene," I complimented.

"Why thank you!" she exclaimed, slightly blushing.

She took her seat next to me to wait for the start of the show. She opened the program to point out some of the more beautiful and romantic designs. I was amazed at how talented she had become in the design of wedding attire. She showed off a bunch of her gowns for brides, bridesmaids, mothers of the bride and flower girls. The show lasted for an hour and a half; after the show, I was invited backstage.

“Ted, over here!” she said, motioning me to move closer to her.

When I arrived, I discovered two tall young women flanking her; one was in a strapless, curve-hugging wedding gown, while the other was in a mermaid-style gown. Both had veils and tiaras on their heads. One of them had short medium brown hair, the other long red hair. “Who do we have here, Dar?” I asked her.

“Ted, these are two of my top models. Robyn Johns is the one in the curve-hugging gown; Helen Reinhardt is the one in the mermaid-style gown. Robyn and Helen, this is Ted Thomas; he runs an export-import business in New York and a longtime friend of mine,” she replied.

“How long have you been modeling?” I asked them.

“I’ve been modeling since I was fifteen years old. It helped me get through college. I’m now in graduate school, studying to be a psychiatrist,” Helen replied.

“I’ve been modeling since I graduated from high school. I’m also a professional photographer; I have one thing in common with Darlene,” Robyn added.

“What’s that?” I asked her.

“I was born a boy. Until I was eighteen years old, I was known as Bobby. From the time I was three years old, I knew I should have been a girl. I practiced modeling at home while I was dressed as a girl. My older sister, Rachael, is also a photographer. She took pictures of me in her old dresses, as well as my mother’s prom dress and wedding gown. I began modeling as a girl in high school; I was in a number of fashion shows in Rochester, where I grew up. My family was entirely supportive of me when I told them I was becoming a woman. Four years ago, shortly af-

ter I turned twenty, I went to Montreal for gender re-assignment surgery. After my operation, I decided to become a fashion photographer, while also working as a model,” Robyn explained.

“I’ve also done a number of photo shoots with these girls in a number of my designs. I’m thinking maybe you should dress up as the groom for a few of these future photo sessions,” Darlene added.

“Let me think about it,” I told her.

She also introduced me to two other models in her show who are transgender. Amanda Albin began life as Andrew in Sherbrooke, Quebec; she’s twenty years old and transitioning from male to female. She had long medium brown hair and wore a maroon bridesmaid’s gown. She hadn’t yet had her gender surgically reassigned, but had planned to have it before she turned twenty-one the following year. Kelli Robins started life as Kevin in Perth Amboy, New Jersey; she began modeling when she started her transition from male to female at twelve years of age. Kelli had her gender surgically reassigned in Philadelphia after finishing the eighth grade; she graduated from the Rainbow School for Girls on Long Island seven years ago. Kelli co-owns a bridal salon in Westchester County with her mother and older sister. When the reception broke up, Darlene took me by the arm. “Would you like to come to my apartment for a night-cap?” she asked me.

“I would love to. Then, you can tell me all about what you’ve been through since we graduated from high school,” I replied.

Seven

In the eleven years since we graduated from high school, a lot of us had changed, but it was quite apparent that Darlene was the most changed of all of us. I got into my car and drove her to her apartment in midtown Manhattan. When I got into one of the visitor parking spaces in the garage, I got out of the car, and went to the passenger side of the car to unlock the door for Darlene. I took her hand as she stepped out of the car. We held hands as we walked to the elevator. Her apartment was a two-bedroom apartment on the eighteenth floor. The apartment number was 1814. She unlocked the door; I opened it and let her in before I let myself in.

“What would you like to drink?” she asked me.

“A cup of coffee would be just fine,” I replied.

Darlene went into the kitchen to start the coffee maker. I sat down on the couch in her living room, and picked up one of the bridal magazines on her coffee table. In that particular magazine, eight pages were devoted to Darlene’s bridal gown designs. Five minutes later, she would come back with a pot of coffee and two coffee cups on a tea service tray.

“The coffee smells so good,” I complimented.

“This is Arabic coffee,” she informed me.

“It’s the most delicious blend,” I added.

She set the tray down, and poured a cup for me and one for herself. “How long have you had your business in New York?” she asked me.

“I just opened it on Monday. It’s the main office; I kept a regional office in Chicago, which my cousin Roger runs with his girlfriend, Margot van der Veldt.

Most of the export-import business transactions are being done in the larger cities now. We also moved our warehouse to Chicago; our hometown has become very labor-unfriendly since we were in high school,” I replied.

“What made you and Roger leave home?”

“Our workforce is unionized. Roger and I feel it’s easier to have our employees bargain as a group than the time-consuming task of interviewing each one individually. The people of our home state elected an arch-conservative governor and legislature four years ago; they want to make unions illegal in that state. So, we moved our warehouse and our branch office to Chicago; we also made the decision to set up an office here in New York.”

“I’d take it there aren’t that many of our friends left in our hometown.”

“Nigel and Missy Schultz are the only ones still living where we grew up; both of them are teachers. They’re preparing to leave after this school year ends next month; they’re planning to teach in San Jose this coming fall. The big reasons were that the pay is better in California, and that the governor back home took away their collective bargaining rights. Nick Schultz and Lori Johnston are living together in Thunder Bay, Ontario now; they’ve been talking about marriage for a long time. Eddie and Rachel Dinwiddie call Bridgeport, Connecticut home now; Eddie has his own private practice out of his home, while Rachel is with an accounting firm here in New York.”

“Do they have any children?”

“Eddie and Rachel have a set of two-year-old quadruplets; two boys named Edward and Raymond, and two girls named Emily and Renee. They’ve hired

a nanny to take care of them while they're at work. Nigel and Missy have talked about having children, but they've had to hold off because their salaries have been slashed to the bone. They will be happy when they get out of that small apartment back home and move to a much larger dwelling somewhere in the San Francisco Bay Area."

"What about you? Why haven't you married?"

"The export-import business doesn't leave me much time to meet suitable dating, let alone marriage, partners. The only girl I dated over the past six years since I graduated from Stanford has been an Asian woman named Winnie Chong. She's a transgender woman, just like you; we have had some very intimate dates while I was visiting her in Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur. I haven't done any dating in the States since finishing graduate school."

"I was hoping you would remain single; I have to admit something to you."

"What is it, Darlene?"

"Would you be surprised if I said I became a woman for you?"

"I would not be too surprised."

"When I was living as a male, dressed in my sister's dresses, lingerie and high heels, made up to look like a girl and wearing my mother's blonde wig, I dreamed that you would hold me in your arms, win my heart and be the handsome groom I dreamed of marrying one day. My family was very supportive as I began my transition from David to Darlene; being a woman was my destiny. I wanted to become a designer of bridal fashions, but I didn't know that I would become one of the world's top bridal designers in the eight years since I got that degree in fashion design. Even while I

was transitioning, I dreamed that I would meet up with you again, and fall in love with you. I dreamed about how understanding you would be of my transgender nature, and accept me as the woman I am now.”

“Darlene, I accept you as the woman you are now. You’re a very beautiful young woman, and I’m very pleased that we’ve met up again.”

“I still remember the dream I had the night after I had my gender reassignment surgery in Montreal. I dreamed that I was walking down the aisle on the arm of my brother Ben, and that you were the groom. You were so gentle and understanding as we exchanged our vows. It’s a beautiful dream that I hope will come true one day.”

“I had a similar dream; it was shortly after I moved the warehouse to Chicago. I was lying down on the bed inside my apartment there. The bride in my dream looked just like you. She was wearing a simple wedding dress and a short veil with white satin flats; she was so beautiful. She came down the aisle on the arm of her father; her mother was in a beautiful lavender dress.”

“Ted, I’ve never wanted a man more than I want you.”

“Darlene, I am starting to want you even more.”

We both set our cups of coffee down on the coffee table, as we took a look at one another. I gently felt the softness of her face with my hands before I filed my fingers through her long, soft hair. She gently felt my face and my very short hair; I looked more like a soldier than an exporter-importer. The next thing we knew, we shared a tender kiss. We hesitated for a moment before sharing another kiss. Before long, we

were engaged in a very deep kiss. We kissed for about ten minutes.

When we finally broke the kiss, she whispered: “I love you, Ted.”

“I love you, too, Darlene,” I whispered before we shared another tender kiss.

We were both tempted to go to her bedroom and make passionate love to one another, but we felt it would wait for another occasion. Darlene poured herself another cup of coffee, and then poured one for me. She asked me to hand her a photo album sitting on the upper right hand corner of the coffee table.

“What are these photos from?” I asked her.

“These are from my transition,” she replied.

She opened it to the first picture, one of her in a ball gown. “When was this taken?” I asked her.

“This was taken just three months after I arrived in New York. My hair was longer than I had it when I graduated from high school. I was working full-time and living at home as Darlene, but went out on social occasions as David,” she replied.

“When did you start being Darlene all the time?”

“A month after that picture was taken.”

She then pointed me to another picture, taken with a man at a charity dance. “Who is the man who was with you?”

“His name is Eddie Boyer. His brother is the noted fashion writer, Eric Boyer. It was my first date as Darlene. The dance was to raise money for a battered

women's shelter in Queens. He even gave me my first feminine kiss."

"Isn't Eric married to a transgender woman?"

"His wife, Elissa, is transgender."

She turned the page and pointed to one of her in a wedding gown. "This was taken shortly after I began living full-time as a woman. I was on assignment in Italy; this gown was designed by one of Europe's leading designers. I never felt more feminine and beautiful as I did that day."

"You were so beautiful in that gown and veil."

"This next picture was taken on a trip to Cannes. I was there to do a fashion shoot for a leading magazine. I'm modeling the beautiful floral print summer dress with pink high heel sandals. The girl in the blue shorts and white body suit is Michelle Dunivan, one of my best friends."

"Was she born male or female?"

"Michelle was born female. In fact, I was her maid of honor when she got married last fall."

She turned the page to show me another picture, this time working on one of her first designs. "I began drawing up designs for bridal gowns while I was transitioning. This picture of me at my desk was taken shortly after I turned twenty years old. I was taking fashion design courses; I made my first wedding gown for a friend of mine who was getting married that summer."

"Did it fit perfectly?"

“It did fit perfectly. Everyone was so complimentary when she walked down the aisle in my original design.”

Eight

After showing a picture of the finished product, she turned another page to one of herself accepting her degree. “It was my last social appearance before my operation. I wore my fuchsia dress, brown stockings and fuchsia high heels when I accepted my degree in fashion design. My family was so proud when I accepted my degree.”

The next one was of her lying on a hospital bed; her sisters and mother were at her bedside. “That was less than twenty-four hours after my operation. The smile on my face was of relief that I was finally the woman I should have been. I had an artist’s notebook at my bedside; I was designing more gowns to pass the time away.”

She turned another page to a picture of her and two other models modeling gowns from her first collection. “One year after my operation, I joined two other models to do a photo shoot for my first bridal collection. I was the one in the wedding gown with long sleeves and a bridal hat. I was very happy to work with Elissa Boyer on that one. After the shoot, she told us about her transition and the day she and Eric got married.”

We spent two more hours going through her photo album before we decided to call it a night around eleven-thirty. “I had a great time tonight, Darlene,” I whispered.

“I had a great time as well,” she cooed before asking me when we should meet again.

“What would you think if I invited you to my place on Long Island? I’m a very good cook,” I replied.

“You know, I would love that,” she added.

We parted with a long, tender kiss; I finally pulled into my driveway around twelve-fifteen. If this were any indication, it would be the beginning of a beautiful relationship.

Nine

Only a week had passed since I went to the bridal fashion show with Darlene. If she had, indeed, become a woman just for me, that intimate encounter at her apartment must have shown me that she did become a woman for me. That Friday night, the breeze was blowing in from the sea; I was making her something special for dinner. I had made her a Caesar salad; I also made myself one, but with grilled chicken. I also got a bottle of wine from my wine cellar; it was a bottle of French Beaujolais, 1977 vintage.

Darlene gave her staff at her design house the afternoon off; they were attending fashion shows all over the New York area. I got home early from work; I decided to take the commuter train instead of fighting the madhouse known as New York rush hour traffic. After putting dinner in the refrigerator, along with the bottle of wine, I sat down on the recliner in the living room to watch the news. Around six-thirty, I heard a knock at the front door. I opened it to find Darlene, wearing a mauve sundress and a white

shawl, with white flats. Her long hair had been tied back.

“Is this the right house?” she asked me.

“You’ve found it, Darlene; come in,” I replied.

She immediately came in and took a look at the décor of my residence before she sat down on the couch. “You have a very nice house, Ted,” she complimented.

“I made it that way; while the house was being re-modeled, I conducted business from the game room,” I told her.

I invited Darlene to sit down on the couch so she could watch a video of my travels to Thailand. I had Filet Mignon in the lower oven, while I had baked potatoes in the upper oven. I had made a salad to go with the meal. I set up the dining room table while she was watching the video. I set the sour cream on the table while I prepared our plates. I didn’t put dressing on the salad because I didn’t know what kind she would like on her salad. Once I set our plates on the table and lit the candles, I asked her: “What dressing would you like on your salad?”

“Do you have Ranch dressing?” she asked me.

I looked in the refrigerator, and discovered I had a small bottle of Ranch dressing I bought on a trip to the grocery store three days prior. “I have a bottle in the fridge,” I replied. I also grabbed a bottle of Italian dressing for myself. I set our plates on the table, and called her to dinner.

“The view of the ocean is just breathtaking,” she told me.

“This is one reason why I bought this place,” I added.

“What are the other reasons?”

“It’s also a short walk to the beach, and a short drive from the railroad station so I can take the train into Manhattan.”

“I chose the area my apartment is in because it’s a short walk from the studio. It’s also a short walk from Central Park, where I can walk by myself to brainstorm for design ideas, walk with a friend to talk about what we’re doing, or just a time to myself away from the pressures of the real world. This place is a lot quieter than back in the city.”

“I’ve always wanted to live far from the city, and live in a quiet area. When I was shopping for a house, I wanted one that was in a quiet area, near the beach, and within a short distance of public transportation. This place fit the bill perfectly. So, I decided to buy this house and move here.”

After we ate dinner, Darlene sat in the living room, where the video of my trips to Thailand was still running. It was at the part where I went to see the “lady boy” revue. As soon as the dishes were rinsed and put in the dishwasher, I poured myself another glass of Beaujolais for myself and one for Darlene. I was about to set our glasses down on the coffee table when she suggested we walk on the beach.

We were holding hands as we walked on the beach. “The view is so beautiful. Everything’s so quiet out here; the only thing I hear is the waves coming toward shore,” she told me.

“It’s so idyllic, my dear...here, you can hear nature, while off in the distance is a city that never

sleeps. This is also a place that inspires creativity, romance and reflection,” I added.

“The sunset is so beautiful.”

“It is beautiful. We couldn’t have picked a better night to take a walk on the beach.”

“I agree. I remember seeing a sunset similar to this shortly after I came home from Montreal after my operation. When it finally got dark, I wished upon a star that I would meet a handsome man who accepts me as the woman I am now. I had a good feeling that night; I had a goal to shoot for in my new life, besides becoming more successful in the bridal fashion industry. Your coming back into my life has put me closer to that dream becoming a reality.”

“Let me ask you something.”

“You may.”

“If you were to get married, would you design your own wedding gown?”

“Of course, I would. I really want to look so breathtakingly beautiful and romantic for myself and for my man.”

“It’s the most romantic day of her life, not to mention that of her groom.”

We turned around at the parking lot near the public beach. Once we came back to the beach next to my back yard, we turned once again toward the setting sun. “Darlene, this is the perfect time,” I whispered to her.

“What is it the perfect time for?” she asked.

“Kiss me, darling,” I whispered. We moved our lips closer together; she hesitated for a second before we shared a tender kiss. After we broke the kiss, we looked at each other for a moment, smiled and shared a deeper kiss. Before we walked back into my backyard, she whispered: “Ted, you make me feel like a complete woman.”

“You have just made me feel so masculine,” I whispered before we walked in, arm in arm. We dusted the sand off our feet before we set foot back in the house.

Later that evening, we were watching a romantic movie on my DVD player. We were sitting on the couch; Darlene was sitting on my lap; we shared several kisses. When the movie was over, it was almost midnight. We thoroughly enjoyed it. “Ted, I was wondering,” she whispered to me.

“What is it you were wondering?” I asked her.

“How would you feel if I stayed the night with you?” she then asked.

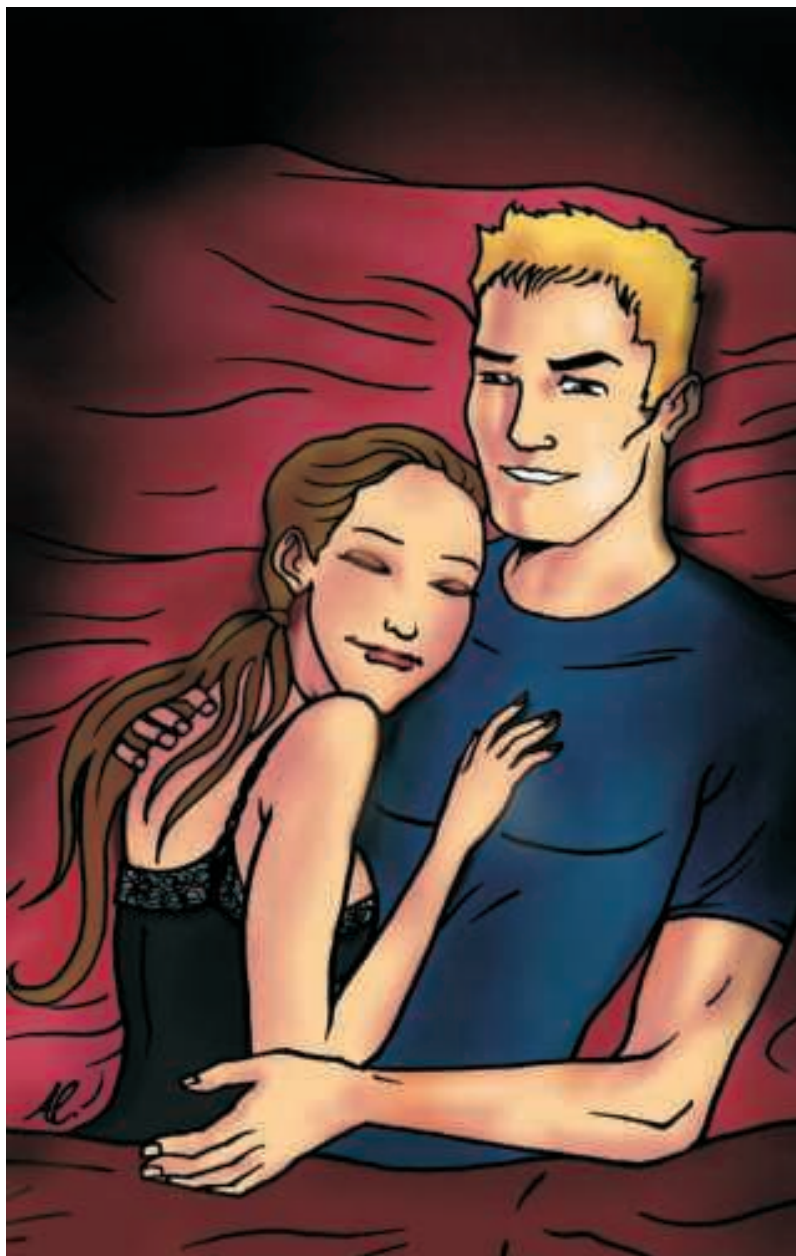
“I think that would be all right,” I replied.

“My apartment is being painted this weekend; I arranged it with my apartment building manager. I packed a weekend’s worth of clothes,” she added.

She went to her car, a brand new Mini Cooper, and brought in her suitcase. I showed her to a guest bedroom, where she set down her suitcase on the bed. “I’ve got a surprise for you, sweetie,” she cooed.

“I can’t wait to see it,” I whispered before we shared a kiss.

I went to my bedroom and changed into a pair of pajama bottoms and a blue tank top shirt. I turned



on the stereo and put in three compact discs of classical music; I got in bed to anticipate her emergence from the bedroom next to mine. When she came into the bedroom five minutes later, her long hair had been tied back; she was in a romantic black baby doll nightie.

“You look so sexy,” I complimented.

“You’re so handsomely sexy,” she whispered before she sashayed toward the bed.

She raised the covers to my bed, got in and sidled next to me. The next thing I knew, she was in my arms. I was very happy to make her most beautiful dream come true. I was finally in her arms. That was what she wanted ever since before she began living full-time as a woman.

“This is the moment I’ve dreamed of since I was younger; now it’s here. We’re in the same bed together,” she whispered.

“I never knew that I would share my bed with such a beautiful woman, even one I also knew in her male life. I don’t know what to say, Darlene...except that you’re more beautiful than I envisioned. I’m very happy that I made your dream come true,” I said softly.

I was gently caressing her face as she softly whispered: “Kiss me.” The next thing I knew, we were engaged in a long, tender kiss. As time went on, the kisses got deeper and more passionate. We were both tempted to make love to each other, but we thought better of it. After all, she’s a bridal gown designer.

The next morning, Darlene was the first thing that met my eye when we woke up around ten o’clock. “Good morning, baby,” she cooed.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” I whispered before we shared a kiss.

I got up from the bed, and put on my bathrobe while Darlene went to the bedroom next to mine to put on her black see-through negligee. I went into the kitchen to make breakfast for the two of us. When she came into the kitchen, I had biscuits and gravy prepared. “What would you like to drink?” I asked her.

“I’ll have a glass of orange juice”, she replied.

I poured two glasses of orange juice before we sat down to a leisurely breakfast. She was reading one of the bridal magazines she brought with her, while I was reading the morning paper. After we finished our breakfast, I went to take a shower while Darlene was selecting her outfit. When I came out of the shower, in my bathrobe, she was only in her black baby doll nightie. “What’s with the baby blue dress?” I asked her.

“My designs are going to be shown at a fashion show this afternoon at the community center in Riverhead. I was wondering if you would like to be my date,” she replied.

“I would love to accompany you to the show,” I added.

While Darlene was in the shower, I decided to wear a white button down shirt, matching slacks, maroon sport coat and a pair of medium brown dress shoes. I waited in the living room while she was taking a shower and getting freshened up for the bridal fashion show. I was all dressed and ready to go when she came out of the bedroom, wearing her baby blue dress, white stockings and baby blue open-toed, high-heel shoes.

“You look smashing, honey,” I complimented her.

“You look amazingly handsome,” she returned.

Since her Mini Cooper was too small to take the two of us, I decided to drive to Riverhead in my brand new GMC Denali. We left around twelve-thirty; the show was scheduled to start at three o'clock. While I was driving, she confessed something to me. “There’s one thing I haven’t done yet.”

“What’s that?” I asked her.

“I have not publicly come out as being transgender,” she replied.

“Why haven’t you?”

“I just haven’t had the time to publicly come out and tell everyone I used to be David. The world of bridal design means that I have no time to tell everyone I am a transgender woman. Many of the women who have worn my designs on their wedding day are transgender; I’ve had my designs worn by female impersonators, crossdressers renewing their wedding vows with their female spouses, transgender women taking husbands, lesbian transgender women marrying their female partners, in addition to brides who were actually born female. I have never thought about what would happen if I came out as transgender.”

“Maybe the bridal industry will embrace you as the woman you are now.”

“I’m very sure of it. The world of fashion is accepting of its transgender colleagues, regardless of whether that person is a designer, photographer or a model. The bridal industry has had several transgender women modeling gowns; I don’t know

how a transgender bridal designer would go over in the industry.”

“My cousin, Stephanie, is a successful bridal consultant; she’s transgender and widely accepted as the woman she’s become by the bridal industry.”

“Will I have your support if I come out as transgender to the bridal industry?”

“You will have my total support.”

We arrived at the community center in Riverhead around one-fifteen. Darlene went back to one of the community rooms, which had the shades down because it was being used as a changing room for the bridal fashion models. I decided to sit down outside the room and checked my cell phone for text messages and voice mails. At two-fifteen, after reviewing my text messages and voice mails, Darlene showed me to my seat. It would be a front row seat, so I could have a close-up view of the models and the bridal gowns and dresses they would be modeling. The designs would be mostly sleeveless, short sleeved and long sleeved wedding gowns; some of them were ball gowns, a few were A-line gowns, some had short trains, while others had very long trains. Each bride wore a breathtaking veil; some wore floral headpieces, while others wore tiaras.

The fashion show didn’t end until after five o’clock. We decided to stay in town for dinner; we went to a seafood place with a view of Great Peconic Bay. I ordered the grilled salmon with a garden salad and herb butter rice, while Darlene ordered the clam chowder. While we were waiting for our dinner, Darlene told me more about her plans to tell the world she’s transgender.

“I’ve been thinking about telling the world about my transition and gender reassignment; I’ve been

working on a line of wedding gowns for tall women, as well as big and beautiful women and, for the first time, a collection of wedding gowns for the transgender woman. It's when I unveil my first bridal collection for the transgender woman that I will tell the world that I've been through a sex change," she said.

"Who else knows you've been through the transition from man to woman, besides me, your family, closest friends, the fashion industry and the bridal community?" I asked her.

"The public at large doesn't know I've been through the transition," she replied, before explaining: "For the longest time, I've seen the transgender community as the ones being underserved by the bridal industry. Many transgender women are not only big and beautiful, but they're also tall. Last year, one of my transsexual friends was preparing to get married. She's a size 28W, for starters; she's also six feet, five inches tall in stocking feet. With high heels, she comes in at six-eight. Her husband is seven feet, one inch tall. I decided to take on the task of designing a bridal gown exclusively for her. I designed a gown for her that had short lace sleeves, a sweetheart neckline, lace adorning the bodice, a cathedral-length train with a heart design in the middle; the hem of both the train and skirt were trimmed with lace. She had a fingertip-length, lace-trimmed veil to top off the ensemble. She was clearly the center of attention on her wedding day; she looked absolutely stunning. I received at least 100 letters complimentary of my design. So, I made another one that will be part of my first transgender collection."

When we got back to my house around seven-thirty that evening, we took off our shoes. Darlene sat down on the loveseat while I put another romantic movie into the DVD player. When the movie



started, I sat down next to her; she sidled over and put her head on my shoulder. We caressed each other and shared several kisses as the movie played. When it ended around ten o'clock, Darlene went into the bedroom next to mine to change into something romantic and sexy, while I got into a pair of green plaid pajama pants and a white tank top shirt. She came into the bedroom a few minutes later, in a pink see-through nightgown with matching bra and G-string panties. She got into bed next to me; we shared a kiss before we fell asleep in each other's arms.

Ten

It was two months later that Darlene made the decision to unveil her first collection of bridal gowns for the transgender bride. She also made the decision that this would be the time to tell the whole world that she is transgender, and went through transition and surgery to become the beautiful woman she is now. It would also be the first time she would unveil this collection at night, at a nightclub catering to the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community.

We talked about the details of her coming out over dinner at her place. "So, let me get this straight. You're going to tell about your transition at the bridal fashion show coming up?" I asked her.

"I've been thinking about this for several months, and I thought that I would tell everyone at the end of the bridal fashion show this coming Friday. I've even decided to wear an informal wedding dress of my own design that night," she replied.

"Darlene, no matter what happens, you will have my full support," I assured her.

“I knew I could count on you for support.”

“That’s what friends are for...even boyfriends, for that matter.”

“And what are you implying?”

“I’ve waited a long time to ask you this. Will you be my girlfriend?”

“Ted, I would be very proud and honored to be your girlfriend.”

“Darlene, I am very happy and honored to be your boyfriend.” After I said that, we shared our first kiss as boyfriend and girlfriend.

“I love you, Ted,” she lovingly whispered.

“I love you, too, Darlene,” I whispered before we shared our first deep kiss.

The following Friday night, I took the train from Long Island into Manhattan to attend the bridal fashion show. A young woman with short blonde hair, wearing a red dress and matching flats greeted me when I arrived at Grand Central Station around seven-thirty. “Ted Thomas?” she asked me.

“I’m Ted Thomas,” I replied.

“My name is Becky; Miss Gaye asked me to take you to the club,” she added. I followed her to a white Toyota RAV4; I got into the back seat; a moment later, Becky got into the driver’s seat and started the vehicle.

“What’s your connection to Miss Gaye?” she asked me.

“I’m her boyfriend. We officially became a couple a few days ago,” I replied.

“I started working for Miss Gaye last year. I’m working my way through college; I’m studying photography at Columbia. I hope to set up my own photography studio after I graduate.”

“I’ve known her since we were kids. I have known her both as a boy and as a woman. From the time he was in elementary school, my friends and I knew there was something different about David. When we graduated from high school, he told us that he wanted to become a woman. I didn’t know about Darlene until I took over my father’s export-import business. Shortly after I came to New York, Darlene invited me to one of her shows; she told me about her transition before the show began.”

It was ten minutes to eight when Becky pulled the vehicle up to the front door of the famous Stonewall club. It was quite an experience to walk into a club that was part of history nearly two generations ago. They had it all decked out as if a real wedding was about to take place. I walked up to the bar, where I saw a young woman in a pink party dress. She was six feet tall with short blonde hair and wearing pink flats. “May I help you?” she asked me.

“Ginger ale, on the rocks,” I replied.

She made the drink as I requested; when she set the drink down in front of me, she asked: “Aren’t you Ted Thomas, the exporter I’ve heard so much about?”

“You, ma’am, are correct,” I replied.

“I’m Julia Squires. I model part-time for Darlene when I’m not working the bar. I’m presently transitioning from man to woman,” she added.

I was in for a big surprise just as I was finishing that exchange. Winnie Chong had flown all the way from Bangkok to see the show.

“I didn’t expect to see you here, Ted,” she said surprisingly.

“This is, indeed, a pleasant surprise!” I added with an element of surprise.

“I heard you moved to New York several months back, and that you and Darlene have been an item in recent months.”

“I only asked her to be my girl less than a week ago, Winnie.”

“What, besides the show, brings you to the Big Apple?”

“The company I work for has been made the exclusive importer for Darlene’s bridal collections in Southeast Asia and India.”

“I also have something else to tell you,” Winnie said before she raised her left hand and showed off her engagement ring.

“Who’s the lucky man?” I asked her.

“His name is Lance Asher. He works for one of the hotels in Bangkok. He’s originally from Westchester County; I met his folks last night. They’re supportive of him marrying a transgender woman, let alone an Asian,” she replied.

“When’s the big day?”

“Sometime next spring; we’re planning two weddings, one at a resort near Bangkok and one in New Rochelle.”

Lance walked in a few minutes later. He was six-eight with short dark brown hair, wearing a gray

suit, navy blue and gray tie and a pair of dark brown dress shoes. "Who is this fellow?" he asked her.

"Lance Asher, this is Ted Thomas. He's a colleague in the export-import business. Lance, this is Ted Thomas, a friend of mine and the designer's boyfriend," she replied.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lance," I said.

"The pleasure is mutual, Ted," he added.

"What hotel do you work at?" I asked him.

"I work at one of the largest hotels in Bangkok. It's locally owned, but a franchise of one of the American chains. I've been working there for the last three years," he replied.

"How did you and Winnie meet?"

"I wanted to find out what the 'lady boys' were all about. I went to a show in town that featured these gorgeous ladies. Winnie was hosting a group of clients from London that night. We took one look at each other and decided that we had to get to know one another. The next thing I knew, we exchanged business cards and she got me to get one of the girls in the show, dressed in an evening gown with a tiara in her hair, to sit on my lap. Little did she know that I am a fluent speaker of Thai."

"Where did you learn to speak the Thai language?"

"I learned it at the University of Southern California."

"Would you like for me to buy you both a drink?" I asked him.

"That's a swell idea!" he replied.

“I’ll have a strawberry daiquiri,” Winnie added.

“I’ll have a Molson,” Lance added.

I signaled Julia, and told her: “One strawberry daiquiri and one bottle of Molson beer.”

“Would you like another ginger ale?” she asked me.

“Please,” I replied.

The female impersonators and transgender women who would participate in the fashion show began arriving at quarter to eight, along with the guests. This was an invitation-only fashion show. There were also representatives from the fashion press at the event. Lance, Winnie and I would share a table near the stage. At eight-thirty, Darlene came out on the stage, wearing a white sleeveless informal wedding dress; the skirt had a lace heart design on the front. The skirt was so big that a crinoline was needed to fill it out. She was also wearing white stockings and white satin pumps. Her blonde hair was done in a bun; a tiara topped her ensemble. She adjusted the microphone so her voice would be heard very well.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’ve asked you here tonight to witness a first in the bridal industry. For many years, I’ve heard from prospective transgender brides. Many of them have complained that there aren’t very many bridal gowns that are specifically made for the transgender bride. Many are very tall for the women they’ve become; a fair number are over six feet tall. An increasing number are of the larger size. These gowns are created for brides whose average height is around six feet to six feet, three inches tall, and an average dress size of between 18W and 26W. By contrast, I’m of average size for a woman; I’m five-seven and wear a size 12 dress. I have a personal

interest in this collection; like the models you will be seeing going across the stage in my bridal designs, I am a transgender woman. I began my life in a small midwestern town as a boy named David Gaye. From a very young age, I felt that I should have been a girl. I came to New York after I graduated from high school to not only work in this industry, but begin my new life as Darlene Gaye. I am so thankful for the doctors who helped me become the woman I am now. Seven years ago, I went to Montreal to have the operation that completed my transformation from David to Darlene. I'm also thankful for a very supportive boyfriend, Ted Thomas, whom I've known for a long time. Ladies and gentlemen, I now present to you the debut of my Lady Darlene collection," she announced before the first model walked out on stage.

The designs were primarily wedding gowns with full skirts; there were several with short sleeves, several sleeveless designs, several strapless designs, and a few long-sleeve designs for winter weddings. Some of the designs were ball gowns, two had short trains, four had chapel-length trains and three had cathedral-length trains. She also had four informal wedding dress designs; two with short sleeves and two sleeveless designs. For the final set of designs modeled by the ten models, they tossed their bouquets into the audience. Winnie caught the bouquet tossed by the second to last model on the stage. Of the ten models, five were female impersonators, three were pre-op transgender women and the last two were post-op. The shortest model was five-ten; the tallest was six feet, six inches tall.

After the show, Darlene came to my table. We shared a tender kiss before we took each other by the hand and walked to the table where I was sitting. "Have you met Winnie Chong?" I asked her.

“No, I haven’t,” she replied before she reached out to gently shake Winnie’s hand.

“It’s a distinct pleasure to meet you, Miss Gaye,” Winnie said with a smile.

“It’s also my pleasure to meet you, Winnie; please call me Darlene,” she said to her.

“Darlene, this man is my fiancé, Lance Asher. This is Darlene Gaye, the bridal designer I was telling you about,” Winnie informed her.

“It’s a pleasure to meet your acquaintance, Darlene,” Lance said before gently shaking her hand.

I was fortunate to bring my camera to the event, so I could take pictures of Darlene’s breathtakingly romantic bridal gown designs. One of Darlene’s friends came to our table so she could take several pictures of Darlene, Winnie, Lance and yours truly. Darlene also got a lot of hugs from the audience for her courage in telling her friends and colleagues about her transition from man to woman. We had to clear out of the club before the female impersonator show began at eleven, so we went down the street to a nice restaurant to have a late dinner around ten o’clock.

Darlene and I ordered a steak dinner for two; Lance ordered Chicken Kiev, while Winnie ordered a Thai stir-fry. While we were waiting our dinner, I ordered a pitcher of unsweetened iced tea. “What designer would you choose for your wedding gown?” Darlene asked Winnie.

“I would love to be in one of your designs for our wedding in the States,” Winnie replied.

“Would you want me to custom-design a gown for you?”

“Have you also designed a gown for a traditional Thai wedding?”

“I’ve done that for a few Thai women; many born female but I’ve also designed several gowns for Thai women who were born boys.”

“I’ll make sure I measure you for your gowns before you return to Bangkok.”

“Make sure these gowns are ones that our guests will talk about for years to come.”

“When would be the best time to come in to be measured?”

“I’m free tomorrow at one o’clock.”

Darlene checked her appointment book. “I’ll put you on the calendar for your measurements tomorrow at one o’clock at my gallery in the Village,” she told Winnie before giving her the directions to her gallery.

After we left the restaurant, Winnie and Lance returned to their hotel room in Manhattan, while Darlene returned to her apartment and I got on the train back to Long Island. When I got in, the phone was ringing. Darlene was on the other end.

“Honey, I’ve gotten plenty of calls from my colleagues in the bridal industry from all over the world. They were watching the show online, and are very happy I came out and told them about my transition. They are very supportive and look forward to showing my collection in their cities.”

“That’s wonderful, darling! I’ve also gotten a few calls on my machine; many telling me that I’m a lucky man because I’m now your man. I’m even more proud that you are my woman.”

“I’m very proud that you are my man. I’m also the luckiest girl in the world because you love me as the woman I am.”

“Darlene, I love you more than life itself.”

“I love you more than anything else in this world, Ted.”

After we finished our phone conversation, I changed from my suit into a pair of athletic shorts and a red muscle shirt. My thoughts were about Darlene and what she has done for transgender women, as far as designing bridal gowns for them are concerned. She has brought her bridal designs to a market that other designers rarely tap into.

Eleven

It was shortly before Valentine’s Day, four months after Darlene unveiled her collection for the transgender bride. Just six weeks before, she sold her apartment in the city and moved in with me on Long Island. One of the guest bedrooms became her design room. We found two invitations in our mail when I got home from work that evening. They were both from Winnie.

Darlene walked in around nine-thirty, after she showed off her latest additions to the Romance of the Bride collection, her collection for the bride on a budget, at a nearby shopping mall. “What’s with the two invitations?” she asked me.

“We’ve been invited to both of Winnie’s weddings. The first one will be the last weekend of April at a resort outside Bangkok; the second one will be at their

church in New Rochelle the second weekend of May,” I replied.

“I think we’ll be able to make the ceremony in New Rochelle. I will be busy the last weekend of April, showing my Romance of the Bride collection in Nashville on Saturday afternoon and Charlotte on Sunday afternoon, and my Lady Darlene collection in Cincinnati on Friday night and Atlanta on Saturday night.”

“I’ll be in Antwerp that weekend; I’ll be looking at some valuable gems to bring into this country.”

“Who do we know is going to Thailand?”

“Roger and Margot are going there; she lived there for a while before she joined him in Chicago.”

“I hear they’ve been talking about getting married, too.”

“They’ve been talking about it for quite a while. He’s just waiting for the right moment to propose to her.”

As the final weekend in May came to a close, I had just come into JFK after a long flight from Brussels. I took the bus from Antwerp to catch my flight at Brussels National. Darlene was waiting for me; her flight from Charlotte had arrived at an adjacent gate.

“How was Antwerp, dear?” she asked me.

“I closed a deal to bring a shipment of diamonds and other gems into the country; most of these came from mines in South Africa,” I replied.

“Believe it or not, I had larger crowds seeing my Lady Darlene collection in Cincinnati and Atlanta than I did my Romance of the Bride collection in

Nashville and Charlotte; they were both well-attended.”

“While I was awaiting my flight in Brussels, Roger called. He and Margot are getting married.”

“Wonderful! When is the wedding?”

“They’re planning to marry sometime before Christmas in Rotterdam, where she’s from. They plan to have a reception in Chicago the day after Christmas.”

“It’s strange that we haven’t talked about marriage that much.”

“Remember, we’re two busy people with two careers that sometimes intertwine.”

“Oh, yes...I’m one of many that exports and imports bridal gowns.”

We cleared our calendars for the second weekend of the month of May. I decided to wear my brown suit and matching tie; Darlene decided in favor of a lavender cocktail dress. Winnie and Lance couldn’t have picked a better day to have their American wedding ceremony. They were having it at a park near where Lance grew up; it was a beautiful spring day with clear blue skies. Darlene and I decided it was a perfect day to take a drive to New Rochelle. We decided to go through Queens and the Bronx on the way over. I dropped Darlene off at a residence across from the park, where Winnie was preparing for her special day. The house belongs to one of her uncles, a Chinese dissident who migrated to the United States after the Tien-an-Men Square massacre with his wife and eldest son. Their other five children were born in the United States. Darlene wanted to make sure the wedding gown she designed fit Winnie perfectly.

I decided to stop into a nearby coffeehouse to grab a cup of coffee and a ham sandwich; I didn't have much to eat before I left the house. I had known Lance's father, the well-known international jeweler Dick Asher, since I was in high school. He was in a gray tuxedo with a matching bow tie. "Ted Thomas, it's a pleasure to see you again," he said before he invited me to his table.

"How's everything with you, Dick?" I asked him.

"Business is very good these days. I purchased some of the gems you brought back from Belgium; they are excellent," he replied.

"I've been in New York for almost a year now. I moved the offices for my company from the small midwestern town I grew up in."

"How do you know Lance?" he asked me.

"I actually met the bride five years ago on a business trip to Bangkok. My company was contracted to bring some traditional Thai costumes into the United States for a Thai-American theater troupe. I didn't get to meet Lance until she brought him to the unveiling of one of Darlene's bridal collections last fall," I replied.

"I must admit, we were a bit uneasy when he found out he was dating an Asian girl. My brother, Bob, was once married to an Asian woman; she was from Taiwan. She left him for a man in Taipei; he was divorced for over twenty years before he finally remarried last year; his wife is twenty-four years his junior, and works for the same company I work for as a domestic jeweler; in other words, her area is the United States and Canada. Lance introduced me to Winnie when I was in Bangkok on business fifteen months ago. She's as sweet as Lance has described."

“I’ve been dating Darlene Gaye for the past eight months; we began living together about three months ago.”

“When Winnie told me she’s a transsexual, I told Lance I was comfortable with his being in a relationship with a transgender woman. My youngest brother, Dean, is married to a transgender woman. He began dating her when she was transitioning from Philip to Phoebe. A year after she had her sex-change operation, they got married. They’ve been married twenty-four years now, and have two adopted sons, Dean and Nathan, and two adopted daughters, Darla and Prudence.”

“My girlfriend is also transgender. I knew her as a boy; we grew up together in a small midwestern town. She began living full-time as a woman when she got to New York; she really took an interest in bridal fashion design. She earned a name for herself in the bridal industry even before I reconnected with her at a bridal fashion show in Manhattan several months ago. I fell for the woman she had become. She even confessed that even before she began to transition, she dreamed of having me as her boyfriend.”

“She did a great job on Winnie’s bridal ensemble for the Thai wedding. I’m sure that the dress she designed for her American wedding will be just as beautiful.”

Just as he finished that sentence, Cathy approached us. She was in her hot pink mother of the bride dress and matching flats. “Isn’t it time we head across the street?” she asked him.

“Cathy, I’m not sure you met Ted Thomas. He’s the son of Theo Thomas; Ted now runs Theo-Roger Exports and Imports; the company is now based in New York,” Dick replied.

"I've heard a lot about you, Ted. I remember your father," Cathy added.

"He retired over a year ago; he's now living on Saint Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands," I added.

I had to wolf down the last bite of my ham sandwich; I finished my cup of coffee after I finished my sandwich. I walked across to the park; one of the ushers showed me to my seat behind Winnie's parents. Her father, Bin-Li "Kevin" Chong, is Lance's boss at the hotel. Her mother, Aung Soo "Augusta" Chong, made the American wedding part of her trip to New York to look at the Lady Darlene collection. Kevin was in a gray tuxedo, while Augusta was in a lavender mother of the bride gown.

"It's good to see you again, Ted," Augusta said with a smile.

"I'm very pleased to see you again, and very happy for Winnie," I said to her.

"Ted Thomas, I don't know if you've met my husband, Kevin," she added before turning Kevin toward me.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Kevin," I said before shaking his hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, too, Ted. Winnie has told me a lot about you," he said with a smile.

Darlene came down the aisle and sat down next to me. "Kevin, Augusta, I don't think you've met my girlfriend, Darlene Gaye," I said while putting my arm around her shoulder.

"You're the one who designs those beautiful dresses?" Augusta asked.

“The very same; I even designed your daughter’s dress for the ceremony in Thailand,” Darlene replied.

“Did you design the gown for the ceremony here?” Kevin then asked.

“Yes, I designed that dress, too,” Darlene replied with a smile.

Darlene and I shared a kiss before we sat down. Kevin then got up to go to across the street to his brother’s house to meet up with Winnie. Shortly afterward, Roger arrived at the park. He was in a navy blue suit with a maroon tie and brown dress shoes. “What brings you here, Roger?” I asked him.

“Margot is the maid of honor in Winnie’s wedding,” he replied.

“Have you met my new girl?” I asked him.

“No, I haven’t...not in person,” he replied.

“Roger Thomas, Junior, this is my girlfriend, bridal designer Darlene Gaye. Darlene, this is my cousin, Roger Thomas, Junior,” I said in an introductory manner.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Roger,” Darlene said with a smile.

“The pleasure is mutual, Darlene,” Roger said before he kissed her hand.

It would be a small wedding; only forty guests were invited. The big one was in Thailand, where over four hundred guests attended. Lance’s best man was his younger brother, Ben; the other groomsman was Thomas Donelli, his roommate from college. The only other bridesmaid besides Margot was Elaine Nguyen, her best friend in Bangkok and, like Winnie, a

post-op transsexual. Elaine grew up in Bangkok as Elwood; her parents and grandparents migrated from Vietnam during the war there. Elaine is a protocol officer for the Foreign Ministry; she had her gender reassignment surgery four years ago in Montreal, while she was serving at the Thai Embassy in Ottawa.

The minister who would perform the wedding, Jason Asher, took his place near the tree line at three minutes before two o'clock. He is Lance's older brother; a notary public who is also a justice of the peace, working out of an office in White Plains. He was six-four with an athletic build, wearing a maroon suit, matching tie and a pair of maroon dress shoes. He had a King James Bible in his hand.

When the clock struck two o'clock, the flower girl, Gertrude "Trudy" Chong, walked down the aisle, spreading the petals of white roses. Trudy is the six-year-old daughter of Winnie's cousin, En-lai "Ennis" Chong, a history professor at Yale. On her arm was the ring bearer, Richard "Richie" Asher III, the seven-year-old son of Richard "Rick" Asher, Junior and Dick's grandson. Trudy was in a pink satin flower girl's gown from Darlene's Little Girl's Dream collection, while Richie was in a navy blue tuxedo. Following Trudy and Richie down the aisle was Elaine. She was six feet tall with a slender build, wearing a pink satin sleeveless bridesmaid's gown, from Darlene's Bridal Friends bridesmaid's collection. Thomas met her; they faced Jason for three seconds before they took their places. Margot went down the aisle next in an identical dress; she flashed a wide smile at Roger as she was walking down the aisle; he gave her a wide smile. She met Ben in front of Jason; they faced him for three seconds before they took their places. After that, Lance would take his place at the end of the aisle as he awaited his beautiful bride.

It was two and a half minutes later that Winnie began her walk down the aisle, on the arm of her father. She was in a beautiful sleeveless white satin bridal gown with lace adorning the bodice and trimming the A-line skirt of the ball-style gown. A fingertip-length veil topped the ensemble; her long black hair was done in a bun. A blusher was over her face, in accordance with North American tradition. Darlene did an excellent job in designing the gown for this event.

When they came to the end of the aisle, Kevin lifted the blusher to give his daughter a kiss. When he put the blusher back over her face, he shook Lance's hand and said: "Take good care of my beautiful Winnie."

Kevin went back to his seat before Jason began to speak. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to see Winnie and Lance joined together in the bond of Holy Matrimony." He gave them some advice, and read a few verses of Scripture before they exchanged their marriage vows.

At the end of the ceremony, Jason asked her: "Will you, Winata Lauren Chong, have this man, Lance Richard Asher, to be your lawful wedded husband; to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in times of illness and health, for as long as you both shall live?"

"I will," she replied, looking him right in the eyes.

He turned toward Lance and asked him: "Lance Richard Asher, will you have this woman, Winata Lauren Chong, as your lawful wedded wife; to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in times of illness and health, for as long as you both shall live?"

"I will," he replied, looking her right in her eyes.

“With the power vested in me by the State of New York, the County of Westchester, and the City of New Rochelle, I now pronounce you man and wife,” he announced before Lance gently lifted Winnie’s blusher. “You may now kiss your bride,” Jason told Lance before they shared a tender kiss and warm embrace.

Jason turned toward the guests, and announced: “Ladies and gentlemen, I now introduce Mr. and Mrs. Lance Asher.” Lance and Winnie walked up the aisle to the sidewalk, where they greeted their guests. The reception would be at a nearby banquet center; they would honeymoon in Vienna before returning to Bangkok to begin their new lives as a married couple.

Twelve

Three months later would be Roger and Margot’s turn to tie the knot. I would be the best man for this one. Darlene and I cleared the third weekend of August to travel to Rotterdam for the wedding. We arrived in Amsterdam three days before the big day; we decided to stay in Amsterdam overnight before we went sightseeing during the day. We got on the early evening train to Rotterdam.

When we arrived at the railroad station, Margot was there to greet us. “Welcome to Rotterdam, Darlene and Ted,” she said before embracing me.

“I’m very pleased to be here to see you and my cousin get married,” I told her.

“I’m very happy you selected a gown from my Select Romance collection,” Darlene added.

Margot took us to a hotel in the downtown area, where we checked in. The first thing we did was crash

on our beds. It had been a long day; we rested for a few minutes before we changed into something more comfortable. I selected a pair of blue pajama pants and a white tank top shirt. When Darlene emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, she was in a burgundy nightgown.

“You look beautiful, babe,” I complimented.

“You’re handsome, honey,” she returned before we shared a kiss.

We spent the morning and early afternoon the next day taking in the sights of Rotterdam; later in the afternoon, we took a short bus trip to Den Haag, which we know in English as The Hague. Roger joined us for dinner at a Russian restaurant when we got back to Rotterdam early in the evening.

“I wonder how long it will be before you pop the question to Darlene,” he said with a bit of a laugh.

“Roger, we’re not under any pressure to get married,” Darlene informed him.

“Besides, we’ve only been living together for almost four months,” I added.

“Just thought I’d ask,” Roger added apologetically.

Darlene and I had the turkey Stroganoff for dinner; Roger went for the chicken Stroganoff. The three of us split a bottle of Bordeaux red wine. After dinner, Darlene went over to the residence of Margot’s parents to look at her wedding gown, while Roger and I went to a nearby sports bar. The television sets in the establishment were mostly on soccer games; we sat in front of one that was broadcasting an afternoon baseball game from the United States.

“We travel to Rotterdam, and we can still watch the White Sox,” Roger said.

“Especially when they’re playing the Yankees,” I added before a waitress came to our table. She was five-two with long dirty blonde hair, a slender build and wearing a pair of black slacks, a Manchester United jersey and a pair of track shoes. “What can I get you?” she asked in a mild Dutch accent.

“I’ll have a Beck’s,” Roger replied.

“I’ll have a cup of coffee, black,” I added.

“Why haven’t you proposed to Darlene yet?” he asked me.

“Like I said before, Darlene and I have only been living together for almost four months. It’s that I’m not yet ready to get married. We have been talking about it off and on since she moved in with me, but she’s not ready, either. Only we know when the time is right,” I replied.

“In other words, you’re taking your own sweet time with her.”

“I really don’t want to rush into things.”

“I understand. I really didn’t want to rush into things with Margot, but I realized after a while that she was the one I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. No matter how long it takes for you to realize this, but you may come to a point where you want to spend the rest of your life with Darlene.”

“That time will come soon enough.”

Two days later, I would be the best man in Roger and Margot’s wedding. It was a beautiful, picture perfect day for the wedding, which would be held at a

small church near the downtown area. The only other groomsman in the wedding party would be the bride's brother, Rembrandt "Brandt" van der Veldt, part-owner of a restaurant in Amsterdam. The ring bearer would be John Thomas Ware, the eight-year-old son of Roger's older sister, Ruth Thomas Ware.

In the bride's room, Darlene, dressed in a pink satin dress, took another look at Margot's wedding gown. It was hanging on a portable partition; Margot was in a pink blouse, a pair of navy blue Capri pants and a pair of pink flats. "You made an excellent selection," she complimented.

"I've really been enamored by your designs ever since I started in the export-import business," Margot added.

"What color of bridesmaid gowns did you select?"

"I selected baby blue for the bridesmaids and white for the flower girl."

"Who designed the gowns?"

"They're all your designs, Darlene."

It was around one-fifteen that the two bridesmaids arrived with the flower girl. The maid of honor would be Margot's best friend since childhood, Valentijn Meijer. She's five-eight with long brunette hair and a slender build; she was working in the Dutch diplomatic corps at the United Nations mission in New York. The other bridesmaid would be her best friend from her days in Thailand, Winnie Asher. The flower girl would be her niece, Nathalie van der Veldt, Brandt's seven-year-old daughter. They were already in their gowns.

"Who is this young lady?" Valentijn asked her.

“This is the woman who designed all your gowns. This is the noted bridal fashion designer, Darlene Gaye. You know Winnie, this is my best friend, Valentijn Meijer, and my niece, Nathalie van der Veldt,” Margot replied.

“It’s a pleasure to meet your acquaintance,” Valentijn added.

“I’m pleased to meet you, too, Valentijn,” Darlene said to her.

Darlene left the bride’s room so that the bridesmaids could help get Margot into her wedding gown. She would head for the room at the church school where I was waiting with Roger, Brandt and John. When she walked in the door, she walked up to me to give me a kiss.

“What put you out of the bride’s room?” I asked her.

“Margot’s bridesmaids wanted to help her get into her wedding gown,” she replied.

She turned toward John, and informed him: “Oh, by the way, John, you’re needed in the vestibule.”

“Thank you for telling me; I was beginning to lose all track of time, Miss Gaye,” John said before exiting the room.

“I just wanted to check in with you before the big moment,” she informed me.

“You look smashing, Darlene,” I whispered.

“You look handsome, Ted,” she cooed; we shared a tender kiss before she left the room to take a seat in the church sanctuary.

“Who is that woman?” Brandt asked in a mild Dutch accent.

“That woman is my girlfriend,” I replied.

“She happens to be the noted bridal fashion designer, Darlene Gaye,” Roger added.

Around five minutes to two o’clock, the minister who would be performing the ceremony, the Reverend Jost Meijer, came into the room. “Mr. Thomas, it’s time,” he informed Roger.

“Thank you, Reverend,” he said before giving the minister a check for 900 Euros.

“This will finally allow me to pay off my Chrysler,” Jost added jokingly.

Roger, Brandt and I were led into the church sanctuary by Jost. Darlene sat on the groom’s side in the pew behind Uncle Roger and Aunt Bridget. Uncle Roger hadn’t changed much except for salt-and-pepper hair; he also grew a beard since he retired to Oregon. He was in a navy blue tuxedo with matching bow tie, like the groomsmen. Roger was the one with the tails on the jacket of his tux. Aunt Bridget’s black hair was now shoulder-length; it had been down past her shoulders for the longest time. She had selected a red mother’s gown from Darlene’s Mother Love collection. When we arrived at the altar to await the bridesmaids, one of the ushers, Roger’s kid brother Austin, on break from Harvard, where he was studying business, just finished escorting Margot’s mother, Anna, to the front pew on the bride’s side. She had short red hair, indicative of Irish heritage on her mother’s side of the family, a slender build and wearing a blue mother of the bride dress, also from Darlene’s Mother Love collection. Lance, Winnie’s husband, sat in the pew behind the bride’s parents, along with Valentijn’s boyfriend, Gregory Smith, a

travel agent from West Orange, New Jersey. My father was also sitting in the row behind Uncle Roger and Aunt Bridget; he and Darlene were engaged in conversation. Brandt's wife, Beatrix, and their three other children, twelve-year-old Brandt Junior and ten-year-old boy-girl twins, Michael and Marie, were also sitting in the same pew, along with my cousin Ruth and her husband, James.

When the clock struck two o'clock, the processional music started. First down the aisle was Nathalie; John, holding the ring bearer's pillow, accompanied her. Nathalie was spreading rose petals across the aisle. The next person down the aisle was Winnie; she looked just as radiant as she did on her wedding day back in New Rochelle. She took Brandt's arm, faced Jost, and took their places on the altar. Next was the maid of honor, Valentijn. She took my arm; we faced Jost for a moment before we took our places at the altar. Roger waited for Margot in front of the pew where Uncle Roger and Aunt Bridget were sitting.

Everyone stood up and looked to the back as the Austin and the other usher, Valentijn's younger brother, Geert Meijer, opened the door. Margot was a sight to behold for Roger. She was in a white, short-sleeved wedding gown with a lace-adorned bodice, lace trim around the skirt and train, lace designs on the skirt, with a chapel-length train featuring a heart design in lace in the center, with a fingertip-length veil and blusher. The blusher was over her face. She was on the arm of her father, Harman "Harm" van der Veldt, in a similar tuxedo as the groomsmen and Uncle Roger. Harm is a respected member of the community, owning his own imported goods store in one of the city's shopping districts. When they came to the end of the aisle, Harm lifted the blusher enough to give Margot a kiss. He turned

to Roger, and said quietly, in a somewhat strong Dutch accent: "Take good care of my daughter."

"I certainly will, sir," Roger whispered before they shook hands. After finishing the handshake, Margot took Roger's arm with one hand while holding her bouquet with the other hand, and faced Jost.

The ceremony was in both English and Dutch. The introductory rite was in Dutch; a language Roger learned to be fluent in during his courtship of Margot. The exchange of the rings was done in English, followed by the lighting of the unity candle, which was in Dutch. The last part was the exchange of marriage vows, which was done in English.

"Margot Juliana van der Veldt, do you take this man, Roger Adam Thomas, Junior, to be your wedded husband; to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, in times of illness and health, in times of poverty and prosperity, until death do you part?" Jost asked her.

"I do," Margot replied with a huge smile, looking Roger directly in his eyes.

"Roger Adam Thomas, Junior, do you take this woman, Margot Juliana van der Veldt, to be your wedded wife; to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, in times of illness and health, in times of poverty and prosperity, until death do you part?" Jost then asked him.

"I do," Roger replied with an even bigger smile, looking Margot directly in her eyes.

"With the power vested in me by the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the City of Rotterdam, I now declare you husband and wife," Jost proudly pronounced before Roger lifted the blusher from

Margot's face. They would share a tender kiss and a warm hug.

The reception was held in a beautiful garden on the edge of town, with a menu of various European delicacies for dinner and Dutch pastries for dessert. I really went to town on the Dutch apple crumb pie. Darlene caught the bride's bouquet, while I wound up catching the bride's garter. We both thought this coincidence would be an indication of what would happen in our future lives. We would return to New York the next morning; Roger and Margot would honeymoon in Venice before returning to Chicago ten days after their wedding.

Thirteen

In the three and a half months between Roger and Margot's wedding and the holiday season, we kept very busy. In September, Darlene showed her collection for transgender brides in Bangkok for the first time. While she was in Bangkok, I was traveling throughout Europe, sealing deals to bring Croatian and Slovenian wines into the United States, along with handmade clothing and accessories from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, spices from Hungary and handmade religious items from Poland. Darlene and I talked about getting married more and more often after we returned from Rotterdam. Finally, on a trip to Brussels in mid-November, I broke down and bought a gift for Darlene for Christmas: an engagement ring with a one-carat diamond. My plan was to give it to her for Christmas.

It was Christmas Eve. We had planned a quiet evening at home. My father was in Oregon with Uncle Roger and Aunt Bridget, while my brother and sisters were spending the holidays with Roger and his new

bride. A lot of changes took place in her family since we began living together. Her older sisters, Adele and Bella, had opened their own bridal salon in Sacramento shortly after Darlene's operation; they were the only salon between Oakland and Reno to carry Darlene's bridal gown collections. Her older brother, Ben, had become a State Representative in his adopted home state of Vermont; he had married a woman who grew up in Winooski, a suburb of Burlington. They have two sons and a daughter. Her younger brother, Bob, had become a firefighter paramedic in the Los Angeles area; he and his wife, Barbara, have a set of quintuplets: two boys and two girls. Their mother, Madeleine Corwin, who taught third, fourth and fifth grades in a three-decade career, and stepfather, David Corwin, a professor of science, had retired to the Hawaiian island of Maui. Their natural father, Thomas Gaye, was killed by a drunk driver when David was five years old.

I built a fire in the fireplace; it was a nippy evening outside our Long Island home. Darlene had given her staff two weeks off for Christmas and New Year's; I did the same with my staff. We had both changed into something more comfortable; I was in a pair of red sweatpants and a blue New York Rangers T-shirt; Darlene had put on a wool nightgown, with a pink baby doll nightie underneath. It was shortly after seven o'clock when we put a huge tea kettle filled with hot water on a hot plate in the bar, along with several tea bags; Darlene had prepared a huge bowl of popcorn. We would be watching Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" on our DVD player. When I sat down next to her, I gave her a cup of hot tea.

"A penny for your thoughts," I whispered before giving her the cup.

“There are so many racing through my mind right now, I have a hard time expressing them,” she softly said before cuddling closer to me.

I wrapped my left arm around her while we both drank our hot tea. I had one thought on my mind and wanted to express it.

“What are you thinking about, sweet stuff?” she asked me somewhat seductively.

“I’m thinking about us, my dear. Had you not become a woman, I probably wouldn’t be here tonight. I would probably be chasing some young models at a friend’s Christmas party. I’m very happy you became a woman, even if you became one for me. I don’t think I’ll ever find a girl quite like you...not even in two lifetimes,” I replied.

“Just having you say that makes me very happy I became a woman. I not only became a woman for me, but I became a woman for you, too,” she cooed.

“Do you see the big package under the tree?” I asked her.

“Yes, I see it,” she replied.

“That box is yours,” I whispered before walking over to the Christmas tree, retrieving it, returning to the couch and giving it to her. She opened it to see a small box from a moving company. She opened it to find a smaller box; it once contained the cookware set my sister Kimberly bought as a housewarming gift.

“I don’t think we need any more pots and pans,” Darlene said with a sarcastic smile before opening the box. She would find another box; this one once contained a set of speakers I bought to put in the garage as part of the sound system for that particular area. “We don’t need any more speakers; we have

them running out of our ears,” she said with a twist of sarcasm. She opened another box to find one about the size of a baseball. It was the box that my baseball desk display came in; I bought it for one of my autographed baseballs from the White Sox. When she came to that box, I said to her: “If you want to open that last box, I’ve got to ask you a question.”

“What, pray tell, are you going to ask me?” she asked with a sense of anticipation.

I slid off the couch and knelt on the living room floor. I muted the sound on the television set; the only sound we were hearing is the crashing of the waves on shore. I took her left hand in my right, and asked her: “Darlene, will you be my wife?”

She shed a tear of joy and flashed a wide smile. She thought about it for a minute before she happily cried: “You’ve just made my most beautiful dream come true, Ted. I have wanted so much to be your wife, and I accept your gracious and romantic marriage proposal.” She opened the box to find a jeweler’s box; in it was a gold engagement ring with a diamond measured at one karat. She gave the box to me; I slipped the ring on the ring finger of her left hand. To celebrate, we shared a tender kiss.

“When would you like to tie the knot?” I asked her.

“Sometime this spring or summer,” she replied.

The first person I called was my cousin, Roger. “I knew you would pop the question to Darlene sooner or later. Margot and I are very happy for you,” he told me with pride.

“How would you like to be the best man?” I asked him.

“I would be happy and honored to be your best man,” Roger replied.

The first person Darlene called was her best friend, Michelle Dunivan Winger. “Ted just popped the question to me,” she told her.

“I’m so happy to hear this; I hope you’re ready to return the favor,” Michelle added.

“Michelle, how would you like to be the matron of honor?” Darlene asked her.

“I would be honored to be your matron of honor,” Michelle replied.

After we finished our phone calls to family and friends, we allowed some time to let it sink in. We continued to watch the movies before we went to bed. For both of us, it would be the final Christmas of our single lives.

Fourteen

Darlene and I finally set the second weekend in May as our wedding date. We were able to get a section of Central Park for the ceremony and the ballroom of one of New York’s fanciest hotels as the reception site. Darlene would be designing her own wedding gown and the gowns for the bridesmaids and the flower girl.

Both of our families were pleased with the turn of events. Our closest friends were especially happy that I was finally going to tie the knot. Darlene and I would become the last of the group to get married. I was able to locate all of our friends. Nigel and Missy Schultz had moved again, this time to New Rochelle.

Nigel was now teaching American history at West Point, while Missy was teaching fifth grade at an elementary school in White Plains; they were raising two sons, Ian and Michael, and a daughter, Nora. Nick and Lori Schultz were now in Manchester, New Hampshire, where Nick became a sales manager for a local television station and Lori was working as an accountant out of their home while raising their two sons, Nicholas and Lawrence, and their twin girls, Heather and Haley. Eddie and Rachel Dinwiddie were still working in New York; Eddie had just opened his own law firm at the first of the year. Rachel was now a senior partner in an accounting firm. Both of them had moved to a home near Bridgeport, Connecticut. They were raising three boys, Edward, Robert and Oliver, and two girls, Rebecca and Emily. Rachel was pregnant with their sixth child, which would not be due until the middle of June.

I gathered with my friends from my old hometown at a pizza place in Brooklyn approximately two weeks before Darlene and I were to tie the knot. Darlene was not with me that night; she was having the final fitting done for her gown at her design studio. I asked them if they had been back to our hometown in recent years. Eddie was the only one who had been back to our hometown.

“It’s become a virtual ghost town back home. After you and Roger pulled up stakes, many more businesses decided to go. The farm implement factory closed up six months after Theo-Roger left town. The work was consolidated at a former auto factory in Bloomington, Illinois. The bakery closed up three months after that; those jobs were moved to a new bakery in Rochester, Minnesota. The steel mill closed at the end of last year; those jobs were moved to Pittsburgh. The only plant that’s still open back home is an electronics plant that makes after-market car radios that employs eighty people. The biggest em-

ployer is now Mr. Fox's farm; his sons and grandsons are helping him out now, along with 200 workers," Eddie explained.

"The downtown area isn't as popular as it was when we were in high school. The men's fashion emporium closed eight months after you and Roger pulled out. The bridal salon closed four months after that. The children's fashion store, the furniture store, the record shop, the Chinese restaurant, two of the three bars and the new car dealer have gone out of business. Just last year, Sal's Pizza Parlor closed its doors after forty years. His sons own this pizza place," Nigel added.

"The only bar left in the downtown area is Puggsley's on Main Street; that's been in the area for three decades. Van Buren High School is still open, but our hometown is down to only one middle school and one elementary school. McCarthy Middle School closed three years ago; the seventh and eighth graders now attend Tyler Middle School on the near southwest side. McKinley Elementary School closed five years ago; their students were split between Carter and Hayes Elementary Schools. Last year, Hayes closed. Carter is now the only elementary school still open," added Missy.

"We expected our hometown to shun Darlene, given that she is transgender, but they're surprisingly supportive of her, and proud to call her one of the town's favorite daughters," Lori told us.

It was a sunny, warm day on our wedding day. We rented a gazebo for the ceremony. Darlene, her bridesmaids and flower girl were at her design studio, getting ready. I was at a friend's apartment, getting ready with the groomsmen and ushers. The groomsmen and I would be in gray tuxedos with red ties, while the ushers would be in gray tuxedos with

black ties. In addition to the best man, Roger, Nigel and Eddie would be the other two groomsmen. The ushers would be Nick and my older brother, Eric. Shortly after one o'clock, Nick and Eric were headed for the park to help seat the ninety guests who would witness the nuptials.

My father was sitting in the second row of seats, in back of Uncle Roger and Aunt Bridget, who would be standing in for my parents. Darlene's mother and stepfather were in the second row; her stepfather declined to give her away, given that he was preparing to undergo treatment for cancer. Her older brother, Ben, would give her away. Uncle Roger was already sitting in his seat at ten minutes before two, when Nick escorted Aunt Bridget down the aisle. She was wearing the same gown she wore when Roger and Margot got married. Margot was sitting next to my father in the second row. Five minutes later, Eric escorted Darlene's sister-in-law Patti down the aisle. She was in an antique white mother of the bride dress. Jason Asher, the man who joined Lance and Winnie in marriage, would be performing our ceremony. At three minutes of two, he directed us to the center, where we would await the bride and bridesmaids.

At approximately two o'clock, the flower girl, Brielle Gaye, Ben and Patti's five-year-old daughter, walked down the aisle, spreading white petals. Accompanying her down the aisle was the ring bearer, Colin Thomas, the third son of Eric and his wife, Cassie. Brielle was in a white flower girl's gown designed by her Aunt Darlene, while Colin was in a gray tuxedo with a red bow tie. When they faced Jason, Brielle took her place on the bride's side, while Colin took his place on the groom's side.

The three bridesmaids went down the aisle next; each of them dressed in identical red tea-length

bridesmaid's dresses. First down the aisle was her older sister, Bella. She would take Eddie's arm; they faced Jason and took their places inside the gazebo. After Bella, Amanda Wilson came down the aisle. She and Darlene have been friends since she first began living full-time as a woman; Amanda is a transgender woman herself. She was just as tall as Nigel. The final person down the aisle was Michelle Winger, the matron of honor. When they took their places inside the gazebo, I waited at the entrance for the moment I had anticipated all my life.

The disc jockey started the traditional processional song. Darlene walked down the aisle on the arm of her brother, Ben. He was wearing a similar tuxedo to mine. Darlene designed a beautiful gown for her wedding. It was a gown fit for a princess. The gown she designed was a white ball gown, with heart-shaped designs in lace adorning the skirt; the skirt of her gown was trimmed with lace. The bodice of her gown was adorned with lace; the short sleeves on her dress were also made of lace. Topping the ensemble was a rhinestone tiara; the veil and blusher were fingertip-length, trimmed with Chantilly lace. She even designed her bouquet, which featured red and yellow roses, along with pink carnations, lilacs and sunflowers. When they came to the entrance to the gazebo, Ben told me: "Ted, please take good care of my sister."

"I intend to," I assured him before he shook my hand. Darlene then took my arm; we walked inside the gazebo. We faced Jason as he told our guests: "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today, in the presence of the Almighty, to witness the joining of Darlene and Theodore in the most sacred bond of Holy Matrimony. For the past several months, they prepared for this day. Today, they will make their decision to commit the remainder of their lives to one another official."

No one showed just cause as to why we shouldn't be joined together. We exchanged wedding bands, and said the vows we wrote. The ceremony would last approximately forty minutes. Toward the end, he asked Darlene: "Darlene Catherine Gaye, will you have this man, Theodore Edward Thomas, to be your wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in times of illness and health, until death do you part?"

"I will," Darlene replied, looking into my eyes with a wide smile.

"Theodore Edward Thomas, will you have this woman, Darlene Catherine Gaye, to be your wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in times of illness and health, until death do you part?" Jason then asked me.

"I will," I replied, looking into Darlene's beautiful eyes, smiling from ear to ear.

"With the power vested in me by the State of New York, the County of Manhattan and the City of New York, I now pronounce you man and wife," Jason told us before I lifted the blusher from Darlene's face to give her a kiss.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Thomas," he announced before we walked up the aisle for the first time as husband and wife.

We had the reception at the ballroom of a nearby hotel. We dined on Chateaubriand with assorted vegetables and breads; our first dance was to "Quiet Nights." Amanda caught the bouquet Darlene tossed; Eric's fourteen-year-old son, also named Eric, caught the bride's garter.

It was around one-thirty the next morning. Darlene and I were in the Bridal Suite of the hotel we had the reception at; we had consummated our marriage an hour before. She was in a white baby doll nightie, while I was in a white tank top shirt and red boxers. "Sweetheart, it's going to take some time to sink in," she whispered as she was gently gliding her hand along my shirt.

"I'm glad I made your most romantic dream come true, baby. How do you feel that you're now Mrs. Thomas?" I asked her.

"I'm still going by my maiden name in my business," she replied.

"Thank you for making my dream a reality. Darlene, I love you, and will love you forever," I whispered.

"Ted, I love you, now and for all eternity," she cooed before we shared a kiss and turned the light out.

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