



Reluctant Press presents:

Little Black Dress

Philippa Peters



A 'NEW WOMAN' E-BOOK

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THE LITTLE BLACK DRESS

by **Philippa Peters**

“That’s what I want!” sobbed Cathy as I held her and we looked up the wide marble steps to where David Merchant was bringing his blonde girl friend out to join the party around his pool. “I want to live in a house like this! I want to be married to a man like, like David. I want to be her, in a little, black dress like that, coming down to look over the masses we invited to gawk at us, the rich and successful.”

It couldn’t happen, of course, because Cathy was married to me, Mike Brown, and like it or not, I had no daddy with millions of dollars in his fortune to leave me in his will when he died in a small plane crash just outside Pelham.

“Shush, darling,” I told her, as one or two of our former classmates turned to look at her. “You’re ruining your makeup.”

Cathy snatched the small towel I offered to her and buried her face in it. It wasn’t the first time that her displeasure and envy had gotten the best of her. I wish I had known about it, however, before I had married her. Maybe I wouldn’t have. No, that’s an idiotic idea. I would have married Cathy no matter what she said to me, no matter how she treated me.

We had been brought up in Rowley, literally across the tracks from Pelham proper. She still had folks alive in the ramshackle hamlet where I had grown up in my aunt’s and uncle’s house. We had gone across the tracks daily to grammar school and then I’d got an old beater from Uncle Jim that I’d worked on with Tom and Dean in auto class and got to run. I had no license and no registration. I used one of Uncle Jim’s plates off one of the cars he never ran and so I had wheels. All through high school, I ran Cathy to school. I was the most careful driver on the road.

When I did get my license, it was time for prom and Cathy was fuming that the boys she wanted to ask her to the dance hadn’t. She said it was because she was from the wrong side of the tracks, from Rowley. So, I got to take her to the prom. I got to kiss her and

something strange happened when we kissed. It was like magic. She said I kissed her more nicely than any other boy she'd ever known.

Cathy wanted out after graduation but, like me, she hadn't any money even to go to junior college. She ran away from her home, telling me how her daddy was beating on her and looking at her kind of funny. Of course, she only ran away as far as the beat-up apartment I'd taken on Parton Street, in Lower Pelham. It might have been in Pelham but it was just like the depressed area we'd lived in before, in Rowley.

Her daddy came looking for her and there was a terrible fight between them outside the apartment. Several other men came out of the buildings and we all set on Mr Dreesen and told him he shouldn't be beating on his daughter like that. He went off yelling that she was no daughter of his and she could live in sin with me if she liked.

Cathy did not like the way the people on the street looked at her after that. So, I snuck back to Uncle Jim's, 'liberated' my old car, and Cathy and I went up through Westrock and over the county line to Clinton. We stayed in a rooming house there for two weeks and spent all the money I had saved to go to college. Then we got married even though we were both only eighteen.

Back in Pelham, Cathy got a job waiting tables. When her daddy came after her again, she called the cops and showed them her ring and her marriage certificate. After he was stuck in jail for a night, her father never came round any more. We moved to a rooming house for a while and then a basement suite in Larrabee Street, a step up from Parton, but Cathy was getting very restless.

We had a plan. I would work and Cathy would go to school for a year, then I would work and she would go. I took on two jobs for the longest while to pay for her school bills and the better apartment we were living in. I even got to save a little to make my start this year at JC. I knew that Cathy was getting restless again but I had to work at nights as well as going to school in the days. Pumping gas was good because I could study between cars. The problem was that Cathy couldn't earn as much as me even though she worked full-time; she said she was sure all the other girls at college were getting way ahead of her.

We were struggling and the times we met in bed, which had been every night after we got married, slacked off. Saturday night became our regular time after we'd catch a movie or after going to a Western bar, which Cathy liked. Of course, it always ended up with her asking me if I had seen what her friend, Cindy, or Marsha, or Ashley was wearing. Or did I see the car Cindy's boy friend was driving?

I told her we'd have all those things one day. "When?" Cathy snarled at me once just before the invitation came. "In eight years' time, when we get through college? I'll be twenty-seven then!"

Cathy made it sound as if her life would be half over. "No," I told her. "You know what? This summer, I'm going to work for Don in the auto shop full time and I'm going to keep on going next year full-time. You can go to college in the day and I'm going to take my courses at night. It won't be a full load but you can be through in three years and I'll be able to go full-time then and catch up to you."

Cathy hadn't said that she would miss me as I wouldn't be around very much. But she cried and said that she didn't deserve anyone as sweet as me and we went to bed early even though it wasn't even Saturday.

David Merchant was holding a school reunion at his wonderful house in Upper Pelham and we were invited. Someone had even scrawled, "Please, please come," in red ink right across the inside of the invitation.

"It's a bit crass, isn't it?" I said to Cathy as she sat staring at the invitation. "His daddy only died three months ago and now he's throwing a big party."

"Three months is forever," retorted Cathy. "And what was the last party that we went to, Mike? Our life is *so* boring. And it's Linda Sweatham who wrote this on the invitation. She's David's girl friend, and we used to be locker partners all through school. You didn't know that, did you? I did have friends in the Upper Pelham set. Once."

"You *want* to go to this party?" I asked her in astonishment. I think most of the kids we went to high school with were gone from Pelham. There were a couple of girls we met in a night club, like Cindy or Ashley Miller, but even Ashley was supposed to be going away to State next term.

"We *are* going to this party," said Cathy determinedly while I gaped at her. "And I have to have a new dress. Can you do a few extra shifts for Don at the auto shop? I'm not going to spend more than a couple of hundred."

I gulped. What could I say? "Sure."

I knew it would mean more shifts at the gas bar actually as Donny had told me I had to get into an apprentice program if I wanted to work on his cars any more. He said something about liability and nothing about the fact that his cousin, Arthur, had just graduated high school and needed a job.

We took a taxi up to Knob Hill where the Merchants lived. I wouldn't have wanted Cathy to arrive there in her new red dress. There must have been four hundred people in and around the house when we arrived very late, Cathy being in such a dither about what she had to wear. She changed her makeup three times and, to me, didn't look any different each time.

I think that she needn't have bothered being so fancy because when we got there, half the partygoers were drunk. The swimming pools, the Merchants had two, were filled with people, cocktails in hand, screaming over the loud rock music being blared out over the whole Hill. There was dancing on the patio and in the living room of the huge house. Cathy clutched the invitation in her hands but we didn't see anyone collecting them. There wasn't any security at the gate, either, to turn away anyone who wasn't supposed to be there.

I got drinks by lining up and a harassed bartender poured me two Jack Daniels, then I had to search for nearly ten minutes to find Cathy. She was talking to some girl she knew who moved away when I joined them at the base of the marble steps that led up to the living room. From there, we could see the sweep of the stairs beyond.

That was when we saw David Merchant coming down the stairs, the huge crowd below raising up their glasses to him as he came down, his arms raised in a victory salute as

if he was President Richard Nixon. For some reason, the crowd parted and he walked right through as if he was royalty. He stopped in the doorway and we saw this blonde girl coming down the stairway behind him. She was in a black dress and, right away, Cathy recognized it as being a designer dress. She said what I thought was some Frenchwoman's name, Eve something, had designed it. I guess she said Yves St Laurent, but it actually wasn't one of his. I know because I have the dress now and it has the name Chanel inside it. Yes, just like the perfume.

"There's Linda Sweatham," Cathy screamed in my ear. It was the only way to be heard in the crush and the noise. Linda came right up to David and then did something I'll never forget because she was smiling so nicely. She slapped David right in the face. Not one of your little slaps but a full-bodied blow that knocked David's contact lenses out his eyes apparently as he went down, screaming about them.

Oh, the commotion and the noise and the mess then. People were grabbing her, grabbing him. They, in turn, were being grabbed by other people who were trying to prevent other people from walking over the area where the contact lenses might be.

Linda broke free of whoever was restraining her. The music died and even the conversations died away as she and David had a screaming match. He called her a gold-digger. He said everything she had on he had bought for her. Cathy and I had a front row view as Linda began to take off all her jewellery. Then she threw it all, necklace, earrings, bracelets, at David Merchant. Then she slipped the tiny straps of her dress over her arms, got some bemused guy to unzip her and she took off the dress and threw it at David.

True gentlemen would have put a jacket about her then and escorted Linda back into the house until she got over her rage at her straying boy friend. There weren't any gentleman at this party, including me. She threw her shoes at him, her black under slip, her stockings, her garter belt, her bra, then her panties. She even undid the fall of hair she was wearing and dumped that on him along with her purse, after smashing an expensive bottle of perfume. Cathy gasped and screeched, "Two hundred dollars an ounce!" when it smashed on the marble steps.

Did I mention that half of the yahoos present were yelling, "Off! Off!" in glee at the impromptu strip? I should also mention that Linda had a lovely body, slender where it should be and if she had undersized breasts compared to my Cathy, well, some men like them small, don't they?

Cathy lunged forward up the steps, pulling me after her. That was when I became a gentleman and took off my blazer and put it about a swearing, hysterical Linda Sweatham, collecting a couple of punches for my trouble. That girl should have thrown off her rings as well as Cathy and I, and a couple more people we didn't know, pushed her into the house, through the gawking mob in the living room. We took her up the stairs again, Linda livid and screaming all the way, seizing vases and plant holders and hurling them over the stairs and the balcony at David and the friends gathered about him below.

I lost my blazer then as the men who had come up the stairs were excluded from the bedroom the irate Linda was bundled into. I knew which one because I heard the crash of something against the door as I stood outside it.

“Wa-hoo!” exclaimed one of the guys I was with. I didn’t recognize him at all. “Time to get out of here, guys.” And so they all turned and left. I couldn’t go. I had to get my blazer back.

I was sitting on a chair in the carpeted hallway, my head down, wishing I had been able to bring my drink with me when a voice suddenly cut into my thoughts. “Who are you?” asked the cultured, baritone voice. “And what are you doing in my house?”

I lifted my head and jumped up. A dark-haired man stared down at me. I think of myself as being of medium height, Cathy is a little taller than me when she’s in high heels, but this guy was really tall, six three or four. I wouldn’t have liked to tangle with him. He looked livid, as if he could start tearing phone books in half at any moment.

I started to babble on about Cathy being with Linda and she had my blazer and I was waiting for my jacket. A slow smile came across the big man’s face. “You don’t know who I am, do you?” he asked, and I had to agree.

“I’m John Merchant III, Jack Merchant to my friends,” he said, “David’s elder brother, and the real and true owner of this property.” He took a cell phone from his pocket and called a number. “The naked girl is upstairs with her friends,” he said to someone on the other end of the phone. “Detain my brother. Get rid of everybody else. You,” he motioned to me and led me to another door down the passage. It led to a billiard room. “Enjoy yourself while I get things organized.”

I was on my second game of pool and deciding to leave the whole place when the door opened and Jack Merchant came in with my wife on his arm. I’ve rarely seen Cathy so lively and animated or so crushed and disappointed when she saw me playing solitary billiards.

“Not quite the surprise you had in mind?” asked Jack Merchant while Cathy’s disappointment was turning to anger as I could see.

“I thought,” Cathy began and then she stopped. She thought that Jack Merchant had been interested in her, I could tell. She had been quite willing to go with him as well, to wherever it was he wanted to take her.

There was a tap on the door behind them and a security man handed a transparent bag to Jack Merchant. “I think we got them all, sir,” he said, “including some rings Miss Sweat-ham says belong to young Mr. Merchant.”

“Thanks, Vic,” said Jack Merchant, taking the bag with the dress and all the clothes that Linda had been wearing. Even her purse and its contents seemed to be in the bag as well. I was reminded of a scene I had seen at Heathrow Airport in London on CNN after a terrorist scare. The security man nodded and withdrew after glancing at Cathy and me. “Now what do I do with these?” murmured Jack, almost to himself.

“My blazer?” I asked. “I’ll just get it, then we can leave as well.”

We went over to the bedroom where Linda had been and the blazer wasn’t there. Jack Merchant called for a search for it, so we sat in the bedroom and answered Jack’s searching questions about our wretched, little lives.

“Not at all?” asked Jack Merchant in surprise when someone called him again. “Well, Michael, if I may call you that, it seems that you are out one jacket. Here,” he grinned, “take this little, black dress and all the accessories in recompense.”

With that, he dumped the bag onto me. I stood up to go. I was sick at the thought of losing my blazer jacket. It was going to take me a lot of late-night shifts to get enough money to replace it. I hoped the dress would fit Cathy, but she wasn't quite as tall as Linda, I thought.

Then I noted that Cathy wasn't coming with me. She had turned to Jack Merchant and was whispering something to him. Jack Merchant looked decidedly amused by whatever she had said. “Oops, Michael,” he said, his dark eyes glinting as he looked down at my wife. “It seems that your wife was hoping I was going to give her a roll in the hay, as they say.”

Cathy was rigid. “You are no gentleman,” she said stiffly, turning to me and looking at me in great annoyance. I got the distinct impression that I had ruined some great plan of hers.

“Well, you are a married lady,” said Jack Merchant in amusement. “What say you, Michael, my man?” There was a sneer in his voice as he stood up and looked down at me. “How much do I have to pay you for one night with your wife?”

I gasped at the effrontery of what he had said. Cathy looked at him aghast.

“You must have seen the movie, *Indecent Proposal*,” Jack said, his dark eyes glinting again. “I wouldn't pay a million for your wife, Michael, but I would pay a hundred thousand.”

“A hundred thousand dollars?” gasped Cathy, her eyes going really wide.

“No thank you,” I said unsteadily. “Cathy, let's go.”

“You don't have the money,” said Cathy angrily.

Jack smiled and called on his cell again. “Vic, go into my study. You know where my cash is stashed. Bring a hundred thousand dollars up to the green bedroom.” Only then did I notice that the walls of the room were painted a very pale green. The white canopy bed had taken most of my attention thus far.

Cathy stared open-mouthed as Vic arrived with a small briefcase, opened it and counted out the money in front of her.

“Thanks, Vic,” said Jack Merchant and his puzzled aide left with a searching glance at us. “There you are, Michael.”

“Not me,” I told him. “I'm not taking your money, not for something as indecent as this.”

“I'll take it,” said Cathy suddenly, avariciously.

Jack Merchant looked at her intently. “Oh no, Cathy,” he said slowly. “The money is for Mike here who would be the injured party. No?”

Cathy looked at me wildly. “Mike, take the frigging money!” she screamed at me.

“And have you make love to another man?” I asked, aghast at what she was saying.

"It wouldn't be the first time," she snapped and her hand flew to her mouth.

"So I withdraw the offer," said Jack Merchant softly, looking at me. He must have seen the disillusionment on my face with my wife. "Now, Cathy, to earn two hundred thousand dollars, what must your husband do for you?" His eyes fell on the transparent bag I was holding and that slow smile of his covered his face, his dark grey eyes glinting as he looked down at me.

"Yes, the little black dress," he said. "The cause of all the trouble between my brother and his girl friend. I would like to see it modelled. In fact, I would like to dance with the little, black dress and kiss the scented wearer, if I so choose, of this lovely dress."

"I'll do that," said Cathy eagerly, reaching for the dress.

"Not you," said Jack Merchant. "Your husband. Two hundred grand for him to wear the dress and dance with David and me, and kiss one or both of us, right here, on the lips."

"Are you perverted?" I asked him while Cathy stared, open-mouthed again at Jack Merchant.

Jack laughed. "Not me," he said. "Well, what are you prepared to do for money, Michael my man? Look at your wife. She'll help you. I don't want hairy legs and a beard to kiss, thank you. No, your wife said that you kiss like a girl, and, Michelle, ma belle, now is the time that you prove it, n'est-ce pas? Two hundred grand, a hundred thousand each. It may not be *Indecent Proposal* but it is enough to get you both through a good college and, Michelle, nobody gets screwed.

"Keep that hundred grand but don't try to leave with it, Cathy. I'm going to go and get another hundred grand while you talk it over. I'm sure, Cathy, that you can persuade Michelle to join us for our nightcap now that the house has been put back to rights. Either that or I take the two hundred thousand and put it back in my safe."

There was a swagger in his walk and a glint in his eyes as he looked at me and stalked off.

Cathy looked at me uncertainly. "Mikey," she began, breathing very quickly as if she was under great stress.

"I'm not doing anything as idiotic as putting on that woman's dress," I told her.

Cathy began to cry. I hate it when she cries. "Two hundred thousand dollars, Mike," she said between great, heaving sobs. "When will we ever have the chance at that kind of money again? And for what? A few minutes of embarrassment. That's all. Just for doing what so many men do on Halloween."

"Why should I do it?" I asked her angrily. "After what you said about me to Jack Merchant?"

Tears began to run down my wife's pretty face. "Because you love me, Mikey," she said in a low, tense voice and the tears began to flow. She suddenly came across the bedroom to where I was standing by the door and threw her arms about my neck.

I kissed her wet face but all kinds of conflicting emotions were running through me. She would have gone with Jack Merchant. My wife would have left me and gone off with another man. I kissed and hugged her, the red dress not preventing me from feeling what

a wonderfully soft, little body she had. If we had been at home in our apartment, I would have taken her to bed and made love to her.

But this was Jack Merchant's house and he had made us an indecent proposal.

"You would have gone to bed with him," I said thickly as Cathy kissed my face and caressed me with her body.

She became very still. "Yes," she said very unsteadily. "And now you hate me for even thinking that, don't you? And no, there hasn't been anyone else, Mike, really. I just said that to hurt you."

"Why, Cathy, why?" I asked her but I already knew the answer.

"I am *so* sick and tired of being poor," Cathy raged at me. "Look at me, Michael James Brown, look at me." She stepped back from me and I looked in surprise at my wife. "I am pretty, you know, and Jack Merchant *did* want me. I know it. I could marry a rich man, Mike, if I divorced you. I could have all the things I want now. I wouldn't have to work and scrimp and save.

"And look at all this money, Mike. I could have it and you could have just as much. We could get a better apartment. We could go out at night some of the time. We could dance all the time at weekends and have friends over. We could give parties. We could start to live. You could use your share to get through school and get a good job. We could do it all, Mike, and I would love you for it. I really would. If you loved me so much that you got this money for me."

I didn't have a chance to argue as Jack Merchant came back into the room, carrying what looked like a small bag that you might carry shoes in. It had a drawstring at the top. He grinned at us, opened the top, and poured the money onto the bed. Another hundred thousand dollars.

"Well?" he asked us, frozen together as a pair, Cathy's arm resting lightly on my shoulder. "What's it going to be? Do you accept my indecent proposal?" His lip curled then and his eyes crinkled in amusement that sent chills up and down my spine.

"Yes," said Cathy firmly, taking my hand and squeezing it. "My husband loves me and he will accept your indecent proposal for two hundred thousand dollars."

Jack Merchant made my stomach crawl as he threw back his head and laughed out loud. "This I have to see," he said. He pointed to a door off to the side of the bed. "That's the bathroom and that," he pointed at a door beside the entrance, "is a walk-in closet where Linda has several interesting hair pieces as Cathy and I saw earlier tonight. If you don't like that dress, there are a lot more in there, and shoes galore if those don't fit. I'm sure you'll find something you can stretch if you look."

I felt my temperature rising. "I said I would wear the dress," I began, realizing then that I had in fact said no such thing. "I do that and that's it."

"Oh, Michelle, my girl," said Jack Merchant with that twisted grin on his face. "You can't expect to be earning two hundred thousand dollars for a five minute flip of your clothes and you looking like a man in a dress. I won't kiss anything that looks like a man in a dress and my brother certainly won't. No, Cathy can help you. You make him up to be

the prettiest woman you can, Cathy, then you call me on that phone." He pointed to one beside the bed.

"Lift it and press 'Master'," Jack said with a smile, "when you are ready and I will tell you where to come to." He stopped smiling as he looked intently at me. Perhaps he saw the strain on my face. "And I'm not going to ambush you. I'll clear out my aides and so it will just be David and me and you two girls there for a quiet party. You might even enjoy it, ma belle Michelle."

Jack Merchant left the money. It didn't seem to mean anything to him. He just smiled at me and said he was looking forward to seeing me in my little black dress and he left us to it.

Cathy piled all the money eagerly into the drawstring sack as I regarded her with trepidation. I was beginning to feel that I didn't know my wife at all. She looked up at me after she had stuffed the bag with her purse and pushed it out of sight behind the entrance door.

"What are you waiting for?" Cathy asked me. "There's the bathroom. Jack said that we have to do your legs."

"I'm not shaving my legs," I said fearfully, feeling silly to be discussing such a thing seriously with my wife.

"He'll notice," Cathy said obstinately. "He made a point of mentioning it, so you must if you want two hundred thousand dollars." She said each of the last four words very slowly and she beamed at me in delight as she said them. She took me by the hand then and almost skipped with me into the bathroom where I felt a heavy weight in the pit of my stomach. Reluctantly, I took off my socks and shoes as she ran water into a large golden bath.

Cathy looked at me slowly as I took off my shirt and wondered if I could possibly go through with this at all. She opened a container of salts, or that's what it looked like, and poured them into the steaming bath. "Hurry up," she said. "Get in and soak, then we'll get rid of all the hairs on your legs." She smiled at me. "You wait. Later on tonight, you're going to feel great when all that's between our bare skins is my silky nightie."

"Not for long," I said huskily as I took off my pants and shirt and felt like such an idiot putting my underpants on the top of my pile of clothes before I stepped up over the side of the bath and sat down in the heavily scented water. In the end, Cathy did not shave my legs at all. She found several chemical compounds in the bathroom closet and she had me stand while she coated me in them, all over my back, my front, including my abdomen, under my arms, then all over my arms as well as my legs.

I had shaved earlier that night before we came out but Cathy put something on me that burned like crazy and had me running like a madman for the sink to wash it off.

"That's because you shaved with a blade," said Cathy. "You mustn't do that on your face or that's what will happen. I used a strong depilatory and that should take care of you for a couple of days. Once we cover you up with makeup, Jack and David are not going to see any kind of beard on you at all. Trust me. Now get back in the bath and wash off all that nasty hair that's crinkling up on you."

I couldn't believe it. A coarse flannel took off all the hair on my legs, on my arms, even on my fingers and toes and from under my arms. I didn't even know that I had hair on my back but Cathy made sure that that was gone away as well. Then she emptied the water and refilled the bath, putting in more of the bath salts.

"Soak," she laughed at me. "It's what I do. It lets the fragrances seep into your skin. But these are far too expensive for me to have ever used. So enjoy them, Michelle, while I arrange the clothes you'll have to wear."

"Don't call me that," I said, a shiver running through me as I looked down in consternation to see that my abdomen was completely bare of hair. I looked down there like I had when I was a young kid of thirteen or so.

"What female name would you like then?" asked Cathy, going in and out of the bathroom, finding things in drawers and looking into every cupboard and drawer. "When you put on the dress and the stockings and a wig, you will look something like a girl and it will be a dead giveaway to David if we call you Michael. Oh, there are some girls with that name now, aren't there? You *could* be a girl named Michael, I guess."

Cathy went out again. I heard her say, "Ah, ha," and she came in smiling with what looked to me like Speedo bathing shorts, or the bottom part of a bikini.

"What's that for?" I asked her suspiciously.

"You need it," she said simply. "I've never seen you so big. This is turning you on, isn't it, all this feminizing and the thought of it?"

"No!" I protested, sitting up in the bath and taking the soft towel she tossed at me. The towel had arms and quickly became a long robe that she pressed against me and dried me with. She giggled as she dried me between my legs, the sensations strange on my body as I had no hair that I could see.

"Ooo, I love it when I'm all clean of hair like that," Cathy said.

"I'm shivering," I said. "I feel *so* weird."

"That's what I love about being so clean," said Cathy with a smile. "What you're calling weird is what I would call feeling like a woman, I'll bet. Well, hold on to that feeling, my beautiful Michelle, because you are going to have a whole lot more before this night is over."

I suppose that I had to do it. I had never seen Cathy so happy. Not since we got married, anyway. She was just like she had been back then as she went here and there, getting out all sorts of things she said that a girl needed. I put on the bottom part of a black bikini and, boy, did it hurt, the way it squashed me.

"Oh, oh," I gasped. "I can't do this, Cathy. I really can't." I pulled the bikini down and Cathy looked at me in dismay.

"Lay on the bed," she said, "and let me see."

I did it to humor her. We were used to seeing each other pretty naked most of the time and I liked what I saw when I looked at her. I thought I was a little too weedy myself and now, without hair, I must have looked like a real wiener.

Cathy put her hand on my genitals and started to fool around with them. "Hey," I said, smiling. "Tit for tat."

Cathy smiled. "You leave my breasts out of this," she said which I thought was a pretty smart answer. We were going to get out of this predicament and get back to being nice to each other for a while, I figured. I figured wrongly. Cathy poked something between my legs and suddenly she was manipulating my testicles into my body.

"Hey," I gargled as she pushed my male member down between my legs and then drew the bikini, that's the way I thought of it then, over my legs and over my genitals. "Ah," I gasped as she put her hand in front of me, pressing on the material and I was flat! I had no bulge between my legs. Somehow, she had pressed my genitals back inside my body.

"We girls talk," Cathy said with a smile. "Ashley was telling me about this girl friend she had. She went swimming with her and everything and it turned out she was a guy. We asked her why she couldn't tell and she said that this is what those guys do, the ones who want to be girls like us. And what she said is true. You do have cavities there to push it all back into you. Now you won't be giving it all away to David the first time you meet him."

"David?" I croaked, feeling still some discomfort as I stood up and tried to walk with my privates so constrained. It felt very odd.

"Weren't you listening to Jack?" asked Cathy in exasperation. "We have to go to a little, private party with the brothers and it's David that you have to fool for just a little while."

"I'll never fool anyone," I gasped as she took the panties that Linda had thrown into the crowd and gave them to me. She expected me to put on women's panties.

"Perhaps not," said Cathy. "But we won't know unless you try, will we? And it's going to be two hundred thousand dollars, Mikey, I mean Michelle, if you can do it for just one dance with David."

I had to dance, as a girl, with David. Oh, yes, that was what Jack said and I had to kiss him, or his brother. Oh, this was going to be the most awful, strange night of my life, I knew it, as I put on the panties Cathy had been pressing on me. They were black and lacy and barely came to the top of my hips.

"That's what we sexy girls wear these days," said Cathy with a grin as I complained. She attached the garter belt about me as I stood there. It felt weird again as the suspenders bounced against my legs. I had to sit on a chair in the bedroom next to the mirror to put on the stockings that Linda had worn. They were light-colored, almost the same color as my pasty legs. But with stockings on, my legs became shiny and a little more rounded, it seemed. Oh, the feelings of weirdness I got as Cathy attached them to the garter belt were more intense than anything I had ever felt up to then.

I looked at my legs and the black garter belt and panties on me. "Oh," I said as I stood up, feeling strange to be encased so tightly all up my legs. It was as if I was being stroked as I moved. Cathy looked at me critically. She had the bra in her hands.

"You are so flat-chested," she told me critically as if it was some fault of mine. "You're flat in here as well," she added, slapping my tush. "I'm going to stuff the bra and panties to give you a little shape."

"I don't need to be shaped like a girl," I told her.

"You do if David is to be fooled for even a moment," Cathy said. I couldn't see the point but she began to use extra panties from a drawer in the dressing table that she had explored before. She put the bra that I had seen holding Linda's gorgeous, full breasts and padded them as well with stockings and panties as she fitted the brassiere tightly about my chest. I looked down at myself in a black bra, the straps cutting into my shoulders. I know I had to do it to please Cathy, but this was too weird, I wanted to tell her.

"Now with this chemise," said Cathy, putting the black, lacy slip over my head and pulling it down on me. It was tight slipping over the padded chest I now had but then it settled airily about my thighs.

"Oh, oh," I complained as the light, silky slip touched my bare thighs, then my stockings. It felt so light, so strange to have such a caress in such a place. I turned to the mirror and it was amazing. From the shoulders down, with the little straps joining with the straps of the bra and the slip following the contours of the padding Cathy had given me, I might have been looking at a girl's body.

"Doesn't that feel nice?" asked Cathy, smiling and teasing me. She showed me how to sit down then while the garter belt pulled on me and the slip caressed me. "You're enjoying this now, aren't you?" I shook my head. "Now, if only I can do as good a job in makeup as Linda does, you should be all right."

So, I sat there, a towel over the mirror, while Cathy did nothing else but put makeup on me. That included false eyelashes, taken from the contents of the purse Linda had tried to dump on David, and false fingernails, acrylic and very hard.

I protested that I didn't need such refinements but Cathy disagreed. "Your hands are a disgrace," she said. "But you have to work hard at too many jobs, don't you?" The gas station wasn't that hard and the kitchens at Boyanno's didn't mean greasy work. Not the kind I would have to do repeatedly if Donny gave me the chance to work in his auto repair shop. Wow, was that ever a long way from here, I thought, as I sat, waiting for the nails to adhere, while my wife sprayed me with cologne, then powdered my face. She stuck out her tongue so cutely as she painted my lips, shaping them and putting lipstick on that I had to spread all over as I shivered. I didn't see why she had to tweezer my eyebrows but she said that she was only doing a few strays, as she put it. Then, she pressed this pencil into my brows and I knew that she was shaping them into an arc.

"You're overdoing this," I told her as she began to adjust the earrings Linda had worn with some sort of attachment to make them clip-ons. Wow, did they sting my ears as she attached them. Then I nearly jumped a foot as she put the cold, silver necklace on me about my neck and bare chest.

"Now, the piece de resistance," said Cathy in her best high school French. "Let's see how it all fits together."

I had to bend forward then as she brought over this dark hairpiece. It wasn't black like some of the girls had their hair. It was mid-brown, a natural shade, Cathy called it. She put it most carefully on my head and I could feel masses of hair draping across my face.

I lifted my head and Cathy touched parts of the wig with her comb. Then she stopped and stared at me. Her lower lip was quivering and she looked totally stunned. Her eyes were darting here and there about me but she seemed to have lost the power of speech temporarily.

"What's the matter?" I asked anxiously, trying to sit up straight as I felt the hair swishing about my neck, the earrings touching me and making me shiver as well.

"I think we did it," Cathy breathed at me. "I think we did. I think we've won the money."

She reached over and took the towel from the mirror. I turned to look; at first all I saw was Cathy's stunned face as she stared into the mirror at this other girl sitting at the dressing table. I was going to turn and look over my other shoulder to see who this girl was and how she had snuck up on us so easily in the bedroom. But as she moved, I saw her earrings bobble as mine did against my neck and I realized that the pretty girl I was looking at was *me*.

"Ah!" I screamed, lifting my hands. My pretty nails were exposed in front of my face, the color almost matching the color of my lipstick. When had my lips ever looked like that, so shaped and womanly inviting, so beautifully colored?

"What have you done to me?" I gasped at Cathy.

"I'm a gene-genius," said Cathy nervously. "I've made my husband look like he should be my wife."

I gasped again and suddenly she began to smile. "My girlfriend, at least," she said.

"I'm *not* a girl," I said, standing up. That was a mistake because the slip began to float most delicately about me, raising feelings in me I didn't want to think about nor endure any longer.

"The dress," said Cathy, taking my hands and smiling at me. "You are going to look so gorgeous in the dress."

I didn't *want* to look gorgeous in a dress. "I want to get out of here," I told Cathy, my insides shaking as I kept looking at the girl. She did everything that I did, even saying that to Cathy as I did.

"After we've come this far," Cathy said with a smile, "you don't want to try on the dress? Isn't that the whole point and purpose of this, where Jack Merchant got his idea for making us earn the two hundred thousand dollars?"

Cathy's voice changed and her eyes lit up when she said those words. She looked just as perky and excited a young teenager as the girl I had married sixteen months before. She was even dancing in front of me as she held on to my hands in her excitement and anticipation of great riches coming our way.

How could I not try on the dress? I did it, though with reservations and great reluctance, as I told Cathy. I did it just for her, my wife.

It was a lovely dress. It made me seem to have a girlish figure that I didn't possess. It concealed my bra and underslip straps with little shoulders that also disguised the top of my thin arms and suggested that I was rounder and more feminine than I was. Cathy

sprayed me again with perfume from Linda's purse which she now gave me to hold. She told me it was Michelle's now and that completed the humiliation that the dress had brought to me.

"Sit like this," said Cathy, showing me how to sweep my skirts under me to sit down and so I did. I shivered as I felt the skirts all about me, touching me, touching my stockings. Then there was my hair. Oh, I suppose that it wasn't so long, but, to me, right then, it seemed like I had been enfolded in hair. I had bangs across my forehead and hair about my ears. I never have hair on my ears and I hadn't had any kind of fringe since I was a kid.

"You should let your hair grow," said Cathy seriously as she came back to me with several pairs of women's shoes, all with high heels.

It was the lowest pair, just two inches or a little higher that fitted me. They seemed to have been worked in. When I stood, I didn't feel as if I would topple over as I had in the brand new or almost brand new four- and five-inch heels.

"Who could ever wear heels like those?" I asked as I stood in the lower heels and agreed with Cathy that I could walk in them. I didn't want to as walking meant skirts swirling about me.

"Oh, Michelle darling," said Cathy coyly, "you will be wearing heels that high when your boyfriend tells you how much he likes your legs in them. You wait and see." Then she laughed as she rifled through a drawer and found gold bangles that she put on my arm, then some rings she put on my fingers even as I protested. I never wore rings or jewellery of any kind.

"Raise your voice," Cathy said with a giggle, putting her arms about me and beginning to dance. She directed me through a few steps as she often did when we were dancing. She was much more proficient in it than me. "When you dance with David and Jack, let them lead you. I doubt that they'll want to do anything more than clinch with us and sway and you should be able to do that easily. But whisper, yes, that's it. You'll have to whisper and not talk. I'll say that you lost your voice in all the noise of the party earlier. I'll bet David buys it. He won't be looking for conversation with you anyway. If he does, just indicate to me, and I'll answer him for you."

"No," I said, looking at the slender, dark girl in the mirror with the fair-haired Cathy, a few of her golden highlights flashing as she bent down and picked up the phone.

I tried to tell her that I couldn't do it, for any amount of money, but then she was talking to Jack Merchant.

"Yes," Cathy said. "Michelle is ready." She looked at the watch on her arm. "Well, I'm sorry," she went on. "These things take time but I'm sure you'll be pleased with the result." She waited and then she said in a very condescending tone. "I think that you will be getting your money's worth. Don't you worry about that."

Cathy hung up the phone and looked at me. "Well," she said and now she sounded nervous. "Let's go and earn our two hundred thousand dollars, shall we?"

Cathy then went over to the entrance door and picked up the bag with the money in it. She opened it and put out her hand to me. I stood rooted, looking at her, wondering what I was doing and how I could be doing such a silly, idiotic thing as dressing up like the

beautiful girl who had been brave enough to rip off all these clothes and throw them at David Merchant.

“Please,” said Cathy, her eyes bright and her mouth quivering. “Please, Mikey.” She clutched the bag of money. “Please do this one thing for me. Please.”

So I walked forward and Cathy took my hand. We were both shaking as we went down the empty hallway and she instructed me on how to walk like a girl. We stopped at the top of the stairs and she showed me how to bend my knees and go down a few steps with my heels turned to the side. Then she came back and took my hand in hers, smiling nervously as my nails dug into her soft palm. We rustled as we walked and I could feel, and hear, the rasp of my stockings.

I could feel the air circulating about my stockings as the skirt of the dress swished about me. I shivered but that only made my hair and earrings move. Cathy steered me through the living room where there had been the big scene and dancing towards a passageway I hadn't noticed. Our heels clicked on a marble floor just as a door opened ahead of us and Jack Merchant stepped out.

Jack stood, tall and dark and unsmiling. He didn't look at Cathy at all who was at her prettiest, I felt. He was looking at *me*. He looked me over from wig to high-heeled women's shoes, the little purse in my hand.

“David,” he said to someone in the room behind him. “Here are two of the girls who stayed behind to help clear up the mess with Linda. Michelle is wearing Linda's dress because I told her to. Her own got torn and lost in the hullabaloo that was going on. Come on in, girls, and meet my brother, the cause of all the scandal that erupted here tonight.”

I had stopped in fright when he came out of the study or whatever the place was where he was interviewing his brother. Cathy gave a little tug on my arm but I couldn't move. I stood there and looked at the tall, manly figure looking down at me. If he had smirked at me then, I know I would have turned and run away as fast as my high heels and tight skirt would have allowed me to do.

Jack Merchant came forward then and put his hand out to me. It was so large, so wide and so masculine. Cathy put my hand in his and took hers away. He smiled as he saw my nails, my red fingernails and the girl's rings that I was wearing. He lifted my hand then and kissed it, bending over me.

“Well done, Michelle,” Jack Merchant whispered to me. “It is indeed well worth the wait and the money to see you like this. I only hope that you are prepared to carry out the other requirements for earning the money.”

“Oh, she will,” said Cathy quickly and I flushed and looked to her. Cathy didn't even seem to have noticed that she referred to me as a woman.

Cathy went forward then, still clutching the bag of money to her and I stumbled as Jack Merchant jerked on my hand and led me into the living room.

David Merchant jumped to his feet, putting down his drink on a glass-topped coffee table as Cathy led us in.

“Cathy,” said Jack Merchant, indicating my wife, who went forward, smiling and bouncy. “And this delectable work of art is Michelle.”

"I know you," said David Merchant unsteadily as Cathy hugged him and gave him a kiss on his cheek. He stepped past her then and headed to me. I almost panicked as I realized that he expected me to greet him in exactly the same way Cathy had.

"I don't know you," said David, looking down at me. He was almost as tall as his brother. He put his arms about my still, wooden figure and hugged me, kissing me on the cheek and savoring my perfume. "But I sure would like to get to know you," David said, keeping his arm about me as he looked down at me. I felt embarrassed and ashamed of myself for standing there, pretending I was a girl like Cathy.

"Now, David," said Jack, freeing me from his younger brother's grip. "This is just what I was talking to you about. You don't even know this beautiful young lady and look at how you are behaving to her. You didn't even invite Michelle to your party here tonight. I was the one who found her and invited her to stay for a little party with us, with her friend, after I tried to explain a few things to you."

David looked quite disconsolate as he stepped back to the reddish, leather-backed sofa on which he had been sitting. Cathy was already sitting at one end, exaggerating how she folded her skirts in under her, to remind me, I'm sure, how I was to sit. She crossed her legs provocatively and I noticed the amusement on Jack Merchant's face as he took in her performance.

"Oh, you've explained things all right," said David Merchant gloomily. "I've lost one father and gained another."

"Those are the terms of the will," said Jack icily, indicating to me to sit at the end of another sofa, clearly where he had been sitting.

I was trembling as I sat, pressing my skirt and slip beneath me, then crossing my legs as Cathy had told me. I wanted more than ever to get up and run



hysterically out of the room. I should throw off all the things just as Linda had, starting with my wig.

"You do a lot more for that dress, Michelle, than Linda did," said David Merchant, raising his glass in a toast to me. I quivered inside and waited any moment for him to recall that he knew me as well. We had once been in a History class together. He'd been miffed to be paired with me on an assignment and had soon worked it so he was Melinda Warner's partner and I got lumbered with Garry 'The Man' Hunter, who dropped out just before we had to present. It was the lowest mark I ever got in History and I always blamed it on David Merchant. The only saving grace was that he and Melinda got worse overall marks than me.

Jack brought glasses of white wine to both Cathy and me. "A drink first," Jack said, his face creasing in a smile. He actually looked quite pleasant then. I shivered inside, however, as he turned his attention back to me. "I know I promised you girls a dance before you leave but let's have a warm-up drink first. Then, we'll try to persuade my brother to join us in a dance."

"Sure," said David Merchant, giving both Cathy and me a big smile. Frightened, I took a sip of my wine. Then I saw the end of the glass and the lipstick mark I had left on it. I, Mike Brown, had left a lipstick stain on a glass. I shivered and my earrings wobbled against my neck.

"You're Linda's friend from Rowley," said David, smiling at Cathy. "Aren't you married or something?" He reached over to her hand and with surprise I saw that Cathy wasn't wearing the wedding band that I had bought her nor the belated 'engagement' ring I had worked extra shifts last Christmas to buy for her.

"Not tonight," said Cathy with a light laugh, looking at the boy we'd gone to High School with. "I'm not married or anything right at this moment."

I suppose Cathy had to say that. I expected that she would have had to pretend that she and I were girlfriends. I felt anger rising inside me, however, as she denied our marriage.

"Michelle," said Jack smoothly. "I know that you've only just appeared in this neighborhood. So you won't have had my brother pawing all over you yet."

"Well, I know she didn't go to Pelham High," interrupted David with a grin. "I know every girl over the last ten years who's been through that place and I never would have missed anyone as cute as you, Michelle."

I couldn't understand it. There I was, a boy in a dress, and there was David, one of the big men on campus when we went to school, sitting beside Cathy, looking so gorgeous in her new red dress, and David was paying attention to *me*. And I hadn't even said a word since we entered the room.

I glanced at Cathy and I think the same thought must have occurred to her as well. She held her wine glass in two hands and so I followed suit. She looked a little nettled by the way the evening, such as it was, was progressing. "So, Jack," she said sweetly. "Where shall we be dancing? In here?"

A fireplace dominated the setting in the cozy room, surely a place where the Merchants came as a family to relax.

"Let's go into the living room, since my brother had it set up as a dance hall," said Jack, standing. He put his hand down then and I had to take it. He pulled me to my feet. I wobbled on my heels and instantly Jack's hand and arm were about me to steady me. I don't know which racked my nerves more, the feel of my dress moving about me or the touch of Jack's arm about my waist.

"Come with me, Michelle," said Jack, "and help me to select some music for dancing. I'm so out of touch with modern music that I'll be putting on hip-hop or rap rather than something soft and light." He turned to David and an amused Cathy, her eyes glinting as she looked at me, trying, I thought, to encourage me to go on with the charade. "That's what you guys want as well, isn't it? Something we can all slow dance to?"

"At three-thirty in the morning?" asked David Merchant. "Absolutely, man."

I saw Jack's jaw muscle twitch. He kept his arm about me as I clutched my drink, not wanting to spill it. And so I was escorted back down the hallway and into the living room where Jack stopped to turn up the lights just a little. Then he turned on some soft, romantic music.

"May I have this dance, my beautiful Michelle?" Jack asked me, taking my glass of wine, smiling at the lipstick on the glass, and putting it on the mantelpiece over the fireplace.

"What do you think you are doing?" I hissed at him as he put his arm more tightly about my waist and picked up my outer hand in his, dancing me across a wooden, dancing floor that had been overlaid in the room, for David's party, I presumed.

"I am dancing with the loveliest girl in the room tonight," mocked Jack Merchant. "See." He indicated the glass windows which were black to the night, reflecting like mirrors the image of a dark-haired girl, earrings dangling, being held tightly by her tall and very manly dance partner. As I shuddered inside, she seemed to be clinging to him in the slow, sensuous waltz, her skirts floating about her.

I was about to scream at him and break free when the mirrored windows showed another couple joining us. I wanted to scream some more as I saw the look that David Merchant was giving my wife as he whirled her about the floor. What was worse was the delighted look on Cathy's face as she smiled up into the younger Merchant brother's face.

I wanted that look. I wanted it reserved only for me, Cathy Brown's husband. Jack looked down at me and twirled me as well. I didn't know what I was doing but I let his hands direct me and I didn't fall over.

"Oh, you dance very well," said Jack, making me do many more steps than I wanted to do, than he and Cathy had said I would have to do. "Did I get it wrong? Have you been playing girlie with your wife before tonight? Is this what you do on weekends, get all prettied up and go out and find a guy to thrill you as a girl?"

I shuddered and I think Jack held me tighter. The touch of the dress about my legs made me feel so weird, so stupid, so ashamed and so disgusted with myself for the little pleasures I seemed to be feeling as I looked at the pretty girl and realized that she was *me*.

But I couldn't let such perverted thoughts settle in my mind. I couldn't. "This is the very first and the very last time," I whispered to him. "This is absolutely no thrill for me."

Jack Merchant's eyebrows went up. "Let's change that then, shall we? Hey, David," he called to the other two, way across the room for us. "Time to change partners, brother. Michelle really wants to try her luck with you."

I think David was about to disagree. He and Cathy had found something between them or so it seemed. But she was pushing David towards me. "Now here's the girl for you, David," she beamed while I felt more and more chills and shivers running through me as I tried to make myself appear female to this one man, one I hadn't liked in the past and didn't now.

"She's gone hoarse, shouting at your scandal of a party," Cathy said while David hung his head sheepishly. "So she can't do more than whisper in your ear. Here she is, David, a captive audience for you."

David grinned. If he had any remorse for what happened at his party, he didn't display any. I quivered as Jack propelled me into David's arms, then he and Cathy swept away from us.

"Don't expect that from me," said David, putting his arms about me and crushing my arms and my breast padding into him. "I can barely walk about on a slippery dance floor like this. I'm much better at smooching." And with that, he sent palpitations through me as he kissed my forehead. Again I could sense him inhaling my scent, my female fragrance.

I quivered and shuddered in his arms, my dress swirling. Each part of my feminine body was chilling and protesting at being treated as if it was female for this tall man whose hands kept slipping down onto my padded rear.

The music thankfully stopped and I thought I had survived. "Thank you, Michelle," said David, looking down at me with a strange smile in his eyes that started the panic rising in me. "I know that you are Jack's girl tonight and not mine. Cathy made that very clear. But still, let's stir up the old codger a little, shall we?"

I couldn't believe what happened next. I thought I was stepping away from David Merchant but he swung me to him and suddenly he was kissing me. A man had his lips on mine and he was kissing me as I tried to shrink back and away. He was kissing me and I tried to move my head but his strong hand prevented me and swept hair about my face. My hair is going to come off, I thought in a panic. Then David let go as his hands slipped down along my body and he fell over onto the dance floor, taking me with him.

David was laughing, Cathy was even smiling, and Jack was sardonic as he helped me up. My dress had flown up and revealed my garter belt and panties to anyone who wanted to look. I had never felt so mortified in my life as I brushed my dress against me, my chest heaving as I felt my heart beating at hundreds of beats per minute.

"See," said a fallen David. "It's always like this. I always go and fall for my brother's girl."

"You shouldn't have been trying to kiss her," said Jack grumpily, sending chills up and down my back as I tried to put my bra and its strapping back into place, guilty feelings overwhelming me.

"What do you mean, trying?" asked David. "It was when she kissed me back, Jack, that I lost my balance." He stared at his brother who seemed angry, even to me, as I edged away from them, towards a grinning Cathy. I suppose that Jack had thought there was no way he could lose his money. David wasn't supposed to have kissed me and he certainly wouldn't have. But even though it was cut short, a kiss was a kiss and, with a tremble, I knew that I had earned Cathy her money.

"We girls need to freshen up after that," said Cathy taking me by the hand. My bracelet fell lightly about my wrist, so clean and smooth and fragrant.

"Yes," said Jack Merchant, dusting off his brother who was now on his feet, "and David and I have a lot to talk about as well."

"Oh, thank goodness," I said to Cathy as she locked the bathroom door behind us. I looked at myself in the mirror in fear as a girl in a pretty black dress looked back at me. "Now we can get out of here."

Cathy looked at me and took a lipstick from her purse. I had left mine in the sitting room. "You really kissed him?" she asked.

I shivered. "Didn't you see?" I asked anxiously.

She shook her head. "I had my back to you," she said. "The look on Jack's face was priceless, though. He went white when you were kissing, I guess. I just managed to turn and there you were with your legs in the air, showing off your stockings and garters, on top of David. What's he like, by the way?"

"He's a horrible dancer," I began and Cathy laughed, putting the lipstick in my hand. I shivered as I realized she wanted me to do my lips again.

"No, as a kisser," said Cathy with a giggle. "Did you really kiss him back, like he said? Did he get your blood racing a little?"

"No," I said, rattled. "And *he* kissed *me*. That's all there is to it. The bet's over. We've won. I danced with both of the men and one kissed me. It was pretty loathsome and I feel all dirty. Let's go back, upstairs, please, and let's go home."

"But I'm just starting to enjoy myself," said Cathy with a sly smile. But then she must have seen the desperation in my face because she nodded, took the lipstick, did my lips, then popped the lipstick back in her purse.

"But look at what we are turning down," she said to me with a grin. "We have two guys who are hot for us and they are rich, Michelle, richer than anyone else who is eligible in this town." She stopped suddenly and looked at me very speculatively. "You know, you *do* make a sensational girl, my husband. We should do this again on a Saturday night. We could get all our drinks paid for at Riders for the price of a few dances and a lot of kisses in the back seat of a Chevy."

"No," I told my wife, turning and seeing the girl I had become beside her in the bathroom mirror. My lips were as red and as full as they had been when I had come down the stairs. "This is the very last time you will ever see Michelle."

"Pity," Cathy said, smiling at me. She lifted her shoulders and turned all coy with me. "Oh, Michelle," she pouted. Hearing her use that name to me made chills run down my spine. "That dress on you makes me crazy, you know." She put her arms about me. I thought she was going to kiss me and my spirits rose but she only laughed at me. "Oh no, my girl," she giggled. "If I kiss you now, I'll spoil both our lipsticks and you'll have to do it all over again."

She suddenly went very serious. "My money," she said, taking my hand and handing me my purse while she took hers. I almost had to run to keep up with her as we went back to the living room where we had first met David. We burst in to find the brothers sitting opposite each other again, the bag of money on the table between them, David holding a wad in his hands, riffling it through. He looked up in astonishment as we girls came rushing in.

"That's my money!" shrieked Cathy, letting go of my hand as she went down on her knees beside the coffee table, scooping the stack of bills towards her.

"Yes," said Jack Merchant easily. "I was just telling David that was so. No, not yours actually, Cathy. Michelle definitely earned every penny of it tonight, didn't she?"

David Merchant leered at me, making me tremble. Oh, thank you, Jack, I thought miserably. You are deliberately letting your brother think that I am a whore of some kind. No wonder he thinks he can put his hands on me whenever he wants.

Cathy had seized the bag the money had been stored in and was busy filling it with the bills David had obviously been counting.

"David and I have just been talking about money," said Jack, his feet resting now on the coffee table as he looked me up and down and a sly grin came on to his face. I knew he was laughing at me on the inside then. He must be. He must think awfully of me to be still wearing a dress, a wig, makeup, and high-heeled shoes when I didn't need to. He had paid us off after all.

"You've got your inheritance as I promised you," said Jack with his sinister smile. "Now David wants his."

"She wasn't in Dad's will," said David sharply, pointing to me.

"No," agreed Jack lazily. "It was just something I promised to take care of. But Michelle doesn't want anything to do with the money."

"Then why should she get it?" asked David, looking angrily at Cathy. She pulled the bag to her, closing it tight, clutching it as if at any moment it might be pulled from her. But suddenly, he smiled at her and she looked shocked. Then a smile came over her face and she looked very coyly away from him, down at her money.

Jack Merchant laughed while I turned away slightly, awful feelings running through me as I saw the way my wife was flirting with David. It couldn't be called anything else. And she knew I was there, her husband, even if I was a girl just like her.

“How about it, Cathy?” Jack asked and I could hear the scorn in his voice. “Would you sleep with my brother if I promised to double that money in front of you?”

The look on Cathy’s face disgusted me. She actually thought it over and both men realized it. David began to smile at her as if he was delighted that she was thinking it over.

“Well, we know the answer to that one,” said Jack, sitting up straight on the sofa. “Now, shall we put the same proposal to Michelle, Dave?”

“Don’t bother,” I croaked, not caring how I sounded. I could feel my hair and earrings shaking as my dress shivered about me as well. “We, we have to get going, don’t we, Cathy? We must get out of here.”

“Before I have made my indecent proposal to you?” laughed Jack Merchant, picking up a wine glass from the table. He came over to me and offered it to me. “See, Michelle. It has your lipstick on it. So it must be yours. You can finish it and have a last dance with me while we wait for the cab to arrive to take you girls back home. I trust that Cathy will have enough to pay the fare tonight, no, this morning.”

“What about my money?” insisted David Merchant as Jack took my hand and led me to the door.

“You asked for a million in cash,” said Jack, leading me towards the door. Nerves broke out all over me as I clicked in high heels, my dress moving with me, caressing my stockings, one smoothness on another. “I paid Cathy off with that two hundred thou she has. You can get the rest from the black safe in my den.” He tossed a small, blue steel key to his brother. “I’ll wire you the other two hundred thou to whatever hotel you’re staying in, in Vegas. You’ll have your million, David, and the house in Malibu. Dad promised you that. But please don’t come back here again to Pelham. I’m going to have a new security fence put up and I’m bringing in a completely new staff. They’ll know that you are not welcome here. You can direct all your future requests for money to me at the head office in New York.”

We went out of the comfortable room. “You don’t have to do this,” I told Jack as he led me back to where we had danced before.

“Shush,” said Jack Merchant. He took a cellphone from his pocket and called someone. “Hi, Vic,” he said. “Sorry, but I have one last job for you to do. My brother will be trying to leave very soon and he will be carrying a lot of cash. I don’t want him to drive after what he has been drinking. So I need you to arrange a driver and security for him all the way to Vegas.” He paused. “You will? Thank you, Vic. Oh, he’ll enjoy the company. He’d never travel alone. I’m sure of that. I owe you one, buddy.”

We reached the dance floor; he went to the console again and flipped it on to a dreamy slow waltz. He took my glass and put it where it had been before. “Michelle, ma belle,” he crooned. “Don’t you recognize our song? It was written by the Beatles before they turned on. Or would you prefer being told to *Get Back* to where you once belonged?”

“Where I *still* belong,” I told him huskily and he shook his head as he laughed.

“Did you practise that voice?” Jack asked me. He put his hands about my waist, making me sway, my dress swinging about me, making me feel so silly, no, not silly really, just different and funny, as we sort of danced together, a little apart.

“What voice?” I asked. I had to look up at his sardonic face, flicking my hair back from my eyes and ears.

He smiled at me then, actually smiled. He had lovely white, even teeth, the kind that all rich people have. I’m alleged to have nice teeth as well, for a man, or so people always told me. Cathy always told me when we first met to smile more and I had tried but I don’t think I am a naturally happy person. I hadn’t thought that Jack Merchant was, either.

“Your voice is huskier than when I first met you,” Jack said and there was a glint in his eyes, a sort of merriment, I realized in wonder. He was laughing at me again, the bastard. “You wouldn’t know this but you do sound like a woman, when you look the way you do. You sound like a sexy, deep-voiced woman. Didn’t you notice David? He didn’t challenge you at all when you spoke to him.”

It had passed me by that David hadn’t responded to me. He thought that I was a woman. I stole a look up at Jack who was making me sway like a woman in his arms and he was smiling at me. He seemed to be reading my thoughts.

“You’re wondering how I see you, Michelle?” Jack asked, smiling broadly as he stressed my name. “No, you don’t have to be frightened about me. I’m not some perverted guy who’s about to attack you. No, but I am going to teach you a lesson tonight, one you ought to have learned a long time ago, I think.” The phone beeped in his pocket. “And here it is,” he added cryptically, letting go of me a little but drawing me closer with his other hand.

I shivered as I thought of the demeaning lessons that Jack Merchant probably intended to teach me. I didn’t need to have my face rubbed into my shame. I knew what I must look like to him. I just wished that he would let me go so I could get changed, then find Cathy to take her home.

“Yes, I thought so,” Jack said to whoever was talking to him on his phone. “Thanks, Vic. Yes, look after them both. She has a lot of money about her as well. She’ll need the same protection as David. Yes, do that.”

I stared at his face. I knew what he was going to tell me and he did. “Cathy has left with David,” Jack said. “He tried to drive through the security gate but Vic and one of his men stopped them. Vic is driving them now to catch the six o’clock flight to Vegas from Clinton.”

“You have to stop her,” I gasped. “She’s my wife.”

“That’s one of the lessons,” said Jack Merchant and his face became very serious. “Don’t you understand why she’s taken the money you should have had and why she has gone to Vegas? Wake up, Michelle. She isn’t your wife any more.”

I stared up at him. He took my hand again and danced me properly through a waltz. “I, I have to go,” I said as he twirled me and I felt my skirt swirling against him. I felt so funny with him still treating me like a girl although we had no audience.

“Yes,” he said, drawing me against him, pressing me into him. I was terrified as I saw the glint in his eyes. “But there is one thing left to do, Michelle. We have to find out whether the thing your wife said about you is true or not.”

“What thing?” I asked him wildly, casting my hair back again to look up at him.

“Do you kiss like a woman or do you not?” Jack Merchant asked me, showing me the whites of his teeth again.

“Not,” I said then as he kissed me. His hand was on the center of my bare back as he pulled me close to him and crushed my mouth with his. His other hand was about my waist. He almost choked the breath out of me as he hugged me; my thighs in my dress and stockings came right against him.

It was a fierce kiss, one that seemed to impale him in my mouth and I’m sure that that was his intent. I couldn’t get away. I couldn’t get free. I couldn’t stop the feelings flooding through me and making me weak at the knees. A man was kissing me as if I was a woman and he intended to. His lips moved and he gently swayed me as he seemed to be enjoying himself.

Oh, it wasn’t like kissing Cathy at all. This was all desire and passion and weird, funny feelings. I stayed rigid as he kissed me. I closed my eyes, I don’t know why. He relaxed the pressure on me a little and I felt his tongue lightly run over my lips. I opened my mouth to protest and his tongue was in me and he was holding me even tighter.

He was even making sounds as if he was enjoying all of this! A man was kissing me and enjoying it. I tried to twist free and Jack took my arm and put it over his shoulder. Then he took my other arm and did the same as I felt my chest pressed right into his. His mouth would not give up mine at all. I felt myself being raised up on tip toe, my garter belt stretching, my skirt swishing as he kissed and kissed me. Short of biting him, I couldn’t get free.

There was a cough then from someone who had entered the room. Jack let my mouth go and uttered a curse as he drew me tight to him. I saw how we must look in the mirrors holding so tightly together, me with my arms about him as if I was welcoming his kiss.

“Sorry, Mr Merchant,” said a man in a dark suit, clearly a security man. “I was just doing a check of the lower floor. There was a door open where your brother and his girl friend went out, I suppose. I didn’t mean to disturb you and the lady.”

“Well, you have,” said Jack with a grin, pulling me tightly to him as I tried to move away, keeping my face averted from the guard. “But carry on. Michelle and I will be going soon as I have to take her home.”

“Yes, sir,” said the faceless guard, departing hurriedly then.

“Where were we?” whispered Jack then.

“I’m going home,” I mumbled, trying to push free of him. I looked up at him and he had my lipstick, my lipstick, a man’s lipstick, all over his mouth. The security guard must be spreading *such* tales about Jack and me. I shivered at the thought and was glad that Cathy wasn’t there to hear them.

But she was running away with another man. My wife was leaving me and what was I feeling? Regret, yes, but relief as well, in a way. Oh, what kind of husband was I if I felt relieved that Cathy was leaving me? She had what she had always wanted, money, and she had left me. I had known that she would from the moment that I married her. I had known that she would go off with someone richer than me. Yes, I was angry with her for choosing to do it that night. But I had been angry with her ever since she had come into the billiards

room, eagerly leading Jack Merchant to what she thought was going to be a sexual encounter. He really hadn't had to put me through all the debasement to teach me a lesson about Cathy. I lived with her for sixteen months and I knew that our marriage would not last. But, oh, I was *so* going to miss making love to her, even if it was only once a week.

"That wasn't where we were yet," murmured Jack then, dancing with me to another light, orchestral version of a Beatles tune. "Now you have met all the requirements of the stupid proposal I made to your wife. But she was right, you know. You do kiss like a girl."

Jack bent his head; I looked up at him in outrage and he kissed me again. I was furious at his insult but this time he kissed me differently. He kissed me firmly but without the impaling process he had used before and I felt my hair standing on end, what little I had, as thrilling sensations went through me.

I don't know what was happening to me, but I was circling in a slower and slower waltz. Jack was kissing me and I couldn't let go. I couldn't take my mouth away, not with the funny sentiments sweeping all over me. His hands started to caress me and my thrills increased tenfold. I *liked* what he was doing to me. I *liked* kissing him. For a little while, I felt like a girl. I felt I knew what a girl must feel like kissing Jack Merchant. He would make her feel special, desirable, womanly. I felt all of those things as his body pressed tightly to mine, his mouth sending shock after shock through me as he greedily kissed me, grunting as he achieved some kind of perverse pleasure.

We broke for air. I trembled as I realized what I was doing but he didn't stop. He was kissing my neck, my ears and my hair and mumbling about how sweet was my fragrance.

I was a man! I didn't have a fragrance! "Jack!" I said hoarsely and he kissed me on my lips again, bending me so that I had to hold onto him or I would have fallen. I wanted to tell him to stop. I wanted to tell him that I was a man, Cathy's husband. But he already knew that.

Jack wouldn't stop kissing me and I kept telling myself to tell him to stop. But I didn't. I kissed him back and he loved that. It seemed to inspire him to kiss me more and more and run his hands over my feminized body. I twitched and jiggled at the strange sensations his hands on my hips and down my legs aroused in me. I should have told him to stop. I meant to tell him to stop. And I would have if he hadn't been kissing me so fiercely. This time I was co-operating with him, my arms about his neck, my padded chest and thighs tight against him.

Suddenly, Jack spun me quickly, reached into his pocket and called someone, not Vic this time. "The cab?" he asked. He listened for a moment. "Okay," he said. "Cancel it. I will drive Michelle home myself." He clicked the phone off and smiled down at me. I had no idea what I must look like except for being frightened and nervous and very, very silly.

"I should have done this ages ago," he said, turning off the music and then the lights, leaving just the one on the stairs. "Let's go up to the green bedroom."

My clothes were in there and, yes, Jack should have let me go before he and I had embarrassed ourselves so thoroughly. "Oh, yes," I whispered to him, his arm about my trembling shoulders. "Let's go up to the bedroom."

Jack turned off the hall light as we turned into the green bedroom. I thought that he would turn on the bedroom lights so that I could find my clothes. A little light was coming through the windows and he led me to them, but only to close the drapes. We were in total darkness, then I felt his arms about my thighs. Suddenly he lifted me.

“Jack!” I squeaked as I found myself deposited on the bed, then I felt him beside me. I felt his mouth on mine and his body was against mine, his hand on my thigh where my skirt had moved up. He kissed me and stroked between my thighs and I convulsed against him, grabbing at his hand and holding it even as I accepted his kissing and enjoyed it so much. Yes, I recognized the feelings going through me. It was pleasure and enjoyment I was feeling.

Jack Merchant was kissing me as if I was a woman and I was enjoying it. I was enjoying feeling like a woman. He was arousing feelings in me that I had never dreamed that I could feel.

I tried to push him off me. “You did agree to come to the bedroom,” he mumbled in my ear as he rolled on top of me, pushing me down on the bed, my wig hair floating out all about me.

I tried to tell him that I had my clothes about the room but I couldn’t, not with the gentle, passionate way his mouth was showering mine with kisses. He firmly put my hands behind my back, then I felt something between my thighs that a man should never feel. Jack had a huge erection and he was undoing his pants, clearly planning to do something to me with it.

I struggled as he spread my legs. I felt him wiggling out of his pants and underpants. He pulled down my panties and my bikini. I seemed to have no strength to stop him even though I worked my hands free and tried. He had my legs up beside his body and then I realized what he was going to do.

“No, no,” I got out but his mouth was on mine and his tongue in me even as his manhood slid into me. Jack coaxed me to relax as I tried to refuse his penetration, then he started to move and I really couldn’t help it. It was so pleasurable to be taken as a woman, to be kissed and fondled. When I let go, stopped fighting it and let it be, I was ecstatic.

My panties and bikini were gone, torn from me but my stockings and garter belt held as he rocked me in the creaky bed. I know that I squealed as he entered me—many times—as he jerked and drove himself into me. I was crying at one point; I felt hurt and so humiliated, then he stopped and began to kiss me softly. I put my hands about him, then he slid past my relaxed parts and rhythmically set about taking his pleasure from me all over again.

Jack kissed my face and my chest and bruised my mouth. I don’t know what it was but I tingled when he finally came and filled me. I didn’t want him to stop and I called that out to him. He stroked my legs and tried to kiss my face as he pumped me faster and faster.

I was so glad that he had made the room dark. I lost my wig in one of the struggles and I knew that my makeup was ruined. I must have looked *so* horrible. It was a good job that the lights were out and the curtains drawn when he did me again, never stopping his caresses as he lay beside me after filling me. He entered more smoothly the next time as I knew what to expect and could co-operate with him.

I betrayed myself as I came, my manhood spitting all over him as he held my soft, little, black dress between us. I felt sad as I ruined it but I couldn't help myself. I was engaged in such delight at his riding me, clasping my legs across his back as he stroked and stroked me. It wasn't just my male member betraying me, it was all of me. My whole nervous system erupted in pleasure as I came. I shivered and trembled as I held and kissed him and he kissed me back.

"See," Jack whispered. "You not only kiss like a woman. You have your orgasm like a woman as well. I think, Michelle, that I am going to make you my woman forever and ever."

"Oh, yes," I said eagerly, in the height of my passion and desire for him. I pulled him to me and kissed and kissed him. I could feel him smiling in pleasure too as he remained firmly camped between my legs.

"My Michelle," he whispered and I loved it. I was his Michelle. I *was*. I was his woman as he told me I was many times. I wanted to be his woman. He loved me kissing him and I loved him kissing me. And he wouldn't stop boffing me, as he called it, rolling me over so he could do it that way as well. He seemed to get into me so much more deeply and enjoy it much more. He was groaning and telling me I was too much woman for him.

I don't recall that I ever had Cathy as he had me. I knew what Jack was doing to me and that I shouldn't let any man make me into his woman, not a married man like me. I think Jack knew what he was doing as well to me, treating me as if I was a woman. But so long as he called me Michelle, it seemed to be all right. I didn't care if Jack was gay and it had all been a set-up between my wife and him.

I was glad that Cathy had her money if she had 'sold' me to him. I hoped Jack thought that I was worth it. But I only felt that when he was making love to me. When I lay there in his arms and he was sleeping, the heebie-jeebies came and I was ashamed of myself for what I had done. Indecent proposal, indeed. I had expanded the limits of that phrase immeasurably.

Then he touched my thigh and caressed me, turning me to kiss me gently and we made long, languorous love. He called me his beautiful Michelle and told me he would make me his woman and that I had nothing to fear. He didn't seem to understand that that was what I was terrified of the most.

I hated my eyebrows when I saw them in the bathroom mirror. I shuddered as I got rid of the remains of my feminine clothing, the garter belt, stockings and bra. I had my own clothes on in a little while and did they ever feel strange without any hair on my body. I tiptoed back through the bedroom I had shared with Jack as Michelle. I didn't wake him.

I was sore inside. My legs were sore from the contortions he had put me through and I was shaking mentally as I tried not to think of all the taboos I had broken the night before. I heard noises from the upper hallway and found that there was a crew of people there, cleaning up the remains of the party. It was fairly easy to pick off a jacket, with the caterer's labels and put it on, pick up a case of empty cans and walk out of the front door past all the guards.

"This all you could carry?" sneered one of the women loading. I shrugged.

“Fagella,” I heard her say to someone inside who laughed as I walked past the truck and down the road. Stupid me. I had left my own jacket somewhere in the house and the one from the caterers had empty pockets. It took me over two hours to walk through the back streets of Knob Hill, Upper Pelham, back to Cathy’s and my apartment on Larrabee Street. I don’t know why but I was disappointed that she was not there. I found our spare key in the crack in the window frame at the end of the hall. Luckily, Cathy hadn’t used it last or I would have been locked out of there as well.

The phone was ringing as I walked in but I didn’t answer it. If it was Cathy, did I want to talk to her? I turned on the TV, sat in an armchair and thought about it. Surely it couldn’t be Jack calling. He had had his way with me. I had been his pretty Michelle and that was when the dam of awfulness broke about me. I had to sit on the floor as I cried and cried at the humiliation I had allowed myself to swallow.

It wasn’t me, I cried to whatever gods there are, but I knew that it was. I was depraved. I was evil. I was a pervert. I was silly. I was stupid. I was a *woman*. Then the chills began as I thought about how Jack had held me and how he insisted that that was exactly what I was. He had insisted that I was a woman, *his* woman, and I had loved him saying it. I had kissed him so many times because I loved him calling me his beautiful Michelle. I had to face up to what I was.

What I was was alone. I didn’t need the apartment on Larrabee Street. Cathy was gone. It was time to strike out on my own. I had college to attend and work to do. I dropped off a note to the super that I’d be moving at the end of the month, packed a bag and headed back to my aunt’s in Rowley. They would put me up for a night while I found a place to stay. I could find a place on Parton. That would be cheapest. It was what I deserved anyway for the fool I had made of myself in a little, black dress.

The Caddy pulled into the full service bay, interrupting my revision of the thirteen principles of setting up a business plan. One was how to serve the customer. I growled to myself, putting on my best smile as I went out to stick the gas nozzle in the proper place under the license plate. I went around to the driver’s window to check the amount needed with my fake, professional smile on my face. It faded right away as I saw Cathy smiling at me from the dark window that slowly lowered to reveal her platinum blonde hair.

Cathy had obviously had it treated. She had never looked so glamorous or so blonde. Jewels glinted at her ears and neck and she was wearing a fur coat though it really wasn’t that cold yet since winter was still around the corner.

“Hi, Michelle!” she warbled at me even though my uniform clearly said that I was Mike, as I had always been with her. “You can fill me up.” She made the last part into a sexual innuendo, pouting in a way that had never been her style before.

I scurried to the back of the car and started the gasoline going into the tank and began all the other little tasks that added up to ‘full service’ at the highway gas bar. My heart was pounding at the sight of her, my wife, *ex-wife* now, according to the papers I had received six months before.

"Oh, stop that," said Cathy as I began to wash the front grill on her car where several bugs were still impaled. "Come over and talk to me."

I went up to the side of the car and looked at my ex-wife. "You look very good," I said to her sincerely, noting the plush interior of the luxury car she was driving. I also noted the huge rock in the ring she was wearing on her engagement finger.

Cathy saw me look at her fingers, well manicured and lovely, dominated by the huge ring. "Isn't it lovely?" she asked. "David gave it to me."

"David," I said, thinking of the man she had gone off with.

"Now don't be like that," Cathy said, pouting as if she did it now as a mannerism. "I *did* tell you what I wanted and this," she wiggled her fingers, "and this," she indicated the car, "are just down payments." She stared at me. "You're making me feel so guilty and I did come looking for you, didn't I?"

"To gloat?" I asked her, feeling more than a little angry. Cathy hadn't said goodbye when she left me as Michelle in a dress as pretty as the one she was wearing and went off with Jack Merchant's brother. I felt that I had a reason and a right to be mad at her.

"No, Mikey," she said quietly. She opened the door of the Caddy and stood in front of me provocatively. "You could never have given me this, could you?" she asked.

"No," I agreed, hearing the pump stop. The car had barely taken any gas at all. Hardly worth the while of her stopping, I thought. "So, when are you going to become Mrs. David Merchant?"

"This month before it gets cold," said Cathy seriously, glancing up at the greyish sky. "David is working it out with Jack tonight when Jack gets in from New York. That's the way I



would like to fly, on my own private jet," she finished enviously, handing me a gold credit card to pay for the gas.

"If I send you an invitation, will you come to my wedding?" she asked me.

"Cathy!" I protested, giving her the credit slip to sign. She signed it Catherine Merchant, I noticed.

"You might be the only one of the locals who will show up," she said suddenly, bitterly, wrinkling her nose as she put her hand on my arm. "You need to clean that uniform," she said with a smile. "I was going to kiss you for old times' sake but that uniform. Phew!"

She turned on her pretty high heels and got back into the car, as beautiful and feminine as I remembered her. I gave her the receipt, my heart still pounding. Just when I had thought myself well over her, she had to come and visit me. Now how could I concentrate on thirteen principles, or even three?

"You didn't ask about why you might be one of the only locals to show," Cathy said, smiling up at me. "Linda Sweatham accused me of stealing David from her when I went around to see her. She practically ran me out of her mansion. Cindy's moved to Chicago or somewhere West and my dad wouldn't even let me in the house in Rowley. Your aunt knew you were working out here but she doesn't know where you are living now. So, please come, Mikey, please." There were tears in her baby blue eyes. "Then I'll know that you have forgiven me."

"I can't afford a wedding gift," I told her bluntly.

"Oh," Cathy said. "I have a gift for you," and she reached for her purse. She took out a cheque and handed it to me. It was for a hundred thousand dollars. "It's your share of the money we got for you being Michelle," she said with a smile. "I heard from David, who was talking to security, that you really earned it. You had Jack in a blue funk, whatever that is, after Michelle walked out on him the next afternoon, according to David. Jack had all his staff tearing up the place as well as searching all over Pelham looking for Michelle, or so we heard. David still hasn't connected you to Michelle yet and I'm not going to do that for him."

"This cheque is signed by Jack Merchant," I told her, my hands beginning to tremble as she made memories flood back into me I had thought were buried. I suddenly felt as if I was wearing a little, black dress again. A dark man was looming over me and his mouth was seeking out mine. I was flicking back my long hair and eagerly reaching for his lips with mine.

"Yes," said Cathy with a laugh, breaking right through my sudden, waking dream, scattering my overheated thoughts. She seemed really brittle; she spoke to me as if there was a lot more she wanted to say but couldn't for some reason. "Jack said that David and I would only spend it if he gave us cash again. Would you believe that he has us on a cash allowance these days? My credit card stops after I've spent five thousand. Then I have to use David's. He has a twenty-thousand limit which is what I want Jack to give me as a wedding present."

I gulped. She'd be getting a quarter of a million a year just for marrying a dope like David Merchant. "Oh, the cheque," Cathy said as she started the car. "Jack made me promise to give it to Michelle and only to Michelle." She laughed. "I think he thinks you're a drag queen or something and the money is to pay for your sex change operation." She engaged the drive and started away from me. "If he could only see you now."

I went back into the kiosk where my college books were but I couldn't concentrate on them again. I looked at the cheque and the strong signature at the bottom. He'd signed it John Merchant III and I could actually read his name, so strong and powerful was his writing. I shivered. If I cashed it, he would know. What would he think of me if I did such a thing? Would he think that I was going to do what Cathy had implied I would be doing? I could feel the sweat breaking out on me as I tried to concentrate on my books. But I could barely remember anything I read.

All I could think of was the little black dress and the girl with dark hair. I recalled how she had looked as the tall man took her hand and she started slow dancing with him. I remembered us feverishly kissing in bed, his arms about me and me pressing my body into his as he stroked my legs. After that first seduction, I had wanted him so much. I wanted him to treat me again and again as a woman. I wanted to kiss him and feel his hands on my legs and, yes, I wanted him inside me. I remembered how I quivered and wiggled and rocked beneath and beside him to increase the pleasure I found in having him make love to me. He had sung my name, Michelle, and I had wanted him to call me that.

I was Michelle. I was a woman. I was Jack's woman. He told me I was, repeatedly, and I had agreed with him. He told me he would make me into a woman and I told him to go ahead. I let him turn and twist me in bed until he got every pleasure he wanted and then some. All I wanted was for him to fill me however he could, and he had. He wasn't even coming at the end as I wriggled and writhed about him, huge sets of thrills and spasms passing through me in rapid succession, burning out the nerve endings in my body, a body given over entirely to pleasing him. And no, I had never loved Cathy like that or for so long.

I couldn't have borne for him to see me the next day, in the light, my wig gone, my makeup ruined, my female clothes torn. I might have needed a shave as well. I had had to get away from it all. And now, here it was, all back again, thanks to Cathy going to my aunt's place and finding me.

I put the cheque at the bottom of a drawer in the little apartment I had taken off Parton Street. Cathy hadn't noticed that I had let my hair grow since going up to Knob Hill and the Merchants' house with her. I guess my cap hid most of it. I really must get it cut, but it wasn't gross on me as long hair was on a lot of guys. I had trimmed it a couple of times, particularly across the front. It saved money for me, I reasoned, to wear it long.

Guys like Steve Nash, the basketball player had lank, dark hair. Around Parton Street, I wasn't an oddity. I saw men with pony tails there or with their hair tied back. I tried that once and I was called 'Miss' by the clerks at the convenience store, the video store and the pharmacy. That was when I got a trim and now I wasn't parting my hair down the middle so much.

I was thinking of working out and trying to bulk up. I was still very slender and not always eating three meals a day was beginning to catch up on me. In jeans and a bulky sweater with my hair in a pony tail, perhaps set a little too high, I saw afterwards in the mirror, I did look girlish. I blushed and I looked even more girlish when I did that.

I promised myself I would get my hair cut for Cathy's wedding and then laughed to myself. Wouldn't that be an embarrassment for me to go and be introduced to everyone as Cathy's ex-husband? There was no way I was going to go to do that, be an object of ridicule at her wedding. No way.

I bought the local paper and the announcement was in it. There was no mention that Cathy had been married before and no mention of me. I gathered that it was going to be a party of two hundred guests, many flown in from New York on the Merchants' private plane. However much certain women must dislike Cathy, I guessed that all of Knob Hill would be at the wedding in Upper Pelham. The Merchants were a rich family and easily able to ride out the public reports of the debacle at David's class reunion party.

Two weeks after seeing Cathy at the gas bar, she was hammering on my door in Lower Pelham, stalking in and asking me what I had to drink in the place.

"I don't keep liquor on the premises," I told her as she strode to the mini-fridge I had rescued from the student dump at the end of the school year. "This is Lower Pelham and I don't want to attract robbers. What's wrong?"

"Everything," Cathy said, taking a pop and opening it, grimacing at the taste of the iced tea which I liked. "Jack's in town and everything is up in the air. You haven't replied to the invitation, have you, and you haven't cashed the cheque I gave you, either. Jack doesn't believe that I gave it to you. He thinks I'm holding on to it and am going to forge your signature and take his money. And now Ashley has eloped with Ronald Brooks. I don't have a second bridesmaid any more and Linda told me to drop dead when I asked her."

Cathy sat down abruptly in the one easy chair I had, opposite the battered television I had bought for ten bucks at a garage sale. She sniffed as she looked about the place. I had come down several degrees since I had left Larabee Street. I didn't need anything to help me get through the next few years of my life without Cathy, save for money.

"This is a dump," she said about the place where I lived.

"What is the biggest problem eating at you, Cathy?" I asked gently and she looked at me in the old, familiar way.

Cathy smiled and gave a sigh as she always used to when we confronted our problems and decided how to solve them. "Same old Mikey," she said. "If only you had taken Jack's money instead of me, we might have worked it out."

I looked at her and she stared back at me. In the end, Cathy broke eye contact first. "Yes, you're right," she said, still seeming very nervous to be speaking to me. "It would only have been a stop gap plan, wouldn't it? I'd have started getting restless and jealous of every girl wearing a nicer skirt and sweater than me. It would have given us six months more, though, wouldn't it?"

I could have taken another six months with Cathy, I thought, as I remembered what I had been up to in the last six months, which was nothing. I didn't go out as I tried to save money. I worked every shift at the two gas stations where I was employed that I could, even pulling the odd shift at the all-night stop on the interstate. Uncle Jim's clunker would get me there but having a car was eating me, not just with gas money but with payments for repairs. It took more money from my pocket than I really wanted to spend.

"I don't think David loves me any more," Cathy said abruptly. "Linda came by the house the other day. Would you believe that Jack brought her home? He picked her up at the Golf Club and he came home and changed into his tux for the Harvest Dance. David was all over her as we waited for Jack to change. It was almost like old times when I was always the hanger-on. Then, Jack came and took Linda back to her place to change and David and I got into an argument over her. He went charging out finally to the casino in Bennettville, he said, but I was just talking to Marsha and she said that he was in the bar at the Golf Club all night long while the Harvest Ball was going on. I guess he was waiting to see if he could pick up Linda at the dance."

"You don't know that," I said, trying to be reasonable. I didn't want to tell her that I had heard about David and his gambling. I'd heard Don at the auto shop laughing about it, saying that all the bookies in town had been warned. Jack Merchant had set a limit to the losses he would take from his brother. He'd been kicked out of two hotel casinos already as his credit limit had been exceeded. Being in the Golf Club and not the casino, I thought would be a reason to celebrate.

"And then Jack gave me heck about the cheque. You are going to cash it, aren't you?" Cathy asked. "There's a lot around here," her eyes swept around the room in which I was living, "that you could spend it on."

"I might," I said cautiously. The trouble with having been married to someone is that you know them pretty well. Cathy must have gathered that I didn't intend to take Jack's money at all. I had an idea it was a kind of guilt money. In retrospect, he must have felt just as bad as I had about that night a year ago.

"You *have* to take the money," Cathy said and I looked at her in astonishment. "I mean, you deserve it. You earned it."

I couldn't help it. I flushed when she said that and she noticed my hair then. I had put it back behind my head in an elastic band, the longer ends over my collar.

"Since when have you been so hippie?" she asked me, turning her head and smiling at me, seeing that my hair was really long. "Since you and Jack?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked her, the heat rising in me, but I was determined to admit to nothing about that night. I couldn't help the blush that was creeping all over my face. She was entitled to think what she wanted but I would admit nothing. "I was going to get it cut for your wedding but then I decided to save the fifteen bucks and just not come."

Cathy's mouth fell open in surprise. "But you *have* to come," she said. "Jack is expecting you." She saw the look on my face then and realized that she had said too much. Her hand flew up to her mouth. Then she gave the cute shake of her head that she always did when she was found out doing something wrong.

"Why would Jack be expecting me at David's and your wedding?" I asked her, a strange feeling of anger and regret mixed rising up in me.

"It's not *you* he wants to meet at the wedding," Cathy finally admitted when she saw the anger in me, possibly. "It's Michelle Jack wants to meet again. I just didn't know how to ask you."

"I suppose you have a cheque as well?" I asked her coldly, already knowing her answer as she jumped when I asked her.

"But it won't be paid until yours is cashed," Cathy said in a rush. "So you *have* to cash it, Mikey, and you *have* to come to my wedding as Michelle."

"You've got to be kidding," I told her.

"It's perfect," Cathy said quickly, her voice uneasy as if she knew she was trying to sell me on something I was not going to like. "With Ashley gone, her bridesmaid's dress will fit you and you won't have to wear a wig this time. I can do your hair. I was taking hair-dressing courses, after all. And with Jack as best man, he'll get to dance with you and we'll both get our money."

"And why should I do all this?" I asked her, my pulse beginning to race. She went on and on about how Jack really liked Michelle and she, Cathy, thought Michelle should be at the wedding since she had brought David and Cathy together.

"Well, you liked Jack, didn't you?" Cathy asked, frowning. "You danced with him when you didn't have to, didn't you, and you kissed him, or so David said he was told, when you didn't have to. Did you go to bed with him as Michelle? David swears that you did and by the look on your face, I think you did."

"I couldn't have done that. Jack scares me a lot. He scares me the way he talks about Michelle when I'm with him. He's so determined to get his own way. I couldn't manipulate him at all before when we were here and I can't at all now. If you dressed up as Michelle again, it wouldn't matter to me, now, really. I've got David. If you like being a girl," she indicated my hair, "I'll help you. It would be nice to have something to hold over Jack for both of us, you know."

Cathy saw the hurt and anger in my face then. "I wouldn't involve you in blackmail, of course," she said hurriedly. "But it would be nice."

"So, not only am I, your ex-husband, to go to the wedding of my ex-wife," I told her. "But I am to do it in a dress. I am to come as my wife's bridesmaid as she marries again?"

Cathy nodded miserably. "Jack suggested it," she said, looking me over. "Are, are you a transvestite now, Mike, since I dressed you up? I don't see any female clothing in here but Jack seems very sure that you are."

"Not at all," I said hotly.

"The, the hundred thousand is, is only a deposit," Cathy said then, unable to look me in the eye.

"On what?" I asked feeling demeaned and humiliated as I thought of she and Jack talking about me as Michelle and obviously discussing my sexuality as well.

"On his real indecent proposal, as Jack said," Cathy said, coming to the point, her voice quivering.

"Which is," I prompted her, hating to hear what she was going to say to me.

"He wants to marry Michelle, Mikey," she said nervously. "A million for you if you'll be my bridesmaid and ten million if you will be the bride. He'll be the groom if you are the bride."

I shook with the fear that ran through me at her words. "And what do *you* get out of it?" I asked.

"The same," Cathy said, her mouth twisting as she said it. "But I have to say nothing about you. I have to treat you as my girl friend, Michelle, and I can't talk about you even to David. If the word gets out that Michelle is you, Mikey, I lose it all, even if it wasn't my fault, even if it was yours."

I sat there, stunned beyond belief.

"Well," Cathy said tentatively. "There you are. I told him you would never go for it. I told him you were too much of a man but Jack didn't believe me. He said everyone has their price and he's going to find out what Michelle's is and pay it." She got up and moved to the door where she turned and waited to open it.

"I have to see you and talk to you every day from now on until I persuade you," Cathy said, looking at me miserably. "Look, Mike, Michelle, whoever you are, none of this is my idea. I think Jack is a sicko and I wouldn't do anything that he wants. You were quite right about him, Mike. I should never have taken his money. Nor should David. But now we are both in so deep to him, trusting him to pay off our debts, that I can't do anything but what he wants or I will be totally poor again. At least when I marry David, Jack will support us. He's promised us both jobs in New York after we're married."

"Hooray for you," I told her bitterly. "You tell Jack that the answer is no to everything, will you?" I went to the drawer where the cheque she had given me earlier was. I tore it up in front of her horrified eyes and gave it back to her.

"I'm not for sale," I told her as she stared at the wad of paper in her hands. "I'm not a whore or a prostitute, male or female."

Cathy's bottom lip dropped. She carefully stuffed the cheque pieces in her pocket. I supposed that she would have to return it to the puppet master to account for what I had done.

"There *was* something between you and Jack, wasn't there?" Cathy asked unsteadily. "There wouldn't be all these histrionics from either of you if there wasn't something between you."

"There's nothing between Jack and me," I said thickly, indicating to her that she could leave right then.

"I said it wrong, didn't I?" asked Cathy. "I should have said that there is definitely something between Jack and Michelle, shouldn't I?"

I couldn't speak again. I shivered and shuddered after she left. Indecent proposal indeed! His proposal was beyond indecent. It was perverted, depraved, debasing, and ut-

terly humiliating. What was worse was how he based it all on money. I should never have given in the first time for Cathy's sake and cross-dressed for money, for her, for my wife, who loved me, as I thought back then. I knew now what he thought of me and why he said to me in bed that he would make me his woman. He thought that I could be bought.

Oh yes, I had wavered a little as Cathy talked of me being her bridesmaid. I had an image of Michelle in my head in a frilly, pink dress and I felt such a feeling of longing that it had been a fight to stay straight with Cathy and tell her that I wouldn't even consider it, not even for her, my ex-wife, whom I had once loved so much that I had worn a little black dress for her.

If Cathy was going to track me down every day in her Cadillac, it would soon get around town what she was doing. There was only one thing to do so I did it. I left town. I closed up the room I had, my so-called apartment, took what was valuable to me, went upstate, across the county line to Clinton, where Cathy and I had been married. Missing classes for a couple of weeks wouldn't matter. Lots of people dropped in and out all the time. So long as I passed my exams, I could keep on going.

I parked Uncle Jim's car in the campground there and set up my tent next to it. I wondered if I should get a job there but I only wanted to stay out of the way until Cathy was safely married. I told the female park ranger who came round and took my money for a camping permit that I was looking for work. I could have kicked myself for that as she gave me several leads to follow up that would have worked out well for me.

I didn't think about the fact that my license plate number could be traced. I was standing on a sidewalk in Clinton, turning over the change in my pocket. I was wondering which of the fast food outlets would give me the best value for a rare meal that wasn't peanut butter sandwiches and milk. That's when Jack came up and stood beside me in his expensive leather jacket.

Everything about me was old and dirty, my jeans, my shirt, my jacket. Jack Merchant was immaculate in dark, black pants, white shirt and black leather jacket. His hair was neat, combed and glossy. Mine felt like straw and probably looked like it as well.

I looked up at him as I was calculating the cost of a burger and fries, adding in taxes, when there he was, looming over me. My mouth went dry and I couldn't speak at all as Jack just looked at me. I could guess what he was thinking by the stern way he was looking at me. He must have been wondering how he could ever have danced with me, how he could ever have taken a thing like me into his bed. I shuddered, too, as I looked at him and licked my lips nervously.

"Your license plate can be traced," Jack said grimly. "But of course you were not at the campsite this morning. I've been going in every lunch place in this town, looking for your car or for you. Now it's supper time and I've been in this godforsaken town for over six hours, hunting you. I was about to head back to the tent site assigned to you but here you are."

Jack looked up at the golden arches and pulled a face. "We have a lot to talk about," he said grimly, looking down at me. "And I am hungry. I am going to buy you a proper meal."

"You don't have to," I whispered. I don't know why, but I didn't want people to overhear us. There were enough people looking at him as it was. Probably they were wondering what he was doing talking to a hippie student like me.

"I do," he said. He reached out a hand as if he was going to hold mine and I jumped back in alarm. He smiled grimly again and put his hands into his pockets. "You are the only person I know on whom I have never spent anything. You wouldn't even drink the wine I tried to give you when we first met."

Jack pointed down the street. "I need a steak even if you don't," he said. "Let's walk down there," he pointed down the main drag. "I need a drink as well. It's been a long and trying day and I've been looking for a totally different person from the one I've found, I think."

We were an odd couple sitting in the darkwood-shrouded restaurant. I found his looking at me to be very disconcerting. I'm not certain what our waiter thought but I thought I could tell by the way he was so formal with Jack. He was, after all, doing the ordering for both of us. At least he ordered me red wine this time.

"You're exactly as Cathy described you," Jack said at last to me. "I don't know why but I keep thinking of you as Michelle and remembering you as the woman I held in my arms on the dance floor."

"Please, Jack," I said, my temperature rising as I glanced around. No one was close enough to hear us, not with the low buzz of country music that drifted across from the bar area on the other side of the restaurant.

"We have to talk it out," he said, his eyes iron-grey and his expression forbidding as he looked at me.

"No, we don't," I said, looking away at the stuffed animal heads that ringed the wooden poles that brought a special ambience to the place.

"You haven't been plagued by thoughts of what occurred between Michelle and me?" Jack Merchant asked me bitterly, his anger so evident that I was stunned. Was he about to blame me for what had happened or was he going to fall back on that old crutch of all misbehavers and blame it on the alcohol he had consumed?

"I haven't been able to get it out of my mind," Jack went on thickly. "I've spent the last year taking out every beautiful woman in New York and sleeping with most of them and with not one of them have I had an experience like I had with Michelle that one night. Was it the same for you?"

Was it the same for me? I stared at his uptight face in shock. "I, I've only, only ever slept with, with two people in my life!" I exclaimed. Jack didn't have to be a genius to know that those two people would have been Cathy and himself. What sort of experiences did he think that I would have had, a guy like me?

Jack leaned forward and stared at me intently. "I see you sitting there," he said, "and all I see is Michelle in some sort of mannish drag, do you know that? What do you see, looking at me?"

"I don't know," I gasped. He just looked at me, waiting, forcing a reply from me. "A very powerful guy," I said nervously. "A man used to getting his own way. Someone who wants to bully me into doing something I don't want to do."

Jack winced. "I liked the first two descriptions better than the third," he said, picking up his full glass of wine and drinking a mouthful. I remembered what he had said about me not drinking before so I picked up my wine and took a mouthful as well. It was very good as it should have been, the price he was paying for it.

"Cathy's wedding is in trouble," Jack said seriously. "Somehow, Marsha Taylor has been convinced by the other members of Linda's set that she faces serious social ostracism if she is a bridesmaid for Cathy so Cathy now has no bridesmaids for her wedding. I am here to ask you to let Michelle appear again and do the honors for her. A cousin of mine from New York is going to serve as well so long as she's not alone, Patty says."

"How much are you offering me this time?" I asked him. I was holding my glass in both hands and twirling it as he watched me intently.

"Oh, I've learned my lesson on that one," Jack said, suddenly smiling at me, showing me all his strong white teeth just as the waiter arrived to serve us the fantastic meal that Jack had ordered.

Conversation stilled at that point but I saw the waiter's ears perk up when Jack said, "I didn't think you'd go for my ten million dollar offer. It was probably too low as a bid. I'm ready to reconsider it and make you a much better offer. This time, I thought I would make it in person."

As Jack intended, I think, the waiter treated me with a lot more respect as he offered me the selection of condiments and wished us to enjoy our meal.

"Wow," I murmured. "You really impressed our waiter."

"I didn't like the way he was looking at you," said Jack, digging into his huge steak as if he hadn't seen food in a week. Well, he was a big man and if he hadn't eaten since morning as he'd said, I guess he was close to starving. "You notice how he changed his attitude at the mention of money. How is it that *you* don't?"

"The last time I did something for money," I told him, trembling inside, "I've regretted ever since."

That stopped him. Jack looked at me in total surprise. "You really regret being Michelle?" he asked.

I nodded, shuddering as he stared at me. "But I recall what we did in bed that night," Jack said, showing me no remorse. "I remember a female figure who couldn't get enough of me, who pressed herself into me and kissed and kissed me and wrapped me up in her smooth, soft legs and said that she was my woman then and forever. And she was wrapped so tightly about me as I went to sleep, her scent all over me, so warm and womanly, even without her wig or her panties or her bra. How many times did we make love? Ten, twelve times. Michelle completely wrecked me that night. And when I reached for her the next day, to have her again, thinking she meant what she had said about being my woman, she wasn't there at all. It was the most cruel disappointment of my life. I didn't know Michelle could be that cruel."

I had sat back when he started to talk to me like that, my head pounding. I couldn't think of anything to say at his assault on all my senses. I stared at him, as the intensity of his words and feelings grew and grew. I recalled all the events of that one landmark night in my life when I had been Michelle.

Our waiter came hovering by, seeing that I was shook up and not eating. I felt positively ill and probably looked it. Jack dismissed him, glowering at him, telling him we'd call when we needed him.

"Why didn't you stay with me?" Jack asked me quietly, as intense as ever.

"Jack," I said in wonderment. "Isn't it obvious? I'm not a woman."

Jack Merchant looked at me, studying me. "Not now," he admitted. "But didn't I tell you that we could take care of that? Didn't I tell you that I would make you into a woman, my woman? Didn't you believe me when I told you that?"

"Oh, Jack," I blurted it out. "This conversation is just getting too weird! I can't go on talking about this in a place like this."

A new group of people were being seated just down the row from us. Several of the girls in the group were very pretty and more than one of them was giving John Merchant III the once-over. But he was intent on me, with talking to me, the hippie kid in the dusty clothes across the table from him.

"Then let's talk about the offer that I want to make to you for resurrecting Michelle to be Cathy's bridesmaid at my brother's wedding the weekend after next," said Jack Merchant, returning to his steak and telling me how good it was and that I should eat it while it was still hot.

I couldn't. I passed it to him. I tried to nibble on some of the bread but that stuck in my throat. All I could think of was that I had to get away from him and his relentless pursuit of the topic of Michelle. I had to get him to stop on that subject, but he wouldn't.

"So here is my offer," Jack said. "Nothing, not a penny, not a farthing, not a sou. I'm asking you to come to Cathy and David's wedding as Michelle and be the bridesmaid Cathy needs to wish her well as she begins her new life with him in New York."

"I can't do it," I gasped, staring at him. "I was married to her, for gosh sake."

"You were married to her when you let her elope with David and all your money," Jack said rationally. "You were married to her when you came to my bed so delectably with me and stirred my mind into mush with your sweet kisses. Don't tell me now that she was the love of your life. She wasn't, was she? You only married her to protect her from her father, didn't you? Really, she was just your high school sweetheart and you've done more than enough already to set her straight in life. Now you can do one last, kind act for her and that whole of that part of your life will be over."

"I *can't* be a bridesmaid," I whispered, shivering inside, as Jack told me what I should have realized long ago about the relationship between Cathy and me.

"Not Mike Brown, no," agreed Jack with a smile. "But Michelle can. And she'll do it out of kindness."

"You said I was cruel," I pointed out.

Jack grinned at me. "Good," he said. "I said that *Michelle* was cruel. It's nice to hear you admit that you are Michelle. And I didn't mean that. Michelle was kind to Cathy, wasn't she, over the little black dress. Now Cathy desperately needs you to be kind to her again."

Jack wore me down. He ate my steak as well as his own and wouldn't let me leave. I knew he would make a ruckus if I stood up and tried to go. I just wanted to slide out of the place which was getting more and more crowded as the evening grew later. He left an enormous tip after I had grudgingly agreed that I would talk to Cathy. I'd told him that she couldn't be that upset and he told me to talk to her about it all. Jack even wanted to drive me all the way back to Knob Hill and abandon my uncle's beater and my tent in Clinton.

I couldn't do that but, as I expected, he followed me with his Mercedes sedan and assisted me in packing up my old car. Then he followed me all the way back to Pelham. I don't know what my neighbors in Partonsville thought to have a Mercedes now parked where a Cadillac had been before. It wasn't there long, though, as Jack gave me his cell-phone and told me to call Cathy and tell her we were coming up to Knob Hill.

Cathy sounded uncertain when I told her who it was. Then I told her I had been talking to Jack and we were coming up to the mansion on Knob Hill and her uncertainty turned to delight.

"He persuaded you to be my bridesmaid!" she shrieked over the phone and I felt a cold ball growing in my stomach.

"We can talk about it," I said, staring at Jack's intense face as he directed me to get into the Mercedes. "He's driving me up."

"Fantastic!" Cathy screamed again. "I *knew* Jack would convince you if he would talk to you instead of sending me all the time."

Cathy hung up and I looked at Jack, who stared back at me. He was probably still trying to find Michelle in the scrubby, undersized guy he was looking at. I should have challenged him then. It didn't sound to me as if Cathy was desperate to have her ex-husband be her bridesmaid at her wedding to her new husband.

"I wonder if we can change your voice in ten days?" Jack said to me. "Well, I guess we can say you have laryngitis, bronchitis, hoarseness, whatever, if we have to, but it would be nice to hear a girlish voice coming out of your mouth."

"You want me to sound like Geraldine?" I said in a falsetto that made him wince. He got in the car, leaving me to get in by myself.

"No," Jack sighed. "We can do a lot better than that. If only we had more time, we could get you a voice coach. But if there's nothing we can do, you will have to mime that you've lost your voice, just look beautiful and smile a lot. I'll be there for you, anyway, as I'm the best man. Patty's husband, Neil, will be the head usher so he will squire her."

"I didn't say I would do this," I said unsteadily as we headed up through Pelham to the area known officially as Upper Pelham, and as Knob Hill to everyone who lived in Pelham for more than a few months.

Jack smiled and said nothing. I sat beside him and shuddered. I should never have let him take an inch in our battle. I should have known that he would turn it into the proverbial mile.

"And these are the bridesmaids' dresses," said Cathy enthusiastically after showing me her bridal gown. It made my stomach churn as I thought of when we were married and didn't have a penny to our name. She had worn her best dress then, a light blue shift, she called it. I had worn my only jacket and the only pants I possessed that weren't jeans.

"Cathy," I breathed, staring at the stylish dark gown that was her idea of a bridesmaid's dress. "I can't wear this."

"Not this one," Cathy agreed brightly. "This is meant for Patty. She's a big girl, you know. Well, you'd expect it, right? She being a Merchant." She moved the front dress along and took out a smaller dress made on the same lines. "This would have been Ashley's and she's the same size as you, now that you've slimmed down. I wish I was ten pounds lighter." She giggled. "Then I wouldn't have to use the corset that I'm going to have to wear but there's no way I'm going to not wear a size six dress on my wedding day."

"Size six?" I asked her, thinking of the tens I had bought for her on her birthdays and Christmas.

"So, you're a four," Cathy said. "You don't have to gloat about it. And are you supposed to talk like that? I thought Jack said something about training your voice."

"If I do this," I told her carefully, "it's going to be with 'laryngitis' so that I don't have to talk to anybody."

"But that's no fun," insisted Cathy. "Everybody knows it's the bridesmaids who have the most fun on the wedding day. The guys are all scared of the groom. I'll bet all the men will be lined up to dance with you." She gave me a calculating look. "But then, if Jack is standing with you, holding you like he did before, he might scare everybody else off."

"Don't-don't say such things," I said to her as I quivered inside.

"Let's try it on you," said Cathy, taking the dress she said would have been Ashley's off the rack and taking me by the arm, marching me next door to her bedroom, the one, I noted, with all of David's suits hanging in a closet.

"With what I'm wearing?" I asked her and she laughed at me.

"No," she said. "She opened one of the drawers of one of the dressers in the room. "Jack gave me all of Michelle's clothing to keep in case you came back. And, of course, you can borrow anything of mine, you can, save for my bridal dress and what goes with that. And look in my walk-in," she said, leading me to a closet, turning on the light to show me racks of clothes and a shelf with nothing but wigs, most just like her natural blonde hair.

"This one," Cathy said, showing me the familiar wig of chestnut brown hair, "was the one you wore last time, but, if you want, you can wear one of mine. I think you'd look gor-

geous as a blonde. Oh, can I call you Michelle as well? I feel calling you Michelle when you're dressed like that. I suppose it will be much easier when you're in girl's clothing again."

"It was only that one time," I protested, my insides shaking, "and you know why I did it then."

"Yes," said Cathy soberly. "I've never really thanked you for that, have I? Thank you so much, darling Michelle, for what you did for me. I hope Jack is rewarding you very well for doing this for me this time. He told me I'll get my million when I marry David. So I hope you get more than that."

My face told the story.

"Oh, don't tell me," Cathy said, her hand coming to her mouth. "You-you're doing this for nothing?"

"I'm doing it for *you*," I told her, my throat dry and my stomach quivering.

"But, but," began Cathy in puzzlement.

"So you *weren't* in a dire predicament?" I asked her bitterly, thinking that Jack had fooled me again. Luckily, I had only said that I would talk to Cathy, that I would consider being her bridesmaid.

"Of course I am," said Cathy quickly. "I just didn't think." Tears came to her eyes. "I didn't think you still loved me, Mike, after the rotten trick I pulled on you and after I deserted you. You, you're still there, here, for me, aren't you? My rock when I need you. You, you *love* me?"

"Of course I love you," I told her with a smile despite the anxiety I felt being in her bedroom with bridesmaids' dresses. "Not in the same way, I must admit, as when I married you, Cathy. I would much rather be sitting in the back of the crowd as one of your old friends, a *male* friend, with a gift in my hands."

Cathy looked at me for a moment or two. Then she shook her blonde mane of hair. "No, Michelle," she said quickly. "I *need* you as my bridesmaid. I really do. Let's put you into the dress and see how beautiful we can make you look."

The routine was almost the same as before. I felt myself breaking out in goose bumps as I let myself go through the routine of taking the hair off my legs and body and waxing around my face. It had lasted so long after Cathy did that for me the first time that I had continued doing it. It was nice not to have to shave every day and I felt smoother as well. I kept thinking of asking out one girl or another after Cathy left me but panic usually set in when I got close. But I thought that they would like my face since I wasn't bristly at all, as Cathy had once accused me of being.

I felt a similar panic to asking out a girl at the pit of my stomach as I waxed my face. Trust Cathy to have that ready in the bedroom assigned to me. I went to the bathroom to do all the hair removal that I had to. As well, I washed my real hair.

I came out, swathed in towels. Cathy smiled and took one from me. "This is how we girls," she said, her emphasis making my stomach start to freefall again, "put a towel about our heads like a turban." She did it easily, then she took her hands away and had

me do it. She giggled as it kept falling apart on me. "Tighter," she said. "That's your trouble. You have to be rougher, Michelle. Hold it tight. There!"

I did it at last and she clapped her hands together. "Now, let's work on your face," she said, smiling at me. "You really have let your eyebrows go, haven't you? I had them shaped nicely for you before when it was just David you were trying to deceive."

That woke me up. "How, how many people are coming to this wedding?" I gasped.

"A couple of hundred," said Cathy airily. "That's why Jack insisted that I have bridesmaids."

"Jack insisted," I groaned and she began to laugh at me.

"Okay," Cathy said. "The secret is out. He told me that he can't get the image of you as a girl out of his head. You should have seen all the girls he's been dating in New York, Michelle. Honestly, they all look like you. Well, they look like you did in Linda's little black dress. And don't tell me, my husband, that you were a good little girl in that dress because I had to get it cleaned. Quite embarrassing that was at the dry cleaners, I can tell you. But you and Jack must have had a lot of fun getting it so marked up. It's hanging right here and I'm going to give it to you as one of my gifts to my beautiful bridesmaid."

"Oh, Cathy," I said, blushing. I was going to lie to her about Jack and me but I had to hold still as she began to pluck my eyebrows again and it really hurt.

"Shush," Cathy said as I cried out. "You should be doing this daily. You really should and then they would be really pretty."

"I can't do this, Cathy," I moaned, taking her hand as she shifted and began to do my other eyebrow.



She laughed at me. "But we *are* doing it, Michelle," Cathy said, rubbing ice cubes across my brows. "And if I stopped now, you'd have one of each, a male and a female and you'd look really ridiculous."

I lost half an eyebrow before I began to think how ridiculous I would look with two female eyebrows. The last part was the painful part as she said that certain hairs had to be moved to make the line right.

When she finished, I looked at my reddened and sore eyebrows and was amazed again at how they changed my face. With a turban on my hair, I saw Michelle looking back at me, wary and more than a little frightened at what was going to happen to her.

Cathy insisted that I wear her false eyelashes again. Then she did my eyes with eyeliner, mascara and eye shadow. When I looked to the mirror, Michelle had emerged even more.

"Oh, you're so soft," said Cathy gleefully as she stroked my chin and began to put lotion on my face. "You've been waxing, haven't you? Why didn't you do that when we were married and I asked you to?"

I grinned at her weakly and she jumped at the obvious answer.

"Oh, you were thinking of Jack when you were doing this, weren't you?" Cathy said, rouging my cheeks.

"No!" I protested.

"Well, let's see," said a smiling Cathy. "You wouldn't do this for *me*, but you are waxing since you met Jack. You've lost weight and you've let your hair grow. And *I* couldn't persuade you to wear a dress again but *he* did. I think that you have a bad case of the hots for John Merchant III, my girl."

"I *don't*," I said, my heart pounding as Cathy painted the outline of my lips and then gave me the lipstick to put on to transform my face completely to femininity.

"I'm not blaming you," said my ex-wife, massaging my shoulders as she looked at me pouting and putting on my lipstick in the mirror. "He's a handsome man and any girl should be honored to be noticed by him. You should see how he makes men behave as well. They fall all over themselves to do favors for him and he doesn't seem to notice. He's got a reputation as a ladies' man, you know. I thought he was just bored and looking for a little, what can I call it, stimulation, from the 'other side of the street,' represented by you. You looked so real in that dress, you know. I thought he would have gone for a girl like you if she was real. But Jack isn't like that, is he? He just accepts what he's got, flawed people like David and me, and he works with us to help make us better. If he drops you, you know, he won't just forget you. He'll help you out in what you want out of life. I know he will."

"You know him well," I said to Cathy as she dried my messy hair. Then she pulled it back tightly and put an elastic about it. "You've talked a lot about me with him."

"Who *else* could he talk to?" asked Cathy as she went into her closet and came back with a wig. I pulled faces at my image, making myself look grotesque in the mirror.

The wig changed all that. It was wide and I do mean wide. It tickled me as she spread the hair over my shoulders and down my back. Cathy combed and sprayed it a lot then, pinning it around my real hair. My bangs were combed up at the front and melded into the wig.

“See,” said Cathy excitedly. “I knew that big hair would suit you. I told Jack it would and that we had to buy this for you. He is going to be delighted to see you like this.”

“Cathy,” I began feeling my heart racing. She had me stand and take off my towels and there I was, Michelle’s head on Mikey’s body, my maleness evident.

It didn’t faze Cathy at all, however. She had stuff for me to put on that I had never thought of. She had a soft, white gaff; she reminded me how I should tuck to get my manhood out of sight. Then I had blushing pink panties to put on.

She taped me across my thinnish chest muscles and taped gel pads into the blushing pink bra she put on me. I shivered as I looked at the girl who now stood in the mirror. I shuddered as I put on a garter belt, my arms touching the bra across my chest and the hair falling all over me.

Cathy giggled and had me practice girlish ways of pushing my hair back, showing me how a woman throws her hair back over her shoulders, telling me I had to learn it and so I tried. She clapped her hands when I finally did it well after fastening my first stocking to the garter belt.

“Oh,” I gasped as I stood and felt the tug of the garter belt and the feel of nylon again, sheer nylon, on my smooth, hairless skin. I remembered now how I had been in a constant state of arousal when I had worn stockings before. I felt the same arousal as I sat on Cathy’s silk-cushioned chair and put on my other stocking.

I stepped into a long slip that covered me and made me look, well, very feminine. Then it was time for the dress and I stepped into it as well. Cathy said that it was a halter bodice and the way that it draped about me was in a Princess line. I had to put on high heels in the same color as the dress that I would never have called pink. To me, it was red but Cathy laughed at my ignorance. She had evening gloves for me to wear, the same color as the dress.

“I forgot your padding,” she said reproachfully as I moved over to her long mirror. Cathy showed me how I looked from the back and from the sides.

I shivered and so did the girl in the mirror as Cathy showed me how to take hold of the dress each time I moved. She made me turn around, taking small steps and practising like a model how to move in a long dress that swished and rustled about my legs. I had to learn again how to ignore the constant, seductive, feminizing tickling of the long hair on my back and shoulders.

“Oh, you will be *such* a gorgeous bridesmaid, Michelle,” said the girl I still thought of as my wife even though I knew she had divorced me and was sleeping with another man. “I *can’t wait* till Jack sees you like this. He is going to flip right out of his mind.”

“I suppose that he’ll want to see me now,” I said, quivering. I saw from the side how my breasts appeared to be real and shapely as I was tugged across the chest to show a pretend cleavage.

"Oh, Jack's gone out tonight," said Cathy. "He said he didn't want to see you before the big day for both of us. Besides, he has a date with Linda tonight. She's been phoning him for hours, wanting to know where he is."

I felt as though I had been kicked. I had done all this. I had been glamorized like a woman by my wife, whom I had thought I was assisting in her time of trouble, and the man who had persuaded me to do it all had abandoned me. Worse, he had abandoned me for a *real* woman.

I felt something running through me, a deep anger. Cathy retreated into her closet and came back with a skirt and a blouse. She said I should wear these and we could go downstairs and tease David.

"Oh, your voice," Cathy said. "We have to work on that as well."

"Look, Cathy," I told her. "It's only going to be one day. I only have to get dressed up for one day like this, don't I? I can have laryngitis and whisper at everyone and smile a lot." I showed her how I would do it. "Sorry," I whispered, "but my voice is gone. Could you ask the waiter to bring me another flute or two of champagne?"

Cathy laughed. "Great," she said. "But Jack didn't tell you it all, did he? You're my bridesmaid and there are lots of things that we have to do all this week, picking out gifts and writing thank you notes for everyone. You are my bridesmaid and you should read a list of your duties, Michelle. It's not just wearing a pretty dress and sleeping with the best man. I have bridal showers to attend and you haven't even picked out the lingerie items you are going to surprise me with when we go to Mrs. Lavelle's reception for me."

Mrs. Lavelle was the wife of the congressman for our district. A family like the Merchants would have such connections.

"But, Cathy," I said, the shock evident on my face. "I can't do that. I'll be discovered easily."

"Patty gets in tomorrow," Cathy said with a grin. "She'll talk for you, you'll see. So your touch of laryngitis trick will work for a while. But this is ten days, Michelle. You have a room here with us and a wardrobe of all the dresses you'll need and I'll be here. You watch. We'll go down and practice on David. If he catches on, I'll give you the million Jack is giving me for having you as my bridesmaid."

She said it so naturally that I turned away; she was undoing my bridesmaid dress. "You're still getting the million?" I asked her huskily. "Are you *sure*?"

Cathy smiled flirtatiously at me. "Well, I'm only his sister-in-law," she said, unzipping me and easing the halter top over my shoulders, pushing my new hair out of the way. "But Jack did say on his way out to pick up Linda that my cheque would be honored on my wedding day. Oh, Mikey, I'm going to be a millionaire. Isn't it wonderful? All I have to do is marry David with you as my bridesmaid and I'm a millionaire."

Cathy seized my hands and began to dance up and down. I was in women's underwear, my legs in stockings and garter belt exposed as my wife clasped me and danced me around the room, my hair swirling about us both.

When she stopped, Cathy had to find pads for my backside. Then she suggested that I wear a bodyshaper, which looked like a corset to me, to make my waist and my newly

padding hips more feminine. It was a mark of how far I had fallen from all the resolutions I had made to myself about ever dressing as a girl again that I accepted the padding she gave me and the new corset. I cursed Jack for not telling me how long I would have to be a girl in his house.

Then I thought of him out with Linda Sweatham, whose little black dress Cathy said was mine. I shivered. I owned a dress and all the feminine lingerie that went with it.

I recalled Linda's pretty, trim, female body as she was screaming at David about his being unfaithful to her. I shuddered as I thought of the wedding when I would be wearing that red bridesmaid dress, blushing rose or whatever, the dark pink dress. Would Linda throw another tantrum if Jack danced with me? Well, he would have to. He had made that clear. He had said that he was going to be Best Man and that I was in his care for the wedding itself.

I found myself breaking out again in goose bumps as I put on a tight skirt, a soft blouse and new high heels. I put on women's clothing and didn't quibble about it. I sat in a woman's skirt and tried to act as if I had been a woman all my life, thinking how silly it all was, that I should ever think that I could fool anyone into believing that I was a girl. I changed my earrings and put on a little black satin choker. Cathy said that tomorrow, I was going to have my hair done, my nails fixed and I was going to have voice lessons. She had downloaded all sorts of tapes from the Internet. I was going to sound like a woman in ten days or her name wasn't Cathy Merchant. I didn't remind her that it wasn't, not yet. If I escaped from this security prison Jack had brought me back to, it might not ever be Cathy Merchant, millionaire.

Alexander came to the house. I had to wear a bra and inserts as well as my panties and gaff. I clasped a silk robe about myself as he took me into the room where the bridal dress was on display. He did Cathy's hair and then mine.

He washed it. A man washed my hair, then he cut it, talking about it to Cathy all the time and ignoring me, the girl with laryngitis. I had started voice exercises the night before with Cathy that had made us both laugh. I think we had overdone it and I could barely squeak as Alexander worked on my hair. I trembled as I thought of the night I spent in bed in a woman's nightie and panties. Cathy said that I should start thinking like a woman all the time, then it would be easier when I came to the wedding.

Alexander shaped my hair, or so he called what he did, to Cathy. He colored it and he put body into it, whatever that entailed. I just sat, forbidden to look at what he was doing to me under Cathy's direction. It seemed to go on for hours, then we had to spend a lot of time under the dryers. A girl named Maya came in, to work on my hands, putting on acrylic nails which she painted hot pink, as she called it. It made my nails match the color of my bridesmaid dress.

A third girl, Anne, came in and gave Cathy and me facials. Then she studied me for a while as I squirmed, sure she was reading that I was a boy. She might have. I don't know. She recommended all kinds of makeup for me and took away some that Cathy had put in

a purse and said was mine. She talked about how to emphasize my lovely eyes and downplay the features she didn't like, along with my jawline and nose. She showed Cathy how to disguise whatever blemishes she was pointing out, then she showed me in the mirror. I only heard and understood half of what she was saying.

I couldn't believe what they had done to my hair. I had a woman's hair style. My hair was thick and gathered in a wave which curled under and bounced a little above my shoulders. I had short bangs across my forehead and with the new makeup style that Anne had applied to me, I was an even prettier Michelle than I remembered.

"Now you girls can get changed," smiled Anne at last, as I hugged my satiny robe about me. It opened occasionally and showed off the thin strap that went over my shoulders. "I *can't wait* to see the wedding pictures of you two. This is going to be a wedding, I think, that Knob Hill isn't going to forget for years."

"Oh, I hope not," said Cathy gaily as she wiggled her painted toes. I tried to be still and not show my consternation as Maya completed my pedicure by painting my toenails the same color as my fingernails.

It was terrible to realize that I was going to be a woman all day and not just for the one day. I was going to have to wear more than one outfit. I couldn't believe what was in the room I had slept in when Cathy took me back there. I had changed into women's underwear, including a bra, which she showed me how to pad with gel packs that would move and look natural on my chest.

I wore a shaping corset about my waist and hips enhanced by long, thin gel pads that did indeed give me a womanly shape. I covered my panties and bra with an underslip. I was eager to see myself in the blue dress with tiny white flowers that Cathy had laid out for me. I was shocked as I looked at myself in my dress with my stockings and high heels in place. I not only felt different as the dress lightly swirled about me but I *looked* different as well. I wasn't Michael any more. I was Michelle.

Cathy giggled as she dabbed perfume all over me, teasing me about my stunned expression. "Oh, you are just so, so delectable," she said, throwing her arms about me, her breasts pressing against my false ones. "You make such a cute, adorable girl."

Then she made me say it. I tried to raise my tone as she encouraged me. "I make a cute, adorable girl," I squeaked.

"You sure do, honey," said a homey, New York, female accent. I turned from the window that Cathy and I had been standing in front of, to find myself looking up at a tall woman, beaming at the two of us. Cousin Patty had arrived.

Learning that I was trying to improve my voice, trying to lose my 'dreadful' Southern accent, Patty became my scourge, insisting that I practise with her, even when I was at my most hoarse. "I used to sound like an old hog caller," Patty told me. Cathy looked on, barely able to control her mirth. "Just like you, my girl. But if you do what we are telling you, darling Michelle, you are going to be charming every single man at my cousin's wedding."

Patty wouldn't hear of us staying in, either. She took Cathy and me on a tour of the neighborhood, introducing Cathy to all the people coming to her wedding. I was flustered

to be introduced as Cathy's cousin, Michelle. With Patty, we were invited into places that we would have been thrown out of if we had appeared as Cathy and Mike Brown. I didn't have to say anything, Patty did most of the talking. I did learn from Mrs Burnsford, though, how to curtsy, which she made Patty and me practice until we got it right.

"A pretty girl like Michelle is going to be a bridesmaid many times over," said Mrs Burnsford to Cathy, "which is why she must learn these girlish things. I suppose that you can dance, not those wild things that hussies in miniskirts do these days, but real dancing, like the waltz and the foxtrot."

"She's right," said Patty emphatically as we got back to the Knob Hill house and took off our gloves and little jackets, with our dresses flowing out behind us. She got out some music and I had to dance with her. She took the male part as she discovered how little I knew of ballroom dancing. I was a total wreck from all the women who had looked me over. Most had said that I was 'cute,' their attention being on the other girls, but I was shaking all the time as I tried to be as girlish as Jack's cousin and my ex-wife. Cathy told everyone how pretty I was in my bridesmaid's dress, much lovelier than she, the bride, was going to be.

Patty insisted that we dress in ball gowns for dinner. She came in and re-arranged my hair which I had been careful not to touch. I was sitting in my slip when she came into my room, took up my comb and brush and made my hair sweep up behind my head. She was appalled that I only had one stud earring at each ear. "Every girl I know has at least two these days," she said, putting long danglers in my ears. They swung away freely with no hair to entangle them.

Patty was zipping me into a long, black and white gown when Cathy came hurrying in. "Oh, you girls don't need me," she said but I did as Patty insisted that I change my makeup to a more striking standard.

I felt stupid, trying to sweep elegantly down the stairway as the two real women with me did so easily in their high heels. Cathy had shown me how to hold up the front of my dress so that I didn't trip on it. I shuddered as I looked at my bare chest and the rounded pads below. I minced down the hallway in my high heels, my skirts swirling about my legs. I still thought of myself as a man in a dress and not as Michelle, despite Cathy calling me that all the time.

David Merchant and Patty's husband, Neil, were waiting for us in the dining room in tuxes and bow ties. I had to curtsy to both of them, holding my skirts out properly as a young girl should. I made Mrs Burnsford proud.

"You didn't tell me that you had such a pretty cousin," said Neil gallantly. He lifted my hand and kissed it, making me flush all over as I tried to be like a woman. I curtsied for David who should have know who I was. We had gone to school together after all. But he just followed Neil's example and kissed my hand.

"There was no point," David said, smiling at my trembling lips, covered in lip gloss. "Michelle is spoken for. She's the girl Jack has been mooning over for the last year."

Neil and Patty turned their attention on me in astonishment. "You're the girl who's been leading him such a merry dance?" asked Patty with a laugh.

I shook my head, feeling my earrings dancing and knowing that my face was burning as well. I was a man in a dress. Couldn't they see that? And where was Jack? I *had* to see him and tell him to call this whole thing off. I couldn't go on like this for another week or more, wearing women's clothes and trying to ape the gestures of the real women who were with me. My groin hurt and my feet hurt as Cathy had insisted that I wear high heels all day. I even had to dance with Patty as a girl, my feet in high heels.

"No, not me," I croaked and the boys winced as they looked at me.

"My fault," said Patty cheerily. "I've been helping Michelle with her acting voice lessons." Where had such an explanation ever come from? "And we have overdone it. But don't you worry, boys, I'll have her singing like a nightingale before the week's out. And as for Jack and this cutie, he's got a poor way of showing his interest in her staying away from here."

"He doesn't want to see us in our special dresses," said Cathy, looking gorgeous as she smiled broadly at me.

More likely, he's a coward, I thought, waiting to see if I can pass muster with all his friends and neighbors before he puts in an appearance. Oh, I hadn't thought to ask Cathy where my men's clothing had disappeared to. I'd have to ask her when I could get her alone. Oh, I shivered when David put his arm about me and slowly led me to the dinner table. I sat as gracefully as I could, a man in a long dress. My dress rustled against me as I sat down.

"Carlos Sevilla will be coming in tomorrow," said Patty, stroking her husband's arm lightly. "I didn't tell you that, Michelle. He taught me how to dance in the front room here on the floor Uncle Jack put in for me. Jack's a great dancer as well, you know, and Carlos is a great teacher."

"And a great lecher," said David Merchant with a laugh.

"He just likes to kiss his students," said Patty with a laugh. "We don't take him seriously, David, but kissing him can be a dream sometimes."

"I hope Jack doesn't catch him kissing Michelle," David said, teasing me, not knowing how much he panicked me, teasing me as if I truly was a girl. "My brother is very possessive, Michelle, so save Carlos' life, give him a peck or two and don't leave your lipstick on his mouth. Jack isn't going to share your lovely lips with anyone, not even an old friend like Carlos Sevilla."

"So you're having a hen party tomorrow," said Neil to his wife. "David and I are going golfing then."

"The Ladies' Golf Club has the course tomorrow from ten o'clock," said Cathy earnestly. "Martha Webber was telling us that today. She wanted us to play nine but Michelle has never really played."

Mrs. Webber had smiled and offered to lend me clubs, saying that playing from the Ladies' tee markers was easy for anyone. Besides, ladies don't count any scores above ten per hole anyway, she said as I tried to smile and agree with my ex-wife. I had of course played in school as part of my junior year physical education and I could get around a course. I

didn't play because I couldn't afford to, certainly not at an exclusive club like Pelham Meadows.

"That's okay," said Neil with a big smile. "I was going to suggest the Ravine course to David anyway. The front nine at the Meadows is just for sissies. It would suit you girls fine."

I looked sharply at him through the fringe of false eyelashes on my eyes. Was that a dig he was taking at me? Did he know about me? Neil was holding a chair for Patty to sit; she smiled up at him and chattered on about all the women we visited that afternoon.

Neil scampered from Patty then to hold my chair for me and David did the same for his future wife, pawing the girl I had married. I sat as daintily as I could opposite her and had to watch their sickening display of affection.

Funnily, we were served at supper by men. One I recognized as Vic, the security man who had been assigned to drive David and Cathy to the airport when they ran away to Las Vegas with the money Jack had given them.

Vic winked at me as he served me with soup. I tried to sit there, my skirts about me, earrings bobbling against my neck, smiling as if I was enjoying myself. Patty was going on about how we surprised Bob Hartwell. The finicky president of the golf club had been sitting beside his pool in a singlet and trousers with suspenders, reading the morning paper in the middle of the afternoon. Thanks to Patty, I didn't have to talk and entertain the men, which would have been awful.

Neil did try to include me in the conversation but both women jumped to my defense, telling the men how bad my throat was and that they shouldn't force me to talk.

"Thank you," I whispered. They all laughed as if I had made a tremendous joke.

"No maids at work around the house?" asked Neil when Vic brought in a roast and expertly carved it for us.

"Not until next week," said Vic cheerfully. "Mr. Merchant wasn't expecting guests this week and he arranged to be dining out all this week. But Mrs. Hull is still here in the kitchen, looking after us security guys. We don't mind serving you all if you don't mind living with all the etiquette mistakes we make."

"You'll be at the wedding, though?" asked Neil in a friendly tone.

"Oh, yes," said Vic with a smile. "Unlike our boss, who doesn't want to see the bride or bridesmaids in their dresses till the day. We've seen them come in and we can't wait to see you gorgeous ladies all dressed up."

"Why does Johnny need to have so much security around the place?" asked Patty as the man served us. I wondered where Jack was that night. I thought that he would have liked to witness my silliness in trying to accommodate his plan of deception. Perhaps he didn't want to look at me any more now that I knew how he had deceived me to get me into a dress again.

"There are a lot of precious objects in this house," said Vic seriously and he winked at me. Everyone saw him and laughed. I squirmed in my long dress and wished I was anywhere but in that room dressed the way I was.

Cathy came and sat with me as I prepared for bed as a girl again, thanking me profusely for what I was doing for her and telling me how wonderful I had been all day with Jack and David's family friends. And she was sorry about what Patty had done. She hadn't told Cathy about the dancing lessons but it was a good idea. We both needed to improve our dancing.

"I'm worse than you at dancing like a woman," Cathy said with a smile as I stored away my false eyelashes and creamed my face. "You and Jack looked good on the dance floor together. I wish I had thought to take photographs of you both. Oh, the photographer is coming in on Thursday. We'll have to clear everyone out then for our dressing-up day.

"It's so nice to have you here with me, Michelle. I feel like I have a real girlfriend to talk to at last. You *are* enjoying yourself, aren't you? Patty is planning all our time now and you have to go everywhere with me. We have to go to the florists tomorrow after our dancing class. There's going to be a bridal shower at the weekend as well, my last weekend as a single woman."

Cathy said the last in a tragic tone and I wanted to remind her that she wasn't actually a single woman. She seemed to have forgotten entirely that, if she hadn't wanted money so much, we would probably still be married. I could be making love to her in the frilly canopied bed in which I was going to be sleeping, in a nightie just like hers, no doubt.

"Mine, too," I told her and that started her giggling.

"Isn't it wonderful to be in a place like this?" Cathy asked me, touching the satiny coverings on the bed I was to sleep in. "Do you know how much this nightie that you sleep in costs? It's genuine silk, you know."

"Where did it all come from?" I asked her and knew the answer even as I asked.

"Jack," Cathy said. "He said that, if Michelle did come to my wedding, you wouldn't have anything at all. He wanted to make sure you had everything a bridesmaid should have. He was supposed to be back tonight to help me with your voice training but I told him how good Patty has been about it. He said Linda wanted him to stay over and so he thought that he would."

"He's staying over at the Sweatham's?" I asked. We could have walked over to Linda's in five minutes from Jack's house, even if I was in high heels and a tight skirt.

"He and Linda have always had a thing," said Cathy lightly, brushing my hair over the stud earrings she'd helped me put in. "I think that was half of the reason he was so miffed at David for that big party he had here when Jack was supposed to be in New York."

"He's not pressuring her to be your bridesmaid then?" I asked her curiously. I sat in women's underwear with my wife and she plaited my hair into little pigtails to sleep in, telling me it would keep my hair looking the way it had been for Alexander when I brushed it out the next day.

"After what she did to me, I didn't want her here," grimaced Cathy. "I wanted my best friend to be my bridesmaid. I wanted you. Jack said that he would persuade you and, look, here we are, bride and bridesmaid. Isn't it wonderful?"

Oh, yes, I thought with a shiver as she hugged me. I was going to tell her then that I didn't think it was so wonderful but there was a tap on our half-opened door. David

looked in, smiling from ear to ear as he looked at me in my bra and panties, my legs so long and bare on the bed where I had lain beside my wife.

“Coming to bed, darling?” David asked. Cathy got up with a beautiful smile, tossing the silk nightie over me, dancing with delight to the door to throw herself in David’s arms.

“Sleep tight,” David wished me. How could I sleep any other way? I thought miserably to myself. There was security out on the grounds with dogs. Jack had neatly imprisoned me in his Knob Hill home; he wasn’t even there to gloat over me and my attempts to be feminine. No, he was off sleeping with some other woman.

Then the absurdity of it hit me. Was I feeling jealous? What was I thinking of myself as I thought of Linda as ‘some other woman’? How could there be ‘another woman’ when I wasn’t even a woman in the first place? I slipped on the nightie, shuddering as it gently swathed me. I went to the bathroom to turn off the light and then I saw myself. I saw this waif of a girl, the feminine contours of my face still there even after I had removed the makeup. It was my hair that did it. I wore it like a girl and the blonde streaks that Alexander had put into it made me even more girlish. My hand came up to the light, my hand with shiny, pink fingernails and I shuddered.

So *this* was what Jack saw when he looked at me, I thought, my figure looking so real since I had kept on my bra. I suppose that I was attractive in a skinny, little girl kind of way. I really should start eating more than the tiny amount I had had at dinner. Everyone had asked me to eat more but I couldn’t. The soup alone had been as much as I normally had in the evening. Wouldn’t it be something if I started eating like Neil and David, making a pig of myself? It would make Jack dump me from his list of oddities to be cultivated.

I went to bed, thinking of him with a real woman. By about three, I had convinced myself that he deserved her, then I was able to sleep.

I wished I had had more sleep as I went through a rigorous day of training to be a woman. I felt as if I was useless and had two left feet in my high heels. Carlos left after kissing my hand as I curtsied to him.

“Another day or two,” Carlos said to me with a smile, “and you will be my star pupil, Michelle.”

I grew so used to the soft touch of my wide dancing skirts that the tight skirt felt ultra-feminine when I put it on and went out about the upscale shopping stores in Pelham. Patty pulled me into an adult love shop. I turned crimson with embarrassment as she talked and showed me the gifts that we must, just must, buy for Cathy's party.

I didn’t know that vibrators came in so many sizes, shapes and colors. “Imagine that inside you,” said Patty of one huge dildo which a young salesgirl tried to talk us into buying. I couldn’t believe all the costumes I saw. I couldn’t speak as Patty urged me to try on a nurse’s costume. It sexy as all get out. It was also made for a girl who had something of a bust, a real one.

We did leave with a vibrator as Patty insisted every bride should have one for those lonely nights when hubby had to work. I bought scented massage oils which the salesgirl approved of, much to my quivering dismay. She began to tell me how to get my lover to apply them before Patty rescued me by telling her that we were buying them for a bride.

“Your voice is improving,” said Patty as we left the shop, “but you do have to try a little more, Michelle. Cathy told me all about the part you have in a movie if you can improve your voice so you have to work on it all the time. Can you repeat what I just said the way I said it?”

I tried and Patty laughed as I flushed again. “You sound like a guy in drag,” she said. I held her arm and we wiggled into the florists to purchase flowers for the last few unexpected guests.

Cathy looked up and smiled at us. “My bridesmaids, Michelle and Patty.” She introduced us to a girl I recognized from high school. I felt odd as she looked at me and said nothing. Angela Barnes didn’t seem to know me at all. I had sat next to her back in school, admiring her and wanting to talk to her, but she had ignored me even though I could have helped her get through Physics.

Cathy held pink carnations against my blouse and put one in my hair.

“That would be pretty,” said a smiling Angela Barnes.

“Anything looks good on Michelle,” said Patty. “Try a flower on me, Cathy.”

They all laughed at that as I quivered.

I hardly stopped quivering over the next few days as I was immersed in female company and preparations for a wedding. I had to be there, sitting beside my wife, in a dress of rustly petticoats, throughout a sedate shower. A day later, there was another wild shower of randy girls I hadn’t realized that Cathy even knew.

I didn’t even know they had male strippers at the Western club we used to frequent. I had never seen so many tipsy, screaming women. We spent part of her bachelorette party there and I had to put money in a man’s g-string as the well-muscled stripper insisted that I be the one to do it. Then he trapped my fingers; I was embarrassed in front of hordes of screaming women as it seemed that I was feeling him up. He made out that he was enjoying it.

Almost as bad was the dress rehearsal for the wedding, coming down the stairs all by myself with everyone looking at me. A grinning Vic stood in for Jack who was too busy to be there. I clicked down the steps on Vic’s arm. He positioned me in my purple dress right in front of the dais so that I would be the one to assist my wife in marrying another man by holding her flowers. I couldn’t have been closer to her if I had planned it myself.

Cathy was radiant through the rehearsals while David was kind of stunned. This was what she had missed in marrying me, I realized. She wanted to be a bride. She wanted to walk down the stairs in virginal white and out into the garden where Neil, apparently, was now going to stand in for her father and bring her to the front of the group where she would be married to another man. And her ex-husband would be right there, in his long, dark pink dress, to hug her and kiss her like a girl and wish her well with her man.

Cathy insisted on taking Patty and me out for a bite to eat after the second rehearsal. There was a rehearsal dinner after with David and his friends who would be going on to the traditional bachelor party.

“They’ll have a stripper,” said Patty with certainty as we got out of the car at Garrows, a fancy restaurant I had never been to. “They *have* to after we went to Ladies’

Night. Everyone has heard how Michelle got her money's worth fondling that guy who looked like Carlos."

She was always teasing me like that. I felt weird about it but at the same time it was nice of her to try to include me as one of the girls at the wedding. "Not like Carlos," I said and instantly regretted it as both girls looked at me.

"By Jove," said Patty in a very English accent. "I think she's got it. I do. I think she's got her part in whatever film she is up for."

"Say it again, Michelle," said Cathy, smiling at me, and putting her arm enthusiastically under mine. "You sounded like, well, like *me!*"

"Some recommendation," said Patty with a pout.

I was saying that I couldn't remember what to say. They were grinning at me as we entered the swankiest restaurant in town. And there, at the center table, hand in hand, sat Jack Merchant and Linda Sweatham.

I almost stumbled in my thin, high-heeled, shiny, patent leather shoes. I felt the silly skirt about me then and the stupid stockings about my legs. I felt my insane hair swirling at my neck, so soft and fluffy after a treatment that morning. Alexander who told me I must wear it loose, and put nothing on it as he wanted my perm to fall out a little before he did my hair again the next day for the wedding.

Jack was patting Linda's hand. She saw us coming in and deliberately leaned forward into Jack and they kissed. I felt so angry. We were ushered into a window alcove where we could look out onto the little river that ran through the town, the railway bridge. The railway line that divided it from Rowley looked quite elegant with its stone facings. A small sailing boat passing beneath made the whole scene picturesque. I could hear and feel nothing, however. I sat down and crossed my legs with a feminine rasp as the other girls exclaimed over the lovely view we had.

"Don't you think so?" asked Patty with an impish smile, turning to me. "Tell us, Michelle, what a lovely view of the river we have."

"We have such a lovely view of the river, don't you think?" I said, my voice squeaking with the anxiety I felt.

"Oh," said Patty, looking past me. "Oh, Jack. Who is that girl who's draped all over him?"

"That's Linda Sweatham," said Cathy, unable to keep the sneer out of her voice. "I was hoping that you girls hadn't seen him. Or her."

Patty leaned forward then and gently squeezed my hand. "Men can be such rats," she said to me earnestly and very kindly. "Even to pretty girls like you. You watch, tomorrow, I'll bet Jack is all over you."

"He has to be," put in Cathy. "He is the best man. You have to dance with him and be there as his assistant and mine all day long."

"Well, I'm going to give him a piece of my mind," said Patty, grimacing in her indignation. "He's treated you abominably this week, Michelle. And you've been so nice and so accommodating. You haven't pulled back from anything, have you, though I know you've

hated how crude I have been at times. I really wish we lived closer together. I would love to be real friends with you."

Cathy raised her eyebrows and smiled at me. "Forget him, Michelle," she said, trying to make a joke. At least, I think it was a joke. "There are plenty more fish in the sea."

"Yes," said Patty, picking up the refrain which I suppose was meant to make me feel better. "Did you see the way Vic was looking at you? No, you wouldn't have. You didn't even notice how Carlos was getting ready to kiss you until he did, did you? I'll bet you could have any man in here if you wanted, Michelle. You were the one they were checking out when we came over here."

"Hey!" said Cathy in mock indignation.

"Well, it's true," said Patty defensively. "Go and get married in California, Michelle. Anywhere far away from here. When you're a bride, you're going to be so beautiful that it will set the industry back years. Girls will be giving up big weddings after you're a bride because they can never be as beautiful as you."

"Please," I said, wishing I dared to raid Cathy's room to find my male clothes and get out of Knob Hill.

"Better," said Patty, smiling brightly. "I hope this movie you are supposed to be in gets made. I think you'll be a big star after people see you on screen. I really do."

"But don't you dare to be *too* beautiful tomorrow," said Cathy assertively. "I couldn't bear if my hus..., if my bridesmaid is prettier than I am as I follow her down the aisle. It's *my* day, after all, Michelle. You'll have yours, some day."

I was numb the next day as I got ready for the wedding. It was as if *I* was the bride, with the extra care I had to take getting ready. Cathy had taught me well. I shaved my legs properly. I scented my body in all the right places after soaking in fragrant waters. I taped and tucked and put on my blushing pink underwear and when I finished, I looked like a girl. I had just donned my slip when there came the knock at my door. Then the experts took over me, doing my hair, my nails and my makeup. When I put on my stockings and my shoes, I felt like a Michelle. Maya ummed and ahed as I put on the bridesmaid dress. Then she arranged my hair about the halter top.

I had my velvet choker in place and my long gloves on as Patty came in, looking beautiful in her long dress, the spitting image of mine. "Oh," said Patty, handing me a bunch of white and pink flowers. "You do so much to that dress that I just can't. I thought *I* looked great until I stood next to you!"

"You *do* look great, Patty," I told her and she beamed.

"Your voice has held up today," Patty said. She smiled as Maya dashed on my perfume again. "Come on, though, Michelle. We have to attend to the bride and help her to dress. Is she ever in a tizzy about her hair!"

I went with Patty into Cathy's room where anything Alexander did was wrong for her. "Oh, you girls look so beautiful," Cathy said, jumping up in her stockings and stiff, under-wired petticoat. She hugged us both, pressing breasts that were larger than I remembered into me.

Cathy saw me start at seeing them and she giggled. She leaned forward and whispered in my jewelled ear, "Ask me about them after my honeymoon. I'll tell you where you can get yours done, your rear as well, a full T and A job. David loves me like this. You can bet Jack will fancy you even more when you've had yours done."



The mention of Jack made me feel ridiculous. I was here as my wife's bridesmaid all because of him. He was welcome to the odious Linda, I thought to myself, and that would be that. I would have fulfilled my part of whatever bargain Jack had with my ex-wife and I would be free from them all, from Cathy and David and Jack. Suddenly there was Patty, smiling and bringing in the photographer which calmed the panicky Cathy a lot. The photographer wanted a picture of me, then wanted a picture of my garter. I didn't know I even had a garter until a giggling Cathy brought them out as a gift to Patty and me. Cathy's was white and had a light blue ribbon about it. Patty's and mine were dark pink like our dresses.

I found my heart beating fast as I lifted my dress and put the garter below my knee. Patty laughed and raised my dress higher, putting the garter high on my thigh, where the top of my stocking began. The photographer was flashing away. Patty exposed my garter belt and my blushing pink

panties as she snapped the garter about my thigh.

"You do mine," Patty said and I did. My fingernails were so long that I could barely get the garter set. Patty apologized for having such chubby thighs.

We assisted Cathy then. I mean that Patty did. I just stood by and goggled as Cathy put on her gorgeous dress; it fit to her with a tight bodice covered by lace. So she had a corset on. She fitted into her size four dress and her breasts were more prominent than I ever recalled. Alexander fitted her veil and put flowers into her upswept hair. Grinning, he brought pink flowers and put them in my dark, upswept hair.

Cathy had necklaces, earrings and bracelets for Patty and me, her real gift to us, the first woman's jewellery I had ever owned.

It was then just a matter of waiting, a time for thinking how absolutely stupid all of this was. The photographer insisted on more photos of the three of us. "I love these dresses," said Patty as we posed. "We can wear them anywhere as evening gowns, can't we? You did such a good job of picking them out, Cathy."

I was aching with all the smiling for the photographer.

"Oh, I didn't pick them," Cathy said. "Jack did. He saw them and said how great Michelle would look in one of those dresses. Since he is the one paying, that's what you have."

"Jack's paying for your wedding?" asked Patty. I thought again how sneaky that man was about getting me in a dress, and not just any dress, but one that he had chosen for me, Mike Brown, his one-night stand.

Cathy told Patty about their allowances and how David had blown all their money in the casinos. He wasn't going back there again, once they were married, she told Patty definitely.

The photographer opened the door and signalled to Patty. "They're ready for you," he said. Patty, rolling her eyes at me after what Cathy had told her, went gracefully down the soft carpeted hall to the top of the stairs. Cameras were flashing as Patty gracefully went down the stairs, her bouquet of flowers in her hands.

"Mikey," whispered Cathy, and I turned to the blonde vision in white still with me in the room. "I wish this could be you I'm marrying," my ex-wife said, a catch in her voice. She hugged me and looked me up and down. "But I *have* to have this, Mikey, I really do. I *have* to have money and thanks to you, I do. I'll love you forever for this, you know."

"Cathy," I gulped through my heavily glossed lips. I would have hugged her and kissed her and taken her out of there then as my wife again but she ran her hand down my arm.

"Go on," Cathy said. "They're calling you, Michelle. Oh my goodness, but do you ever look beautiful."

I didn't feel beautiful. I felt like what I was, like a man in a dress as I stumbled forward and went to the top of the stairs. The foyer and the route through the living room were packed with people. Camera bulbs were popping as I tried to be dainty and graceful going

down the stairs as we had practiced. I held my dress clear of my high heels. It seemed to take forever but I managed it.

Only as I sashayed to the tent on the lawn did I remember to smile a little and I saw several people applauding me. Way ahead of me, I saw Patty reaching the dais and I started down the runway. I was a model on the runway, Patty had coached me. That's how I kept it together, my hands shaking, my smile fixed. I reached the line of jacketed men, then the organ music changed. I heard everyone rise as the bride entered and followed after me, but she had Neil's arm to steady her.

It took me a moment to register that I was standing next to Jack Merchant and his brother as I paused exactly where I was supposed to. My bouquet shook as I looked up at iron grey eyes staring at me. Jack looked at me as if he had never seen me before.

Then he and David moved forward and I stood there shaking as Cathy came forward, smiling brilliantly beneath her veil. She handed her flowers to me and I stepped away and the marriage ceremony began.

It was all a blur to me. I was only aware of Jack standing there, so tall and dark in his morning coat, like his brother. I saw the ring, I saw Cathy unveiled, I saw her kissing a very unsteady David Merchant and I sensed one of the groomsmen near to me swaying as well. I knew they must have been very, very drunk the night before after the bachelor party. *My* bachelor party, I thought bitterly, had been Dr Peppers with Cathy in the Clinton rooming house.

Then Jack looked at me and I thought he knew what I was thinking. But he looked down at the flowers I held so I moved forward, my skirts almost trapping my ankles. I gave Cathy her flowers. She smiled brilliantly at the audience and began to walk down the aisle with her new husband.

Jack offered me his arm and I had to take it. He took very short strides so I was able to mince down the aisle on his arm as the people in the seats applauded. He must have felt me shaking as we were arrayed about the radiant bride and groom. Neil had taken charge of Patty; she just smiled up at him, obviously playing over her own wedding in her mind as she looked at her husband with real affection. They kissed and everyone called to them with goodnatured bantering. Then Cathy and David kissed.

"We have to oblige them," said Jack as people were calling. I was shaking my head, saying 'no' as he swung me in front of him. Then he smiled and lowered his lips to mine. His arms were like bands of iron pressing me to him, saving me from falling over. I found myself almost fainting at the surge of emotion rushing through me. I was shuddering and shaking as his wonderful lips took possession of mine. Somewhere, dimly, in the background, I heard people shouting and I didn't care about what. I only cared about the man who was kissing me and making me so female. Oh, I wished that I was female, as I clung to him, kissing and kissing him, wishing that it would never have to stop.

"Oh my," I heard Patty say from somewhere close. I shivered and clutched Jack as I couldn't move in my high heels. His arms slackened.

"I have to let you go, Michelle," I heard Jack whisper, "but not because I want to. This is David and Cathy's day but I promise you, later, it is going to be our night."

What had I done? The thought transfixed me all through the afternoon and evening of Cathy's wedding. The funny thing was that everyone seemed to be so pleased that I had made a fool of myself, kissing Jack as I had. I could still feel the imprint of his kiss all through the afternoon. I could feel his lips on mine through the incredible meal during which I had to sit between David and Neil at the head table. Every time I looked up, it seemed that someone was staring at me from the other tables, some member of the wealthy people of Upper Pelham trying to place me in their mind.

There were interminable speeches and I was toasted as one of the bridesmaids. Neil chatted to me as much as his wife did. I learned that he was an architect in 'the city,' by which he meant New York. He worked for a firm Jack owned. It was at some reception given after a 'tapping out', whatever that meant, about a skyscraper I supposed, that he met Patty. I heard all about his plans to be independent in a year or so. I heard all about his designs for his own house. I smiled as he told me that Jack had commissioned him for a completely new house design for a huge tract of land he had acquired in Pennsylvania.

"This might be the last gathering you ever see in this place," Neil told me. "It's all about money markets these days, not manufacturing. The Merchants have closed down all their plants in town." He mentioned every factory and mill that made up the industrial sector of Pelham and Rowley. "And you'll be moving on as well, won't you? I hear from Patty that you're going to be in some movie. When you're rich and famous, you can be one of my clients as well."

Rich and famous? I was more likely to be infamous, I thought miserably. We cheered on Cathy and David as they led us all into the refurbished ballroom area and began dancing together. We all applauded and I smiled and smiled as if I enjoyed seeing my wife marry another man. Then David and Cathy split and David came for me to dance. I had to lift my dress into my hand so that I wouldn't trip and fall with him.

David laughed as I moved easily with him in the old-fashioned waltz, my dress tight about my feminine figure. "I didn't tell you how much I fancied you myself when I first saw you in Linda's dress, did I, Michelle?" the groom whispered in my ear on this, his wedding night. "I thought Jack was giving you to me and I did fall for you, I guess. Would I have had a chance with you? Cathy told me Jack had set his sights on you and I would never cross Jack. But if you do ever fall out with him..."

You rat, I thought. I looked over at Cathy dancing with Jack. She looked so happy, smiling and laughing at Jack. He was smiling back at her. He even bent and kissed her. And so it went on. I smiled and was a good girl even as I felt sorry for my ex-wife. David Merchant was no catch. Believe it or not, I did want her to be happy in the rest of her life, a life without me.

I danced almost every dance and got to know all the menfolk of Knob Hill. They all told me what a lovely girl I was and how they envied Jack Merchant. It chilled me when Bob Hartwell said that to me with a smile as he hugged my narrow waist. Then I heard it from Alfred Burnsford, Tom Webber and a host of other men who were all taken in by the

beauty of my dress, the exquisite work of Alexander the hairdresser and the beauticians Cathy had hired.

I wouldn't look like this in the morning, I thought, wondering if I dared to go back to Par-tonsville in a dress. But I didn't have my keys, I suddenly remembered. I had to speak to Cathy before she got away, I thought in panic, and find out where my male clothes were.

I hadn't realized that Cathy and Patty had slipped out and changed into normal clothes. For Cathy, that meant a white silk suit. There she was, hugging and kissing every-one, crying and laughing as rice and confetti cascaded down on the bridal couple. They were swept out of the ballroom to where a limousine was awaiting them on the patio.

I couldn't reach Cathy but she gave me a huge smile, waved to me and blew me a kiss. I watched her leave and felt empty inside. I was leaning against a pillar as the car pulled away. Horns were blaring and everyone was yelling and having a great time.

Then I felt an arm about my waist. Turning, I looked up into Jack Merchant's hand-some face. "You've been avoiding me," he said curtly. I shivered as the party resumed again with a wild set of dances led by the enthusiastic band leader, pitching *YMCA* and *La Macarena* to a crowd of older people who followed his lead. The party began to heat up.

I didn't say anything as Jack held me away from the floor, his arm about me, but the tension inside me rose and rose.

"Patty tells me I've been awful to you," Jack murmured.

I shuddered at his arm about me so possessively. I saw several people look at us, do a double-take, then smile. "Linda is not here and, no, I have never slept with her," Jack said to me as he ran a hand over my bare arm. "I wondered why she kissed me in Garroways. Patty told me you all saw it, Cathy and you and her. Linda's brother, Rob, was my best friend in high school, years before your time. I've been playing golf with him and taking Linda out on occasion over the last three months, as she'll tell you herself, to give Rob some space with his girlfriend. She's the wiggly girl in the fringed yellow dress and that's Bob she's trying to do the Lambada with."

"You don't have to tell me all that," I murmured. Jack suddenly pushed me towards the floor as the music slowed down. He turned me to have me waltz with him. I could barely move in my long dress. I know I was shaking as he held me close to him.

"I wish that you had taken me up on my offer," Jack said huskily as he directed me about the floor. "*You* should have been the bride today, you know."

"Don't say things like that, Jack," I told him unsteadily. He smiled at me.

"I *love* this voice you're using," he said. "It's sending shivers right through me, as is this perfume you're using."

The band went into another waltz. Jack spun me on my high heels and I was terrified that he would trip on my dress. But we didn't and he held me even tighter.

"Please, Jack. You know what I am. Don't treat me like this."

"I know very well who you are," Jack said to me, smiling as he looked down at me. "You are the most beautiful girl in the room. I am going to treat you this way because this

is what you are. Didn't I tell you that my night here belongs to you? Now if we can only get all the people here to go home, you and I could catch up on a year's lost time."

I blanched at that. He kissed the top of my lovely, upswept hairdo as we circled the floor. He held my hand or had his arm about me for the rest of the night, circulating with me through the non-dancers as the older people started to go home. He took off his jacket but kept hold of me so that I had to wish goodnight to everyone as Jack played the genial host. I was kissed by many of the men and women I had come to know. The kisses on my cheek and the hugs made me feel funny and girlish as Jack insisted that he and I say good-bye to his friends as if we were a couple.

We were kept busy saying goodnight. When the band played its last waltz, only a few couples were still there, like Rob Sweatham and his girl friend. Jack didn't even ask me to dance, he just swung me onto the floor. We danced the last dance, then we said goodnight to everyone. Jack's arm was about me, making it quite clear to everyone that I was his and that I was going to be spending the night in the mansion while they all went home.

"Three o'clock," Jack said. Vic was there in a flash, smiling at me as I quivered on Jack's arm. "You'll see to the band and bar staff?" he asked Vic.

"Delighted to," said Vic with a big smile. "Take some champagne upstairs with you, boss, and relax. You both had a very long day."

Jack nodded, still not letting go of me as he took the glasses and the large bottle that another grinning security guy brought to us. I couldn't look the other man in the eye and I was surprised that Jack could. I needed to lift the skirt of my dress again as Jack directed me up the long, curved staircase.

Jack directed me right to the bedroom I had slept in for the last week and more. He put the champagne and the glasses on the dressing table. I just stood there, not telling him to leave, crying out, or protesting in any way, as he put his arms about me, stroking my bare back.

"Kiss me," he whispered. Almost without thinking, I lifted my head and did so. I put my arms about his neck and I kissed his warm, dry lips. It was such a terribly, awful, wonderful thing to do; strange, satisfying sensations raced through me. I wanted to kiss him. He kissed me back and I wanted him to go on kissing me for a long time.

"My beautiful girl," Jack said to me and he hugged me intensely. He took me to the bed. He dimmed the lights so that there was just the faintest illumination coming from the bedside lamp. He took off his shoes and socks; I sat nervously on the edge of the bed. He turned to me and pushed me down as I looked up at him. I was scared of him, scared of what I wanted him to do to me, scared that he would stop saying that I was his woman, scared that he wouldn't treat me as his woman.

Jack lay out beside me, hugging my body against his, my legs, thighs and calves against him. He kissed my neck and my earrings. Then his mouth found my lips. I was pressed down deeply into the bed. I quivered with the wonderful feelings going through me.

"Let's get it straight this time," Jack said hoarsely, his hand sliding down my back to my derriere, pulling me into him. I felt the bulge of his manhood. "You are my woman,

my darling Michelle," he said, one of his hands releasing the clasp on my dress. "We are going to make love, me the man and you the woman."

I shivered and looked up into his eyes. He was waiting for me to agree. I nodded, then buried my hot, flushing, guilty face into his starched shirt.

"And in the morning, when I reach for you, Michelle, you will be here beside me, my woman," he said. "You are not to leave me like you did last time. Say that you won't do anything as hurtful as that to me again, Michelle."

Jack wouldn't accept a shake of my head. He made me say it out loud.

"I'm your woman, Jack," I agreed, trembling all over. "And when you wake in the morning, I promise that I will be here with you, no matter *how* awful I look."

"You couldn't be ugly even if you tried," Jack said to me as he began to strip the women's clothing from me. It took him the longest time as we had to stop to kiss and fondle each other. He helped me take off my earrings, as well as the pins in my hair and the jewellery Cathy had said were her gift to me. Then I put my bare arms about his neck and hugged his head to me. I kissed him and he stripped to nakedness as I kept on my bra and panties.

We snuggled into the bed, then I was everything to him that a woman should be. I didn't push him off or try to stop him. I slipped off my panties myself. He produced a cream that made his passage into me a delight. I put my legs about him and kissed and kissed Jack as he made frenzied love to me. It truly was 'making love' because I loved it so. I loved his hands on me, caressing me as if I really was a girl and had girlish attributes. I wished I had and I remembered Cathy's words about a doctor who had done T and A work for her.

So womanly did Jack make me feel that I had all sorts of strange ideas and feelings; he stroked me gently and took me forcefully, not just once but many times during the night. Somewhere in there, he whispered, "I love you," to me and I whispered it back to him. And no, even though I woke up first, I didn't get up. I snuggled into my lover and waited for him to awaken, hoping that he would still feel the same way about me in the cold light of day.

Jack woke. He twitched and I cringed back into the corner of the bed as far from him as I could get. He turned over and sat up in one motion, reaching out and patting the bed beside me. He touched the nightie I had slipped on to disguise at least a little bit what he had in bed beside him.

"You didn't run away!" he said, sliding right up against me. His hands went about my waist, holding the thin layer of silk against me. I felt his strong, sinewy legs against mine.

"No," I said shakily, knowing that I should have. I'm sure Vic would have called me a taxi and let me leave without waking Jack. I could have put on makeup and a dress, the little black one that was right at the front of the walk-in closet full of female clothing. I knew that dress. I had worn it before.

Jack had had his night with me. He had had his second night. I had fulfilled his indecent proposal to my wife to sleep with her husband. I was sure now that that was what he must have paid her for, not once, but twice. Twice I had let this man treat me totally as a woman. I had been as womanly as I could be for him. I had kissed him and run my hands over his well-developed, masculine body as any real girl would have loved to do.

I had guided his manhood into me and guided his hands over me, even my padded breasts, as I made love to him. He had moaned and told me what an incredible woman I was as we rocked together. I made a mess all over him, coming before he was able to. He laughed at my stammered apologies and kissed me so fiercely for so long that I welcomed him rolling me again on my back, wrapping my smooth, caressed legs about him. I welcomed his attempts to penetrate me again and make me feel everything that a woman feels when she makes love to a man.

I only had to murmur, "I'm your woman," and he seemed to surge inside me, clasp me tightly and kissing me so ardently that it seemed we were just one person in bed. He fell asleep on me and I had had to ease myself free of him. Sometime in the night he had turned over. I dozed beside him and tried to contemplate what he would do with me when he saw me there, still with him, as I had promised, the following morning.

I thought miserably about how I would have to stay off work for a week or more until my eyebrows grew back. I must cut off my permed hair if I wanted to be a man again. I had thought of moving, then I had thought of Jack and how I felt when I had come up the stairs in my slinky dress with him. I had enjoyed thoroughly the experience of being treated as a woman.

Jack's arms about my waist pulled me to him and he kissed me. His face was all bristly and he didn't smell too sweetly but he kissed me. I tried to hide my face as I had no makeup on at all and he was seeing me as I was.

"You've bathed," he murmured, his hands touching my face. "You smell so flowery and I smell like," he lifted his arm and grimaced, "like a man who just ran a marathon. I bet my breath could gag a maggot as well, couldn't it. I'm making your face all red where I touch you."

I didn't care. He had kissed me. He hadn't hit me or pushed me to the floor, two of the things I dreading he might do. I tentatively put my thin arms, thin in comparison to his, about him and tried to pull him against me. I kissed him on the lips and he didn't pull back in horror, though his eyes were open as he looked down at me.

"Ah," he groaned as he kissed me; I clung to him. We lay together for a while as he played with my mouth. I felt a stirring in the dark pink panties I had found and put on. He was the one who broke away and got out of our bed. I pulled the blankets up about me. Now, I was sure, he was going to tell me how he was going to get rid of me after all.

"Can you make up by yourself?" Jack asked me. "Or shall I call for one of the maids to come and help you?"

"I-I can do it," I said hoarsely.

"Good," Jack said, looking at the closet where all the female clothing that Cathy had bought was displayed. "Put on that little black dress you wore last time we were together,

will you, and we'll conclude this business as we should have at the end of our first night together."

He went into the bathroom and I heard him showering, humming a song here and there. I dressed as hurriedly as I could, putting on the dark stockings that Cathy had left to be worn with that dress. I put on my gaff, the black panties and the black bra, using the old padding that Cathy, it must have been her, had put in a bag and left with the dress.

I didn't need the wig. I brushed my own hair as Alexander had showed me and it all seemed to come back to shape. I was fixing my eye makeup when Jack came out of the bathroom, dancing up behind me. He kissed my shoulder and smiled at me in the mirror as I looked at him in petrified fear.

"I know," Jack said. "You women all hate being interrupted when you're putting on your makeup. But I couldn't resist, darling, you look so adorable. Wait for me while I go and find some fresh clothes and settle some other matters."

I trembled as he left. He has said 'you women' and called me 'darling'. It took me a long time to get my eyelashes in place, my hands were shaking so. I had just blotted my mouth and stood up, smoothing down my dress, when he came in, talking on his cell-phone. He looked at me.

I felt so tiny beside him until I put on my high heels. He grinned at me. "See, I told you, Rob," he said. "We lay out the re-development plan and they'll go for it like mice do for the scent of cheese."

Jack led me out of our bedroom and down the stairs. He waved to people who were still cleaning the house after the ravages of the party. I found myself blushing at all the frank looks and knowing smiles cast at me. They didn't seem to bother Jack at all; he led me to the familiar room with the leather couches and the fireplace I had been in before. An older woman was arranging a table with candles and a rose. She smiled at Jack as we entered.

"So this is the young lady," she said, smiling at me.

Her words made me go hot all over. Jack introduced me to Mrs. Hull, his housekeeper and cook. "You could have let one of the maids do this," said Jack, pointing to the table. An enormous magnum of champagne sat in an ice bucket before the table on a movable trolley. There were at least a hundred glasses, flutes for champagne, beside it.

"I'll leave you to it," said Mrs. Hull, turning down the burners over which something very aromatic was being prepared for our lunch.

I dawdled uncertainly as Jack answered another phone call. "Yes," he said. "It's true. I am taking up residence in Pelham again. I'm going to redevelop the East Industrial. I will have Japanese partners but I'm going to leave openings in all of the projects for local investors. It should revitalize Pelham and we'll be growing as a city again. Yes, my wife and I will live here through all of the renovations. My brother and his wife will take care of New York. The challenge will do them good."

I went cold as I listened to him. Finally, Jack hung up and threw the phone onto the sofa. He took my hand and led me up to the table. I had never thought that Jack was married. I should have known, shouldn't I? I was just an exotic interlude, after all. I didn't feel

particularly exotic, though, as he drew back the high-backed chair in the sunny alcove, a step or two above the rest of the room. We could look out the window and see the tent where David and my wife had been married being taken down and stored on a huge truck.

"You are supposed to be paying attention to me," said Jack as he came around in front of me. He picked up the rose and presenting it to me. I didn't know what to do with a flower. What does a girl do when a man presents her with a red rose? I had no clue. I crossed my legs in my black stockings and sniffed at it.

It was very nice. I set it back beside the place setting but then Jack did the funniest thing. He smiled at me and went down on one knee in front of me.

"You could have denied me before because you were married," Jack said, still smiling at me. "But now, I know that you aren't so you can't deny me any more."

I couldn't think of anything I had denied him. I was sitting there, foolishly dressed like a woman, doing what he had wanted me to do. After this lunch, I must look for a way to slip out of here and let him and his wife have possession of their family home.

"I tried to give you part of my wealth," Jack went on, "but you wouldn't have it, not even ten million dollars. So, I have one last bid, Michelle, and it's this. All of my money, everything that I have, and most of all, me. Will you marry me, my darling, and make me the happiest man on the planet?"

"But I'm a m..," I began. He shushed me before I could complete the word.

"Remember what you said to me last night as we made love," Jack said. "Say it again."

At first I was mystified, then I remembered. "I am your woman," I said huskily. Jack beamed up at me. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a gold ring with a huge sapphire in the middle. He took my left hand and put it on me as I felt my heart flutter.

"I take that as yes, you will marry me," Jack said, standing and drawing me to my feet. I don't think that we ever kissed quite like that as I tried to grasp what I had just done. Luckily, he seemed to know. He whistled in all the staff and told them that I had said yes. I was besieged with people offering me congratulations and the reason for the champagne became obvious.

Jack held me tightly about the waist as we were toasted time and again as more and more people joined us. I hadn't realized that there were so many people in the house; they all seemed to know Jack and be very fond of him. My ring had to be seen and admired. I was so glad that I had a manicure and new nails put on for the wedding of my ex-wife.

"When are you going to get married?" asked Vic, winking at me as Jack held me possessively. "Are you going to get married here? We're going to have to do all of this again?"

There were loud groans from the clean-up crew at that but they were all smiling as well.

"Yes," said Jack. "My fiancée, Michelle, will need time to have her dress designed. I think the next wedding here is going to be even bigger than the last. Kate," he smiled at the woman who had organized the last for David and Cathy, "you can start on it right away. "Early spring, I think."

The wedding photographer flashed us as I was smiling up at Jack, wondering how the heck I was going to get out of this one. How could he even think that I was going to give up being who I was and become a woman, become his *wife*?

Jack set our wedding for the spring so that I could recover from my T and A and cosmetic surgery. He was with me through it all as I took on all the outward aspects of a woman, save for the most major.

Jack said he didn't care about that but I am thinking that for next Christmas, if I time it right, I can have the final surgery done. Then he can enjoy me in ways he never thought possible which, I think, he will adore about me.

Cathy saw me in a bikini after I had been augmented. We all went on a holiday in the Caribbean and I wasn't out of bikinis for two weeks. I have never worn so little clothing or had my body studied for so long by so many men. Jack couldn't keep his hands off my new body, saying that he loved driving other men green with jealousy when they saw what he could do with me but they couldn't. Our lovemaking was incredibly improved by me having breasts and a softer, bouncier derriere for him to play with.

Cathy said that I should do it before we got married but, frankly, I wasn't ready for it yet. Cathy is my best girl friend and we talk all the time about our men and about how we can make love to them in new ways to peak their interest in us. She was my bridesmaid and said that my bridal dress and the dress I had chosen for her and Patty and Linda were nicer than the ones at her wedding.

I'm often asked what my husband gave me as a wedding present. I just say a picture and, when they ask to see it, I tell them I can't show it to them. They think it's a nude of me, of course, but it isn't. He gave the large portrait he had had painted, from the photo taken on the day he asked me to marry him, to me but he has copies of the photo in his office in Pelham and New York.

When my husband phones me, he says that he's looking at me looking at him, and he tells me how he misses me when he has to stay away. And that's when we miss only a meal or a morning or afternoon together. He will never let me miss a night with him. So you can see why I love the portrait of me in my little, black dress. Without that little, black dress, I wouldn't be the satisfied woman that I am today.

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