



*Reluctant Press presents:*

# The Trans Interviews



**E. B. Stevenson**

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A 'NEW WOMAN' E-BOOK

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# **“THE TRANS-INTERVIEWS”**

**by E.B. Stevenson**

## **One**

Things were rather quiet around the offices of the magazine I worked for in the summer of 2010. I had been with Magruder’s, a socially conscious monthly magazine, since the summer of 2001. Unlike most magazines, which call New York home, this magazine was based in Toledo, Ohio. This is because the owner of the magazine, a billionaire philanthropist named Zachary Magruder, wanted to stay close to his home in Temperance, Michigan. I was forty-three years old, six feet, one inch tall, heavy-set with a crew cut, and a bachelor who moved around frequently in my previous career before

settling in Toledo. The editor I worked for was Melanie Davis, a young woman who had shoulder-length strawberry blonde hair and checking in at five-eleven. Since the spring of 2006, I have been working closely with a young photographer named Ian Ashford. He's a young man of twenty-four, five-ten, average build with shoulder-length, light brown hair. On the side, he played in a punk rock band; his group was a Sex Pistols tribute band. While I was living in a one-bedroom apartment near downtown Toledo, Ian was living with his girlfriend, Vicki Tomlinson, twenty-four, five-five with long black hair and a slender build, a writer for sister publication *The Romantic Bride*, and their eighteen-month-old daughter, Renée, in a small three-bedroom house in a middle-class part of town.

I had won several awards for my exposé of the radio broadcasting industry in the United States, which *Magruder's* published in the fall of 2009. I had worked in radio for sixteen years in the Midwest prior to joining the magazine's staff in New York; I moved with the magazine to Toledo the following year. Although my series of articles ruffled numerous feathers in my former profession, Zach and the editors stood by the story. I was researching another article, this one on emergency preparedness, with Ian at the office in downtown Toledo. Melanie had another idea.

I was sitting at my desk, wearing nothing but a camouflage T-shirt, a pair of tan slacks, and a pair of white sneakers, reviewing articles I was planning to cite for the emergency preparedness article. Ian was in a blue polo shirt, a pair of blue jeans and a pair of brown loafers. Ian and I were also listening to *The Talking Heads* on his laptop. I was in a gray polo shirt, a pair of slacks and a pair of athletic shoes, while Ian was in a blue T-shirt, a pair of blue jeans and a pair of

brown loafers. It was ten o'clock in the morning on June 28 when the phone in my cubicle rang. "Hello?" I answered.

"Would you and Ian like to come into my office?" Melanie asked.

"I'll be right there," I replied.

"Melanie?" Ian asked me.

"She wants to see us," I replied before I got up off my chair, and briskly walked to her office. Ian followed close behind. Melanie was in a mauve pantsuit that day.

"Bill, Ian, put the emergency preparedness article on hold for a while. I have another assignment for you," Melanie informed us as soon as I shut the door to her office behind me.

"What is it?" Ian asked her.

"It is one of the most groundbreaking assignments you will be going on. I have also assigned four other writers and their photographers on this one," she replied.

"We're not exactly Woodward and Bernstein, but we'll be more than happy to accept this assignment," I added.

"This is actually a series of articles we're planning for our October issue. This is Mr. Magruder's idea. The reason he came up with this idea is that his second son, Keith, is in the process of becoming a woman named Kara. She's a photographer for our sister publication, *The Romantic Bride*. We're sending five reporters and their photographers to profile ten transsexual women who are successful in their chosen fields. Two of our teams are going to Europe, one to Asia and one to Aus-

tralia and Brazil. You'll be staying in the United States for this one. For part one of the assignment, I'm sending you to St. Louis to interview Stephanie Thomas, one of the top bridal consultants in the country. After you're finished there, part two of your assignment will take you to Los Angeles, where you'll interview Dr. Erica Bentley, a psychologist who's one of the top specialists in the area of gender identity. I already have made your train reservations to St. Louis. You leave tomorrow morning; you'll have a four-hour layover in Chicago en route," she explained.

Melanie handed us the information packets on Mrs. Thomas and Dr. Bentley. When we got back to my cubicle, I was looking over the packet on Stephanie Thomas while Ian was checking his camera.

"They are very interesting ladies. Could we discuss this over a hot dog?" Ian asked me.

"Sure thing, Ian," I replied.

Around noon, Ian and I took a walk over to Tony Packo's. I ordered four hot dogs with just mustard, while Ian had his usual foot long hot dog, packed with chili and onions. We sat down at a table, where we discussed our assignment.

"As I recall, Mrs. Thomas has dealt with us before. Her bridal shop is one of the advertisers in *The Romantic Bride*," Ian told me.

"Who does the photography for the bridal magazine ads?" I asked him.

"Her brother-in-law, Paul Thomas; he's not only one of the top fashion photographers in the Midwest, but fancies himself quite the ladies' man. I did my internship with him in St. Louis."

“When I was working in radio, I had the privilege of interviewing her husband, E.S. Thomas. It was in 1996, when his third novel came out.”

“I saw the pictures of their wedding in *The Romantic Bride*. My girlfriend wrote the article.”

When he finished that sentence, Ian’s cell phone rang. While he was talking on his cell phone, I started in on my second hot dog. When he got off the phone, I asked him: “Who was it?”

“It’s Vicki. She asked if you could come over for dinner tonight, and I thought it was okay,” he replied.

“I’m especially looking forward to Renée climbing on my lap,” I added.

It was around seven o’clock that I arrived at Ian’s residence via taxicab. My car, a 2002 Ford Police Interceptor I bought at a police auction in Fort Wayne, was in the shop for routine maintenance. Vicki opened the door. She was in a pair of faded blue jeans, a red T-shirt and a pair of sandals. “Glad you could make it, Bill,” she said as I walked in the door.

“Thank you, Vicki,” I added.

“I hear your boss has the two of you on a groundbreaking assignment. This is going to be very interesting when it comes out in print,” she said as I was sitting down in one of their twin recliners.

Ian walked into the living room as soon as I sat down. “I had the hardest time putting that kid to sleep,” he said as if exhausted.

“Did Renée have trouble falling asleep again?” I asked him.

“She got scared stiff when she heard a popping sound an hour ago. Vicki walked out in our back yard,

and discovered a car had backfired before breaking down on the next street. I had to calm her down; she finally fell asleep a minute ago," he replied.

Vicki and Ian had prepared barbecued chicken, corn on the cob and garden salad for dinner. "Ian tells me you're going to interview two very successful transsexual women," Vicki said to me.

"That's true. Melanie has taken us off the emergency preparedness article for now. Mr. Magruder wants us to profile ten successful transsexual women; Melanie is sending five writers and photographers to different parts of the world. We drew the domestic assignment," I added.

"I wrote the story on the wedding of Stephanie and E.S. Thomas for *The Romantic Bride*. She's quite an interesting person," Vicki told me.

"We've been looking over the information packets on our subjects all day. We're not only going to interview Mrs. Thomas, but also Dr. Erica Bentley, who is one of the leading psychologists who specializes in gender identity disorders," Ian added.

After dinner, a courier had arrived with our train tickets. I signed for them. "Who was it?" Vicki asked.

"A courier came by to deliver our train tickets. We leave tomorrow morning; we need to be at the station at six o'clock," I replied.

After I left their house around nine o'clock, I went back to my apartment to pack my suitcase for a two-week trip. I even made sure I packed my laptop computer. Before I went to sleep, I put a red golf shirt, a pair of khaki slacks and a clean pair of socks on the chair. While I was away, I decided to let my cousin Caroline and her friend, Emily, use my apartment

while they were in Toledo for their internships. Caroline was interning at The Romantic Bride, while Emily was interning at Magruder's. The magazine only paid for the final three weeks of their internship. I was asked to provide them my apartment while I was on assignment.

It was five-thirty in the morning that Vicki and Ian arrived at my apartment building. They were driving a 2000 Cadillac Seville. Caroline and Emily were in the back seat. I gave the ladies the keys to my apartment; they carried their bags into the lobby, taking the elevator to my eighth floor apartment. I put my bags in the trunk. "Good morning, Bill," Ian said just before he yawned.

"Good morning, Ian. I'm pumped for this assignment; how about you?" I asked.

"I'm so amped for this assignment," he replied.

"We had to get a sitter for Renée; it's hard to get someone to come over and keep an eye on the kid at five o'clock in the morning. My sister Vanessa volunteered to watch over her," Vicki added.

"Isn't she the sister who attends Notre Dame?" I asked her.

"No, she attends Bowling Green. It's my kid sister, Tanya, who's one of the Fighting Irish," Vicki corrected.

When we arrived at the railroad station at six o'clock, I immediately got out of the back seat, and walked toward the trunk. Vicki pushed the button on the driver's side door to open the trunk. She gave Ian a smooch before he stepped out of their car. As soon as he opened the door, I had already taken the luggage

out of the trunk. "Have a safe trip, honey," Vicki told him as he was stepping out of the car.

"We will, dear," he assured her.

It was just before seven o'clock that the train arrived in Toledo. Most of the passengers were none the worse for wear. During the layover in Chicago, Ian and I discussed the story further, and walked over to a restaurant near Union Station to have lunch. We were back in time to catch the connecting train to St. Louis, which left at quarter over two in the afternoon. We would arrive in St. Louis just after seven o'clock in the evening.

## Two

When we arrived at the Gateway Transportation Center in downtown St. Louis, we hauled our luggage through the terminal, past lines of passengers preparing to board busses to different parts of the country. I suddenly spotted a young man in a chauffeur's uniform, holding a placard with our last names on it. "Are you Mr. Stevenson and Mr. Ashford?" he asked us.

"I'm Bill Stevenson, and this is the photographer, Ian Ashford," I replied.

"Mr. and Mrs. E.S. Thomas personally sent me to pick you up, and take you to your hotel. My name is Jay; Mrs. Thomas is looking forward to meeting you," he informed us.

"Riding in a limo; that sounds like fun," Ian added.

We were driven to a hotel in the Italian part of town known as The Hill. Ian and I were given adjacent rooms at the hotel when we checked in. A bit tired after the eleven-hour journey from Toledo, I decided to get

some sleep. Ian checked out his cameras in his hotel room before turning in for the night.

Our interview appointment with Stephanie wasn't until July 1 at one o'clock in the afternoon. That gave me the opportunity to catch up on reading the information packet provided by Dr. Erica Bentley. That morning, Jay drove us to pick up our rental cars. I wound up with a 2010 Chevrolet Camaro, while Ian was able to get a 2010 Honda Fit. Ian decided to make an advance to Stephanie's Brides and Belles. Taking one of his cameras, he left the hotel around ten o'clock; it only took him ten minutes to get to the establishment, located in St. Louis' Central West End.

He walked into the shop with his Minolta camera on a strap around his neck, and immediately began to study the surroundings. One of the consultants emerged from the back room, wearing a white blouse, pink skirt, white stockings and pink high heels. "May I help you?" she asked.

"I'm just browsing, thank you," he replied.

"Do I remember you from somewhere?" she then asked.

"I'm Ian Ashford. I interned with Paul a few years back," he replied.

"I remember you. You set up the lighting on one of the shoots. You may remember me, I'm Melissa Horton," she added.

"Your hair was a lot longer when I interned with Paul."

"I got a new style after Haleigh got married last year."

"Do you remember Vicki Tomlinson?"

“Yes, I remember her. She wrote the article on Stephanie’s wedding.”

“We’re living together in Toledo now. We have a four-month-old daughter named Renée. She still writes for *The Romantic Bride*.”

“I heard that you were assigned to take the photos for an article Magruder’s is doing on Stephanie. She picked the perfect time to take off. Haleigh, Stephanie’s assistant, has given you permission to take pictures in the shop.”

“Thank you for telling me, Melissa.”

While he was taking pictures of Stephanie’s bridal shop, Melissa asked him: “Whose idea was this?”

“This is entirely the idea of our magazine’s owner, Zachary Magruder. His daughter, Kara, is transitioning from man to woman,” Ian replied.

“Who’s doing the interview with Stephanie?”

“Bill Stevenson is doing the interview. He interviewed her husband when he was still in radio.”

“Eric has wondered what’s become of him. It was a shame when he was forced out due to his station being sold twelve years ago.”

After spending an hour and a half taking photos of Stephanie’s *Brides and Belles*, including one of Melissa helping a prospective bride with her fitting, Ian returned to his hotel room to look over the pictures he took. In the meantime, I was meeting with Paul Thomas, who was going over the details.

“Bill, Stephanie has asked that you conduct the interview in the living room. We have already told Ian that we want some pictures of her with her husband, and a few pictures of her working with a prospective

bride. She will expect both of you to be wearing a suit and tie for the interview. I'm sure you and Ian packed a suit or two for the interview," Paul explained.

"We've packed two suits for this assignment," I added.

"Stephanie will be looking her best for this interview. The interview is scheduled for one o'clock tomorrow afternoon. She is requesting that you be there ten minutes before the interview is to start; you are to wait in the living room. I've already gone over the questions with your editor; I'm sure you have a copy of the questions."

"I have a copy of the questions I'm going to ask her. That was included in the packet you sent the magazine."

"I look forward to seeing you tomorrow, Bill"

"Ian is looking forward to it as well."

"Ian Ashford is with you on this assignment?"

"You taught him well, Paul."

That evening, Ian and I were at an Italian restaurant, splitting a pizza and having linguine in meat sauce. "I'd take it Paul covered all the bases this afternoon," he said.

"He did. I take it you took some fantastic pictures at the bridal shop," I added.

"When we get back to the hotel, I'll have to get you to look at the pictures I took. I even got a few of one of her consultants fitting a prospective bride for her gown."

"Stephanie wants you to take a few pictures of her helping another prospective bride for her fitting."

“The picture she’s requested is to show our readers how good she’s become in her profession. I heard that when I talked to Paul this afternoon.”

“Is there anything that I forgot to read in our packets?”

“There’s just one other thing; I don’t know if you have this in your packet. Two other consultants, besides Stephanie, are also post-operative, male-to-female transsexuals. I talked to one of them, Melissa Horton, while I was at the shop. She had her sex-change operation in 2001. Patricia McGillicuddy is the other transsexual consultant; she had her sex-change operation last year. Haleigh Smith and Stephanie Kenton are the only genetic female consultants at the shop; Mrs. Kenton works part-time, while Mrs. Smith is Stephanie’s assistant.”

“Here’s something else I found. She’s six feet tall, checking in at 230 pounds and wearing a size 22W dress. She’s quite a stunner.”

After dinner, Ian and I returned to the hotel to finish our preparations for the next day’s interview. Around ten-thirty, I decided to turn in for the night. Ian continued to practice with his cameras until midnight, when he turned in. I must admit I had my fair share of nervous moments as the next day got closer.

## Three

When I woke up at eight-thirty on the morning of July 1, I immediately called Room Service to order steak and scrambled eggs for myself, along with a large glass of orange juice. While I was waiting for my breakfast to be delivered, I got my navy blue pinstripe suit out of my suitcase. I chose a maroon tie to go with it,

along with a white button-down shirt and pair of my best brown shoes. I had a nice, leisurely breakfast before taking a shower. I had just finished putting my tie on when a knock came at the door around ten o'clock.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"It's Ian," he replied.

I opened the door, and let him in. He was in a black suit with a red tie. "You look really sharp today," he complimented.

"You look very dapper, yourself," I added.

"Since Mrs. Thomas wanted us to look our best, I thought I'd better do a Park Avenue on this one."

"That's exactly what I was thinking, Ian."

Ian and I walked next door to his room, where he had all of his camera equipment together. "What time do we have to be at the Thomas residence?" he asked me.

"We have to be there at twelve-thirty to set up. So, if we're to grab some lunch, we have to be on our way no later than eleven o'clock," Ian replied before I picked up his tripod, in a carrying case, and his lens bag.

After loading Ian's camera equipment into his rental car, we walked back up to get our laptop computers. We had to make sure the batteries were fully charged before we left. As the batteries on our laptops were fully charged, we departed the hotel around ten minutes of eleven. We decided to have lunch at a restaurant in Clayton that Stephanie and her husband frequents. Ian ordered baked cod with a side of rice and a garden salad, while I ordered a Caesar salad and a twelve-ounce steak with baked potato. While waiting

for our meal, Ian asked me: "Who discovered this restaurant?"

"This place was a favorite of E.S. Thomas long before he met Stephanie. In fact, I had dinner with him at this restaurant when I interviewed him fourteen years ago. She didn't set foot in this place for the first time until their third date," I replied.

"Vicki told me that this was the restaurant they took their parents to after they became engaged," Ian added.

It wasn't until noon that we finished our lunch, and headed for the street. I checked the parking meter before getting into the rental car, and discovered there was only a minute left. "We're getting out just in time; there's only one minute left on the meter," I informed him.

"A cop is two cars down from us, and just ticketed the Jaguar that's parked in front of that meter. One or two more minutes, and we would have been looking at a parking citation," Ian added.

I reached into my briefcase, which I had set in the back seat, and fished out the directions to the Thomas residence in the Central West End. It's in one of the more exclusive areas of that part of town. Ian pulled out into traffic on Forsyth Boulevard, and proceeded to the Thomas residence. On the way over, we had to deal with heavy traffic at Big Bend due to a fender-bender. Despite the accident, which involved two sport-utility vehicles, we pulled into the driveway of a large, two-story house at twenty minutes after noon. I helped Ian unload his camera equipment. Carrying Ian's tripod and my briefcase, both in one hand, I rang the doorbell. A blonde-haired woman in a white top, a pair

of blue jeans and a pair of white flats answered the door.

"Mr. Stevenson? Mr. Ashford?" she asked in a strong Russian accent.

"This is Ian Ashford; I'm Bill Stevenson," I replied.

"I'm Raisa Chekhova. Mrs. Thomas is expecting you," she replied.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Raisa," I added, before Ian asked her: "What part of the world do you come from?"

"I'm from Kaliningrad. My husband, Yuri Chekhov, is from St. Petersburg. We took over in January for their previous domestic workers, Mr. and Mrs. Ramirez, who left to open their own restaurant in Cleveland with their children," she replied.

"I hear that one of her brothers-in-law has connections in the local Russian community," I added.

"That's how Yuri and I came to work for Stephanie and Eric. We were referred to him by Eric's sister-in-law." Yuri then walked into the living room, wearing a Tampa Bay Lightning T-shirt, a pair of khaki slacks and a pair of tennis shoes. "I understand that Stephanie doesn't want us to start on mowing the back lawn for a while," he said to her.

"Yuri, she's going to be interviewed at one o'clock, so we shouldn't be starting on the back lawn until after they're done," she informed him.

Raisa then took his hand in hers, and they walked toward us. "Mr. Stevenson, Mr. Ashford, this is my husband, Yuri Chekhov," she informed us.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Yuri," I told him before I shook his hand.

"My pleasure," Yuri said in a strong Russian accent before I shook his hand.

"How did you two meet?" Ian asked them.

"We met in Moscow. We were both gymnastics coaches at the time we met about ten years ago. She was coaching a group of girls between six and nine years old; I was coaching teenage boys. We soon fell in love; before I asked her to be my wife, I asked her where she wanted to live, and she told me: 'America'. We married in Kaliningrad, got our visas at the American embassy in Moscow, and first came to New York, where we coached mainly the children of Russian immigrants. When our contracts weren't renewed, we came to St. Louis. Mr. Thomas' sister-in-law is Russian, so it was through her that we found our jobs," Yuri replied.

Just as he finished his reply, Paul walked into the living room. "We'd better be getting into the kitchen; Stephanie wants it cleaned from top to bottom," Raisa informed us.

"It was nice meeting you," Yuri added.

Ian was setting up the lighting for the interview. "Mr. Stevenson, you'll be sitting in Eric's rocking chair. Stephanie will be sitting on the couch next to the end table; Raisa has made sure that bridal magazines will be on that table. You have your list of questions; Stephanie has a habit of being a bit long-winded at times," Paul explained.

While I was getting my notebook out of my briefcase, Yuri came into the living room, and asked us what we'd like to drink. "I'll have iced tea," I replied.

"Orange spice, mint, Earl Grey or plain?" he then asked.

“Earl Grey,” I replied.

“I’ll have orange spice,” Ian added.

Raisa came back out with two pitchers of iced tea; a pitcher of Earl Grey for me, and a pitcher of orange spice for Ian. Yuri came out with three glasses. Raisa set Ian’s pitcher on the coffee table in front of the love seat he was sitting in; Yuri set two glasses on coasters on the table next to the couch before giving Ian the third glass to pour his tea into. When Raisa set the pitcher on the end table next to the couch, I moved the rocking chair closer to the end table, where I poured myself a glass of iced tea and one for Stephanie. Raisa and Yuri returned to the kitchen as Paul, Ian and I finished setting up for the interview.

At five minutes to one, Paul informed us: “I have to go upstairs to check on Stephanie. She insisted on looking her best for this interview. Eric is in his den, grading compositions from the English class he’s teaching this summer. He’s been working on two novels as of late. He won’t join us until the latter part of the interview.”

I sat calmly for five minutes, rocking back and forth in the chair. Ian was continuing to practice focusing his lens before he sat down on the love seat. He noticed one picture on the end table to the left of the love seat; I didn’t notice that it was a picture of Stephanie and Eric from their wedding day. At the stroke of one o’clock, a tall, heavy-set woman with huge breasts, wide hips and shoulder-length light brown hair came down from upstairs. She was in a fuchsia skirt, matching jacket and a white blouse, with a pair of white stockings and a pair of fuchsia pumps. She also had a pearl necklace around her neck, a pair of diamond stud earrings, and a pearl bracelet around her right wrist. Her left wrist

had a woman's watch with a gold band on it. She looked a lot younger than her forty-four years would testify. The one feature that caught my eye was her engagement and wedding rings. "I've been expecting you, Mr. Stevenson," she said as she walked past the door to her husband's den.



I got up to shake her hand. "I've been looking forward to this, Mrs. Thomas," I said as I was shaking her hand lightly.

"Please call me Stephanie," she corrected.

"I'm sure you remember Ian Ashford; he interned with your brother-in-law," I added.

"It's nice to see you again, Stephanie. You haven't changed a bit," Ian complimented.

"Why thank you, Ian!" she said with a huge smile, before she asked me: "Won't you sit down?"

I sat down on the rocking chair, while Stephanie took her place at the edge of the couch. I gently took the list of questions out of my notebook, grabbed a pen out of the pocket of my shirt, and grabbed a digital voice recorder from my briefcase before I read the first question. "When did you first realize that you wanted to be in the bridal business?" I asked her.

Stephanie sighed for a moment, before answering: "I wanted to be in the bridal business long before I became a woman. When I was in elementary school, I read every bridal magazine I could get my hands on. You would think that would be an unusual activity for a ten-year-old boy. Stephanie Kenton, who started this shop, has been a very good friend of my mother's since they were little girls. I was so fascinated by wedding gowns and the other details involved with the bride's special day. Before I was thirteen years old, I modeled my mother's wedding gown, as well as my aunt's. I had a passing interest in wedding planning when I was working as an accountant for the family business. I wasn't interested in what my father or my brothers did; I wanted to be my own person."

The next question was: “When did you finally realize that you had to pursue your dream of being in the bridal business?”

“Even though I had been through two failed marriages in my former life as a man, I still showed an interest in helping brides plan for their special days. When I began my transition from man to woman, I studied to become a bridal consultant. While I was preparing for the exam, I had my name legally changed from Eric to Stephanie. I passed the exam on the first try; when I began living full-time as a woman in the spring of 1994, I asked my mother to look for a business opportunity that would be more feminine than the job I was in at the time. Stephanie Kenton was getting ready to retire, and was looking for a buyer for her bridal salon, Stephanie’s Brides and Belles. I had to sell the house in Chesterfield I shared with the second wife in my male life, and move into a much smaller condominium close to the shop. I left my job as an accountant for the family business, and bought the shop. When I took over the shop at the beginning of 1995, my dream had come true. I’ve been enjoying every minute of it.”

“I’d take it you found the bridal business more appropriate for you than working for a more man-type business.”

“Definitely; I mean, I felt that being an accountant for the family’s cabinet making business didn’t appeal to me. I was in that job when I began to live full-time as a woman. While my co-workers were supportive of my becoming Stephanie, I wanted to be in a more feminine occupation. For some of the men employed by the family business, my being a woman took some getting used to. I was looking to get out of the home furnishing business, and making the move into the bridal busi-

ness. When I took over the bridal salon, I was very happy to have two co-workers who were totally supportive of my transition to a woman. My assistant, Haleigh Jones Smith, who's a genetic female, is totally understanding of the needs of women like me. She built a reputation within the local transgender community even before I bought the salon."

"How has your being a transsexual influenced you as a bridal consultant?"

"It has influenced me considerably. I'm one of the few bridal consultants in the country who has been through life both as a man and as a woman. I have worked very hard to strengthen the relationship between the bridal industry and the transgender community here in St. Louis. It has influenced the decision I made in hiring Melissa Horton and Patti McGillicuddy as bridal consultants. They have also worked toward strengthening the relationship between the local transgender community and the bridal industry. We not only fit brides for their wedding gowns. We also fit high school girls for the prom and Homecoming, girls and women for their party dresses, evening and formal gowns, and we've also fitted numerous local female impersonators for their dresses and gowns for pageants and performances. When a transgender girl asks where she should get a gown or dress for any occasion, everyone in this town will tell them to go to Stephanie's Brides and Belles."

"Do you think transgender women are becoming more accepted in your industry?"

"We're getting there, slowly but surely. I own one of the few shops in the world that employ primarily transsexual women as consultants. When I took over the salon from Stephanie Kenton, I was the first trans-

sexual to work at the shop. When it became time to hire a third consultant after my sex-change operation, I noted that I was mainly looking for a newcomer to the business that Haleigh and I could develop into one of the top women in the bridal industry. We felt that Melissa had the smarts we felt it took to become successful in this business. The fact that she was a pre-op transsexual at the time we hired her was secondary to us. We had the same reasoning when we hired Patti just before I met my husband. In my business, I am more concerned with the ability of a consultant to do her job right than the birth sex of that particular consultant.”

“What advice would you give to bridal shop owners who are looking to reach out to the transgender community?”

“The advice I would give is that before your bridal shop starts serving the transgender community, make contacts in the community first. There are a lot of resources available on the Internet for bridal salons to become better acquainted with the local transgender community. If you feel it best serves your relationship between your salon and the transgender community, I would suggest hiring at least one transsexual bridal consultant, regardless of whether she’s transitioning or has completed her transition from man to woman.”

“Your brother-in-law does the photography for your bridal salon’s newspaper and magazine advertisements. Did you hire him before or after you bought the shop?”

“Stephanie Kenton hired Paul right out of college. He was looking for a big break as a photographer; he won numerous photography competitions while he was in college. She gave him that break; his career took off after that. When I bought the shop, Paul stayed

aboard. He still does our photography for the ads today, even though he has his own photography studio nearby."

"He introduced you to his brother's novels."

"In fact, I became a fan of E.S. Thomas' novels long before I met him. When I took over Stephanie's Brides and Belles in January 1995, Paul gave me a copy of his first novel. Every girl that starts at the shop gets a copy of an E.S. Thomas romance from Paul. Haleigh and I read them with interest. Every time he released a new novel, I'm among the first to get a copy. I got to know a man with an unparalleled sense of romantic adventure through those novels."

"How did you meet your husband?"

"Paul was able to secure to invitations to a book signing for me and Haleigh in January 2002. He was releasing his latest novel. We went on a cool January night, and stood in line with several other women who were fans of his period-driven romance novels. When Haleigh and I got to the table where he was autographing his latest novel, we exchanged business cards. The next thing I knew, he asked me for a date."

"The fact you were born a boy didn't stop him from falling in love with you?"

"Nor did the fact that he was romantically frustrated keep me from falling in love with him. Before I met him, he had not been in a relationship for thirteen years. I had not been in a relationship with anyone since before my sex-change operation. He used writing as a way of expressing his romantic dreams. He let out his frustrations by writing about men who fell in love in the most difficult of circumstances. Before we both knew it, we had fallen in love. I told him about my sex

change; he was very understanding. As our relationship grew, I got to know a different E.S. Thomas; an E.S. Thomas who had always dreamed of meeting the woman of his dreams. I was very happy to make his dreams come true."

At that moment, her husband came into the room and sat down next to her. "How's the interview going, sweetheart?" he asked her.

"It's going quite well, honey," she replied before they shared a kiss.

"I'm now at the point where I'm about to ask you a few questions. You're a romance novelist, and your wife owns a bridal salon. Has that influenced your writing in recent years, especially now that you're married?" I asked him.

"Stephanie has been an enormous influence on my writing ever since we started dating eight years ago. She's been especially influential in my writing since we got married two years ago. In my first eight novels, the relationships established in the story lines never got to the point of marriage. I always ended it with either the couple becoming engaged or going their separate ways. After I met Stephanie, the end result of the relationships in the story lines had gotten to the point of getting married, even having children. My latest novel, which came out two months ago, has a transsexual woman as the female lead character. It's set in the early 1980s in New York. I'm working on another novel, which is due out around Christmas," he replied.

"The level of inspiration for writing his novels has heightened since we met. In a lot of the novels he wrote before we met, I had felt sorry for the protagonists who had to break up with the women they loved. Since we've been together, he seems more inspired to write

novels in which the protagonists have more success in their relationships. He hasn't had the habit of leaving his readers wondering what happened to the lovers in recent years, especially since we got married," she added.

"Do you find inspiration every time you visit your wife at the salon?" I then asked.

"Of course, I do. When I pop in during a fitting for a prospective bride, I often find the bride they're fitting for her gown an inspiration for a female character in a story I'm planning to work on. The same is true when I pop in during a fitting for a high school girl's prom or Homecoming," he replied.

"In one of the fittings he popped in on, Melissa and I were fitting one of her transsexual friends for her wedding gown. She became the inspiration for the female lead character in his latest novel," she added.

"I have just one more question for you, Mr. Thomas. Did you ever think, for one moment, that you would marry a transsexual before you met Stephanie?"

"I had kept my mind open to that possibility for many years before I met her. To me, the fact she was born a boy was secondary. The only thing that mattered to me was the woman she had become. When I asked her to become my girlfriend, she reminded me that there was something I should know before we committed to a steady relationship. That something was the fact that she had been through a sex change. I prepared myself for this possibility for years before we met," he replied.

"To this day, I'm very grateful that he understood the fact that I was born a boy, I had been through two divorces in my former male life, and that I had been

through a sex change. He was prepared for what I told him, and he was a gentleman about it. He saw past what I used to be, fell in love with and married the woman I had become," she added before sharing a kiss with her husband.

"I have to get back to work, darling. I'll see you later," he whispered before sharing another kiss with Stephanie and returning to his den.

"Are there any more questions?" she asked me.

"There is one more question. What are your future plans?" I asked her.

"We've been keeping it from everyone, but now is the time to tell you. My husband and I are planning to adopt a child. We hope to do so before the end of the year or early next year," she replied.

At that point, I had Ian take several more pictures of Stephanie at her home before Ian packed up his camera equipment, and I packed up my briefcase, and left for Stephanie's Brides and Belles. We followed Stephanie in her 2010 Lincoln MKZ to the shop, ten minutes from their house. Upon our arrival, we got our equipment out of the car, and walked to the front door of the shop, where Stephanie was waiting for us. "Shall we go in?" she asked us.

I held the door open for her as she walked in. Ian followed her, carrying his camera equipment. When I walked in, Stephanie asked Ian to set up his camera in the shop. I was then introduced to the girls in the shop.

"Bill Stevenson, I'd like to introduce my consultants. The one on the left in the white blouse and maroon skirt is Haleigh Jones; the one next to her, in the pink dress, is Melissa Horton," she said in an introductory manner.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Stevenson,"  
Haleigh said with a smile.

"I'm pleased to meet you," Melissa said before curtsying in front of me.

"This lovely lady in the red pantsuit is the original owner of the store, Stephanie Kenton," she added.

"I've heard a lot about you from Ian," Mrs. Kenton told me.

"This beautiful young lady in the blue sleeveless dress is Patti McGillicuddy, and the one in the red cotton dress is our seamstress, Clarissa Martinez."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Stevenson," Patti said before she curtsied to me.

"I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Stevenson," Clarissa said before we shook hands.

"Stephanie, I'm ready," Ian informed her.

"Let me tell you about the bride that's being fitted for her gown. Her name is Lexi Bermudez. She's one of Patti's transsexual friends. Lexi is getting married in September to her longtime boyfriend, Tony Robinson. They've been engaged since Valentine's Day. She's a part-time photographer's model and the owner of Lexi's Boutique, a shop that specializes in fashions for the tall and big woman in The Grove. She and Tony have been together for five years; she had her sex-change operation six years ago. Lexi and Patti have been friends since she joined their transgender support group eight years ago, when Lexi began her transition from man to woman," Stephanie explained.

"Lexi, we're ready," Patti said to her before she emerged from the dressing room. A tall young woman with chestnut-brown hair emerged from the dressing

room, wearing a strapless white wedding gown with white lace adorning the bodice and decorating the skirt, and a cathedral-length train. She stepped up to the mirror, and admired herself in her beautiful wedding gown.

"Let's see. The bodice hugs your curves beautifully," Patti complimented as Ian began taking pictures.

"I think it does, Patti," Lexi returned.

"Tony will love you in that gown," Stephanie added.

"Thank you, Mrs. Thomas," Lexi then added.

Haleigh put a rhinestone tiara with a fingertip-length veil attached in her hair. "How do you like this?" she asked her.

"The tiara and veil make me look like a princess," Lexi replied.

"Do we have a silk bridal bouquet she can hold?" Melissa asked.

"I think we have one in the dressing room," Mrs. Kenton replied before she went into the dressing room. She came out with a bouquet of pink and white silk flowers. "Would you hold these, Lexi?" she asked her.

"Sure thing," she replied.

Haleigh, Patti and Stephanie helped Lexi with the train of her gown as Ian continued to take pictures of the bride-to-be. Ian had an idea. "Why don't we do some pictures of Lexi with the blusher over her face?" he asked them.

"That's an excellent idea," Melissa replied.

"I love that idea," Lexi added.

Melissa gently put the blusher over Lexi's face and bouquet. Lexi looked at her bouquet while Ian took several pictures. Then, Patti lifted the blusher long enough to get the bouquet in front of the blusher, and replaced it over Lexi's face. Ian proceeded to get several more pictures of the bride-to-be. The whole shoot lasted for an hour and a half. When we were finally done, it was almost four o'clock.

As Ian was packing up his equipment, Stephanie said: "Thanks for coming by my shop. I hope you will write a great piece on my life and career."

"I've been taught to treat all women, regardless of whether she was born male or female, with respect. I'll do my best to write an excellent piece," I assured her.

When Ian finally had all of his camera equipment packed, Lexi emerged from the dressing room, wearing a yellow and white sleeveless dress. "Thank you for taking pictures of my fitting," she said.

"I wish you the best of luck with Tony. You will be such a beautiful bride on your wedding day," I said with sincerity.

"Why, thank you, Mr. Stevenson," she said with a smile.

Ian and I walked out into the parking lot, and loaded our equipment into the back of the car. Lexi stepped into her car, a 2009 Mercedes, and headed back to her place of business. "She's a stunner, Bill. She will be a gorgeous bride on her wedding day," Ian added.

We returned to the hotel to look over my notes and Ian's pictures. "All of these pictures look great, Ian. It'll be hard to select which one to publish in the article," I said while looking at one of the pictures he took of Lexi at the bridal shop.

“It will be a tough decision; we’ll wait until we return to Toledo; we’ll seek Melanie’s input,” Ian added.

## Four

Vicki joined Ian in St. Louis on July 3; she would be there to do a profile on Stephanie’s Brides and Bells for Romantic Bride. I had a head start and headed for two days of relaxation in Kansas City on the same day. Ian and Vicki would only be together for two days before he boarded the train on July 5. I would meet him in Kansas City before heading on to Los Angeles for our interview with Dr. Erica Bentley. I would be staying with a friend of mine, Cheryl Johnson. She went through her sex-change operation two years prior. On the night of the Fourth of July, she and I were watching a fireworks display through the back porch of her house, which she shared with another transsexual, Chrissy Stevens. Chrissy was out with her boyfriend that night.

Cheryl was in a sleeveless pink dress, while I was in a T-shirt and a pair of khaki slacks. “The fireworks are enjoyable when we’re not so close,” I whispered to her as I was holding her gently with my right arm.

“I can’t stand the sound of fireworks at close range,” she whispered.

After all the firework displays were finished, I sat down on the couch, next to Cheryl. “I hear you’re interviewing a couple of successful transsexual women for Magruder’s,” she whispered.

“That’s right. I interviewed Stephanie Thomas, the owner of a St. Louis bridal shop and the wife of romance novelist E.S. Thomas, three days ago. I also wit-

nessed the fitting of a bride-to-be, who's also a transsexual, for her wedding gown," I said softly.

"I don't know how to say this, Bill, but I think you need an evening of romance that you'll never forget," she cooed as she moved her lips close to mine.

"I'll bet," I whispered with a bit of sarcasm before I shared a kiss with her. "Let me get into something more comfortable," she whispered as she went to her bedroom to change. When she emerged, she was in a hot pink baby doll nightie with matching lace panties and a sheer negligée.

"You are so romantic and sexy, Cheryl," I complimented.

"Why, thank you," she said with a seductive smile. She then sat on my lap. We would whisper the sweetest things to each other, caress each other's bodies, and share numerous kisses. While I was filing my fingers through her blonde hair, she asked me: "Would you like to come to bed with me?"

"It's been a long time since I shared a bed with a girl. I would be most happy to," I whispered before we shared another kiss.

It was nine o'clock the next morning when I woke up. I was still holding Cheryl in my arms. "Good morning, sexy," I whispered.

"Good morning, baby," she cooed as we shared a kiss.

After a nice, leisurely breakfast, I changed into a beige golf shirt, a pair of off-white slacks and a pair of white sneakers. Cheryl changed into a pink sundress and a matching pair of open-toe pumps. We toured the Harley-Davidson Final Assembly Plant and Museum, followed by visits to the Truman Presidential Museum

and Library, as well as the Korean-Vietnam War Memorial and Shawnee Town on the Kansas side of the line. I took her out to dinner at a nice restaurant in downtown Kansas City, followed by a jazz show before we left around ten o'clock to catch my train for Los Angeles.

Cheryl drove me to Kansas City Union Station; we arrived around ten-fifteen in the evening. I thanked her for her hospitality with a kiss. Ian was waiting for me inside. "Hey, Bill, how were your days off?" he asked me.

"They were great. Cheryl and I spent the evening watching the fireworks display from her back porch; I ended up sleeping with her last night. Today, we took in some sightseeing on the Missouri and Kansas sides of the line, had a quiet dinner and took in a set of jazz," I replied.

"That Cheryl is one sexy girl," Ian added.

"What about you and Vicki?"

"We went to the Arch to see the fireworks display. While we were there, I did it."

"What did you do?"

"I asked Vicki to marry me."

"Did she accept?"

"Yes, she did. I gave her the ring on the Arch grounds last night."

With all our personal effects in order, we boarded the train for Los Angeles. When I got into my room on the sleeping car, I decided to get some sleep before breakfast. Ian and I went to the dining car around seven o'clock in the morning on July 6 to have sausage

and eggs. "Did you look over the information packet from Dr. Bentley again?" he asked me.

"As a matter of fact, I didn't. I fell asleep shortly after we left Kansas City," I replied.

"Have we got our transportation and accommodations taken care of when we get to L.A.?"

"We're staying at the Sheraton at Universal Studios Hollywood. We'll be arriving at the hotel around nine o'clock in the morning. We'll have a day to rest before we start work on the interview. Dr. Bentley and her husband, Dr. Eric Bentley, a psychiatrist, operate their practice out of their home in Canoga Park. We will have a single minivan while in L.A. Dr. Bentley will send a car when it comes time for the interview."

"I'd take it they've become quite well off with their practice."

"Yes, they have. They're two of the leading professionals working with transgender women. Erica Bentley is a transsexual herself."

"I understand she became a psychologist to help women and girls like her."

"She's the youngest person ever to undergo a sex-change operation at Charing Cross Hospital in London. Her father was a U.S. serviceman who was killed in a plane crash on Taiwan while returning to Okinawa from a supply mission to South Vietnam. Her mother is the retired owner of a women's boutique in Los Angeles. She was born Eric Bunsen on Okinawa, began living full-time as a girl after moving to Los Angeles from Minneapolis at the age of seven. She lived, dressed and went to school full-time as a girl for five years before having her sex-change operation in May 1979 at twelve years of age. A friend of her mother's, a

nurse at Charing Cross that Mrs. Bunsen knew from the time her own father was stationed in England, helped set up the operation. Her husband, Dr. Eric Bentley, was her best friend when they were boys. When they reconnected in high school two years after her sex-change operation, they fell deeply in love. They married in 1992, and set up their practice five years later. While they have four adoptive children, a successful practice and have numerous speaking engagements to transgender groups, they always find time for each other."

"I wish you could find time to meet a nice girl."

"With all I have to do, and the horrible history I've had with dating over the past sixteen years, it's now farthest from my mind."

Just as Ian was about to speak, my cell phone rang. I looked at the text box, and it was from another transsexual friend. Tina Stevens had gone through a sex-change operation thirteen years ago, and had been working at a women's boutique she's part owner of and modeled since her operation. Before that, she entertained men as part of the all-transsexual Krazy Girls of L.A. She was told that I was coming to L.A. by Chrissy, Cheryl's housemate. I immediately called her; we set up a date for the night before the interview.

"Who was that, Bill?" Ian asked me.

"She's an old friend of mine. Her name is Tina Stevens. She wanted to see me again; I last saw her when I interviewed her on the radio thirteen years ago, before she had her sex-change operation. She's thirty-eight years old now, but doesn't look a day over twenty-three. She's also a friend of Chrissy, Cheryl's housemate. She has something special planned," I replied.

“Tina... what’s that short for?”

“In her case, it’s Christina.”

“When is your date with Tina?”

“It’s the night before we go and interview Dr. Erica Bentley.”

“How did you meet her?”

“I met her online while she was transitioning from man to woman. She was working as an entertainer in an all-transsexual group called The Crazy Girls of L.A. They went to various parties and nightclubs in sexy dresses and lingerie, and entertained their audiences, who were mainly men. They did bachelor parties, adult birthday parties, company parties, and even entertained in private homes. We corresponded via E-mail for a while before her sex-change operation. I kept in touch with her shortly afterwards, but lost touch with her in 2000, when she bought into the women’s boutique she works at. She’s originally from Carthage, Missouri, and came to Los Angeles in 1994 to transition from man to woman. She’s a real stunner at six-two, and is a very sexy woman.”

“It’s amazing how you can attract all these transsexual women. You must have had real problems with the women who were born girls.”

“You’re not kidding.”

“I knew you would say that.”

“You probably know that I’ve been single the whole time we’ve worked together. You’re lucky to have a woman like Vicki in your life. I haven’t been in a relationship in nearly seventeen years now, and I’ve pretty much thrown in the towel. When I was in high school, every girl my age and older rejected me; the only legiti-

mate excuse in my book was already having a boyfriend. The ones who I thought were available made up every excuse in the book to get out of dating me. I was once engaged to be married, like you are now. My former fiancée was born female. The trouble I had was that hardly anyone was supportive of the relationship. One of my relatives even told me she was too immature to be a suitable candidate for marriage. When her parents, then in the middle of a very ugly divorce, finally decided to step in, I had no choice but to dump her. Since then, I have been unable to find a woman who is feminine enough to see past my failures, to the good and faithful man I was. I dated transsexual women for a while because they were the only ones willing to go out on a date with me. After I turned thirty years of age, I acquired a new problem: getting stood up on dates. I first got stood up by genetic females; I didn't get stood up by a transsexual woman until two months before my thirty-sixth birthday. After being stood up twice by transsexual women, both times while visiting relatives in St. Louis, that was it. I have not asked a woman, regardless of whether she was born male or female, out on a date while in St. Louis or Toledo, since that time."

"Have you ever thought about the possibility that they were emotionally unavailable and uninterested?"

"Ian, I never thought of that."

"Bill, these are the women that claim to be available for dating. They said they would be available for a date with you, but, deep inside, there was something wrong with or about you. They debate it for days before the time you two were scheduled to meet. They never tell you, up front, that they won't show up. All they want is to make you look bad. When you show up at the

time and place the two of you mutually agreed on, and she doesn't show up, that not only shows you that she wasn't very interested in you, didn't want to make herself emotionally available for you in the first place, but also shows you that her behavior toward you is irresponsible. Perhaps this explains your declining interest in romantic relationships over the years."

"I had been hoping there's still a small chance left, but after your explanation of the whole thing, there may not be much of a chance left of my ever finding the woman I had been looking for over the past seventeen years. I have buried that rejection in my work, especially over the last four years."

"That's why Vicki and I are concerned about you. We just don't want you to become a brokenhearted workaholic."

"I already am a workaholic, Ian. I've had a broken heart for a long time."

"Maybe your upcoming date with Tina will start to change that."

"I hope so. I'm simply too old to be living on false romantic hopes."

"You're too old to have the ladies stab you in the back all the time."

When the train arrived in Albuquerque, I got an E-mail from Dr. Erica Bentley. I read it and called Ian into my room on the sleeping car.

"What is it?" he asked me as he walked in the door.

"I just got an E-mail from Dr. Bentley. She has re-scheduled the interview for July 8 from ten o'clock in the morning to two o'clock in the afternoon," I replied.

"That's fine by me," he added.

After sending the E-mail accepting the new time, I spent the remainder of the day looking over the notes from the interview with Stephanie Thomas, putting together an outline for the interview I had with her, and looking over the press package on Dr. Erica Bentley. Ian continued to look over the pictures he took, and took a nap. Over a dinner of barbecue pork, baked beans and a salad, Ian and I discussed the schedule changes, as detailed on my laptop computer.

“With the change in the schedule, we’ll have a few more hours to prepare. According to the new schedule Dr. Bentley sent, we can grab our lunch before we have to be at her place. We have to be there by one-thirty so you can set up your camera. Unlike with Mrs. Thomas, Erica’s husband, Dr. Eric Bentley, will be seeing a patient at that time. We’ll be setting up in her office. She made the change because one of her patients had her sex-change operation moved up,” I explained.

“Ah, that’s why she changed to a later time,” Ian added.

## **Five**

When our train pulled into Los Angeles shortly after eight o’clock on the morning of July 7, a young, clean-cut man awaited our arrival. He looked like he was ready to tackle the day; Ian and I both looked like we had just come out of a war. “Mr. Stevenson, Mr. Ashford?” he asked us.

“I’m Bill Stevenson, and this is my photographer, Ian Ashford,” I replied.

“We’re very pleased to meet you,” Ian added.

"I'm Ben Smith. Eric and Erica Bentley asked me to pick you up and take you to the car rental agency at LAX," he informed us.

We followed him to a waiting Mercedes-Benz, where he opened the trunk so we could put our luggage in. After we closed the trunk, Ian and I got into the back seat of the car for the ride to the airport.

"I'd take it you're the ones Magruder's sent out to interview her," Ben said as he was driving through heavy traffic.

"We are," Ian informed him.

"One of the reasons why we're doing this is because one of Mr. Magruder's children is going through the change from man to woman. About a week ago, we interviewed businesswoman and bridal consultant Stephanie Thomas," I added.

When we arrived at the car rental counter at LAX, a tall, blonde-haired woman was at the counter. "Do you have a reservation for William Stevenson or Ian Ashford?" I asked her.

"Yes, we do. We've been expecting you," she replied.

I was given the keys to a 2010 Chrysler Town and Country. Ben drove us to the parking lot, and parked in back of the minivan. He helped us load our bags into the minivan. Once we had our luggage in, I got into the minivan to start it up. As soon as Ben pulled away in the Mercedes, Ian and I proceeded to the hotel. When we arrived, we got a bellhop to bring our bags into the hotel while Ian and I checked in. A tall brunette-haired girl took care of us at the desk.

"Mr. Stevenson, Mr. Ashford?" she asked us.

“What is it?” I then asked.

“We’ve got a big meeting here this week, and we have had trouble getting a room for you both. We’ll have to upgrade you to a two-bedroom suite,” she replied.

We were shown to the suite. “I’ll take the room with the twin-size bed,” Ian announced.

“I’ll take the one with the king-size bed,” I added.

Ian and I decided to get some sleep before ordering room service for lunch. He ordered a ham and cheese sandwich, while I ordered a slab of barbecue ribs. We spent the afternoon reviewing the notes for our upcoming interview. Just before four o’clock in the afternoon, Ian got a delivery: two tickets to the taping of a late-night show. A friend of his from college invited him. That left me with the suite for my date with Tina. I ordered a bottle of champagne and a party tray before she arrived.

I decided to wear my red button-down shirt, a pair of khaki slacks, white socks and a pair of white sneakers. At the stroke of seven o’clock, I heard a knock on the door. When I opened it, I saw a tall, sexy and slender woman. She was more conservatively dressed than I remembered her from her pictures. She was in a floral print summer dress with a flowing skirt that extended to about two inches below her knees, with white flats and a matching pair of stockings. She only wore a gold necklace around her neck, with a heart pendant, along with a pair of diamond stud earrings. Her medium brown hair was now down to her shoulders, still spiked in front. “Come in, Tina,” I said to her.

“Thank you, Bill,” she said before she walked in, sa-shayed toward a chair, sat down, and crossed her legs

in a feminine fashion. "May I get you something to drink?" I asked her.

"Sure," she said before asking me what I have.

"I have champagne; Dom Pérignon 1999," I replied.

"That's lovely," she added before I poured her a glass.

"What are you doing these days, Tina?"

"I'm now a majority owner of Christina's Boutique in Van Nuys. My store specializes in fashions for taller and larger women. My best friend, Laura Williams, and her sister, Lisa, split the other forty percent of the business."

"I've been writing for Magruder's magazine since the summer of 2001. Ian Ashford, who's with me on this assignment, has been on my assignments as a photographer since 2006. I now live in Toledo, Ohio. I'm out here to interview Dr. Erica Bentley, a psychologist who works with transgender patients."

"What a coincidence! She's my therapist. Of course, you know that she's a transsexual, like me."

"I interviewed Stephanie Thomas, a bridal consultant, last week when Ian and I were in St. Louis. She's also a transsexual."

"I've heard of Stephanie. In fact, I'm looking forward to meeting her this fall, when I make my trip to St. Louis."

"Is your shop getting ready to carry bridal fashions for tall and large women?"

"Yes. In fact, we've just completed a major remodeling and expansion to the store. We anticipate adding bridal fashions in time for next year's bridal season."

As I was sitting down in a chair next to her, she asked me if there was anything to eat. "Yes. In fact, the party tray came with the champagne," I replied.

I opened the party tray, and asked her what she would like to have. "Ham and cheese is fine," she replied.

I made a ham and cheese sandwich for Tina, while I made myself a pastrami sandwich. We both had carrot and celery sticks with our sandwiches. We poured each other another glass of champagne. While I was eating my sandwich, a knock came at the door. It was a waiter from Room Service.

"Mr. Stevenson; here's another bottle of Dom Pérignon '99, sent with the compliments of Mr. Ashford," he informed me.

"Thank you," I said before I tipped him.

"Who was that?" she asked me.

"That was a waiter from Room Service. Ian sent over a second bottle of wine for us," I replied.

"He must be a romantic," she added.

"He does this for his girl, Vicki, all the time," I said quietly.

She had one more ham and cheese sandwich, while I had one more pastrami sandwich. By ten o'clock, we had finished the first bottle of champagne. That was when Tina looked at me with lustful seduction.

"How long has it been since you've been intimate with a woman?" she asked me with lust in her eyes.

"It's been too long," I replied before she sashayed closer to me. Before I knew it, she was in my arms, and I in hers. We looked at each other in our eyes before we

closed them and prepared to share a kiss. We both hesitated for a moment, before finally engaging in a tender kiss.

“Doesn’t this make you feel like a man?” she asked me whispering.

“You make me feel like a man; I haven’t felt this way in a long time, Tina,” I whispered back.

“Bill, you make me feel so feminine,” she cooed lustfully before we engaged in an even deeper kiss. After we broke the kiss, she whispered; “Make me feel like a woman, honey.”

I proceeded to passionately neck her, while my hands found their way inside the skirt of her dress, caressing her buttocks, clad in a pair of pink bikini panties. “Oh, Bill, you bring out the woman in me!” she whispered excitedly.

“You’ve brought out the man in me tonight,” I whispered as I finished necking her. My hands were still caressing her buttocks.

“Bill, make passionate love to me,” she moaned lustfully before she began loosening my pants. While she reached down to loosen my pants, my hands fumbled their way to the zipper of her dress. When my hands finally found their way to the top of her dress, I began to unzip it while I was planting tender kisses on her neck. She removed her hands from my waistline long enough to get out of her dress, revealing not only a pink pair of bikini panties, but also a matching strapless bra, garter belt and white lace-top stockings. “You’re so sexy,” I whispered before she knelt down to finish undoing my pants.

As soon as she loosened my pants, I gently kicked off my shoes so she could gently take off my socks.

When she removed my socks, I finished pulling my pants off. We both sat down on the bed, where Tina unbuttoned my shirt. "You have more hair on you than a gorilla," she joked as she undid the last button.

"That, I can agree with," I whispered with a smile before we shared a kiss.



"This is the most memorable night of my life," she lustfully whispered before she slipped off my underwear. Before I knew it, I was totally nude. I then moved over to one side of the bed, where Tina climbed in, crawled to my side of the bed, got her long, sexy legs positioned where my legs were in between hers, and began to lick and suck my manhood. "Tina, that feels great," I whispered as she worked her silky tongue and lipstick-clad mouth around my manhood.

While she was giving my manhood some attention, I reached down to undo the hooks of her bra. Before she knew it, her breasts were bared. After tossing her bra to the side of the bed, I could feel my juices coming out of me. "Tina, you're the best," I whispered as she tasted my essence. After she licked the last drop, she slid over to her side of the bed, where I started fondling her pert breasts.

"Bill, oh Bill, you make me the most feminine being in the world!" she lustfully cooed as I licked and sucked at her right breast. While I was doing that, I reached to her back to try and find the hooks to her garter belt. My hands found her garter belt almost immediately; I unhooked it from around her waist. After tasting her delicious milk, she sat up to remove the tabs of her garter belt from the top of her stockings; she seductively took off her stockings. After taking off her stockings, she slid closer to me, where she guided my head to her left breast. "I have not had this feeling of utter masculinity in a long, long time," I whispered before I began licking and sucking her left breast.

After I tasted the milk of her left breast, she guided my hands to her hips, where I began to take off her panties. "Make me *your* woman...I want to make you my man so badly," she lustfully whispered before she

got on her knees. I took a hold of my manhood as she moved her legs to where my legs were in between hers. She lowered herself over my manhood. Before I knew it, I was deep inside her. She began moving up and down my manhood like she was riding a horse.

"I haven't felt this good... this romantic in a long, long, time," I whispered as she was continuing to move up and down on my manhood. She lowered herself slowly so we could share a passionate kiss. She kept moving up and down my manhood before I felt my liquids mixing with hers. "I have never felt so manly in a long, long, long time" I whispered as she was finishing her motions.

"No man has ever made me feel as whole and feminine as you are making me feel tonight, Bill," she seductively cooed as she lifted herself off my manhood and slid over to her side of the bed. We walked over to the bathroom, where we shared a bath together.

"Bill, what would you think about having a girlfriend again?" she asked.

"To tell you the truth, Tina, I haven't really been thinking about it in recent years," I replied.

"That trouble with no-shows again?"

"Not only that, but I've been so focused on my work in recent years."

"What would you think if I make a side trip to Toledo after my business trip to St. Louis?"

"That would be interesting...and fun."

"I mean it, Bill. You're such a handsome and sweet man. I really would like to spend some time with you, honey."

“You’re such a beautiful, sexy and stunning woman, Tina. I would love to spend more time with you, baby.”

“I thought about spending the night with you. You know I haven’t shared a bed with a handsome guy in a long time, and my roommate has her boyfriend over tonight.”

“Is he going to stay overnight?”

“Yes, he’s staying overnight with her.”

“In that case, I would love it if we spent the night together. I haven’t shared my bed with a beautiful woman in a long, long, long time.”

After we got out of the bathtub, I changed into a red pair of boxer shorts, while Tina got a lavender night-gown out of her overnight bag. She sashayed toward the bed, and lay down next to me. She pulled the covers over her before I took her in my arms. “Good night, sweet stuff,” she cooed.

“Good night, sexpot,” I whispered before I kissed her good night.

Ian didn’t return to the hotel suite until after one o’clock in the morning. He saw me in bed with Tina. He had to drive his friend home from a nearby bar; he drank too many beers. When we woke up around seven-thirty in the morning, I was greeted by her beautiful face.

“Good morning, Bill, my love,” she cooed.

“Good morning, my dear Tina,” I said whisperingly before we shared a tender kiss. She looked at the menu while I asked her what she wanted for breakfast. “The mixed fruit bowl looks yummy,” she replied.

I ordered her the mixed fruit bowl, while I ordered a plate of pancakes and sausage. Tina decided to go for a glass of orange juice, while I opted for a glass of milk. After breakfast, Tina left for her business, while I started to look over the package on Dr. Erica Bentley one more time before lunch.

Ian didn't get up until nine-thirty. "I'd take it you and Tina had a great evening," he said inquisitively.

"She was, in a word, marvelous," I told him.

"Did you....you know?" he asked me.

"Yes, we made passionate love last night," I replied.

## Six

I had changed into a white dress shirt, a pair of navy blue slacks, a maroon tie and matching navy blue jacket, while Ian chose a khaki polo shirt, a pair of khaki slacks and a pair of beige loafers. It was around twelve-thirty that we made our way down to the hotel restaurant for lunch. Ian ordered a salad and a bowl of split pea soup, while I ordered a hamburger and a bowl of bean and bacon soup. We split a pitcher of iced tea. After we finished lunch, we returned to the hotel suite to gather our equipment, and proceed to the residence where Dr. Erica Bentley and her husband, Eric, have their practice.

We left the hotel around one-fifteen; it took us half an hour to get to their residence, in a quiet Canoga Park neighborhood. When I pulled the minivan into the driveway, I got my briefcase and brought it to the front door, while I helped Ian with his equipment. I rang the doorbell; Ian and I waited a minute before a housekeeper came to the front door. She was dressed

in a pair of faded blue jeans, a fuchsia top and a pair of white flats.

"I'm Bill Stevenson; I'm here with Ian Ashford to see Dr. Erica Bentley," I informed her.

"Erica is finishing up with a patient. I'm the housekeeper, Jana Gregory. I'm very pleased to meet you both," she told us before showing us to the living room, where Ian set up his cameras. I sat down on a rocking chair near the couch, and set my pen, notebook and digital voice recorder on the end table next to the couch. Ian had finished setting up his cameras and was all ready to take pictures when a tall woman with short blonde hair, done in a bob, wearing an antique white blouse, mauve pants, matching jacket and a pair of antique white flats emerged from her office just as Jana was setting a pitcher of iced tea and two glasses on the table in the living room.

"Mr. Stevenson, Mr. Ashford?" Erica asked us.

"I'm Bill Stevenson; Ian Ashford is behind the camera," I replied.

"I'm Dr. Erica Bentley. My husband and I have been expecting you," she added.

"We're very pleased to meet you, Ian said before he started to take several pictures of her. Once he finished taking photos of her, I sat down in a chair next to the end table, while Erica sat down on the couch. My first question was: "What do you do in your practice?"

"I'm a psychologist, working primarily with male-to-female transgender patients. I also work with patients with relationship problems and, in recent years, I've also been working with patients with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders. In my work with male-to-female transgender patients, I have

an advantage over most psychologists in that I've been through what they're about to go through. I mainly work with younger patients, some as young as seven years old, but I have a few older patients I see," she replied.

"Your husband, Dr. Eric Bentley, is also part of your practice. What does he do?"

"Eric is a psychiatrist; he not only prescribes medication, but he also works with the endocrinologists who are treating our transsexual patients. He consults them on issues concerning hormone replacement therapy; we're both part of the gender team that recommends whether or not the patient is a candidate for gender reassignment surgery, or sex reassignment surgery. Some people still call this a sex-change operation."

"When did you first realize you should have been a girl?"

"The picture in the frame on the end table next to you was taken when I was six months old. I was wearing the dress my sister wore when she was six months old. My older sister, Mary, dressed me as a girl as much as she could during my early years. Starting when I was three years old, I had the feeling I should have been born a girl. My feminine feelings started to get stronger after my father was killed in a plane crash on Taiwan in 1970. Before long, I was dressing myself in her old dresses. Before I moved with my mother, sister and brothers to Los Angeles, I told my mother that I hated being a boy, and wanted so much to be a girl. I didn't start living full-time as a girl until after I moved to California."

"How long ago did you go through the transition from male to female?"

“When I started my transition from male to female, I was very young. In fact, I was just seven years old when I began living full-time as Erica. I had moved with my mother, brothers and sister from Saint Paul, Minnesota to Canoga Park. We moved into the house I now share with my husband and adopted children, and told my mother that I wanted to be a girl. I made my social *début* as a girl shortly after I began living full-time as a girl, when I was the flower girl in my aunt’s wedding. We were surprised that I had been accepted as a girl; after all, it was over thirty years ago, and changing sexes, even at such a young age, was unheard of. As I progressed in my transition from boy to girl, I became close friends with a group of girls who accepted me as the girl I was becoming. I was lucky to have a mother and a sister who supported me every step of the way. You would expect my brothers not to be supportive, but they were surprisingly supportive. They were very happy to have another sister in the house. While transitions can be a trying time for many transsexuals, I had a bit of an easier time, since I was living in an area that’s more accepting of transsexuals, even one as young as I was.”

“You were twelve years old when you were operated on in 1979.”

“My mother and I traveled to London to have my operation performed. One of her best friends from her days on an air base in the United Kingdom had become a nurse at Charing Cross Hospital in London. After I finished the sixth grade, we went to London, where I had my operation. I was very relieved to finally be the girl I should have been in the first place. I spent most of the summer healing from the operation; I was very happy to begin seventh grade as a complete girl.”

“You’ve known your husband since before you became a girl.”

“Eric and I met when we were very little. His father was my father’s commanding officer when they were stationed on Okinawa. My father flew supply missions between Okinawa and Saigon. We were the best of friends by the time we were both three years old; we lost touch after my family left Okinawa after my father’s death. We reconnected when we started high school; his father had retired from the Air Force, and moved to a house not far from where I was living. We both had deep secrets when we reconnected. Eric was not well-liked by the other girls in our school; that was obvious from what I noticed when I was around him. I told him that I went through a sex change when he asked me to be his girlfriend. He was very comfortable with the fact I used to be Eric Bunsen, and fell in love with the girl I had become. As time went on, I knew that we were meant for each other. He knew it, too. We dated each other exclusively starting when we were both fifteen years old; we’re still deeply in love now, twenty-nine years later. We’ve been happily married for seventeen and a half of those years.”

“What have you discovered in your work with young transgender patients?”

“Eric and I have discovered that the younger we can diagnose someone with gender identity disorder, the better we can get a grip on what is making the patient this way, and allow for early intervention and treatment. I was thankful for professionals that intervened when I was younger, giving me an early diagnosis of my gender identity disorder. When a patient comes to us, we ask our patients, and, if necessary, his or her parents about how the disorder manifested it-

self, and what we can do to more effectively treat the patient and the condition.”

“What do you look for in your patients’ history?”

“What I generally look for is a history of dressing in the clothes of the opposite sex. I often ask the patient, and maybe their parents, when they recall the earliest point where the patient dressed in the clothes of the opposite sex. Many of the patients I work with began dressing in the clothes of the opposite sex as early as the age of two. That first experience with dressing in the clothes of the opposite sex could be a dress or gown a sister once wore, just getting into girls’ undergarments, or even being completely made and dressed up to look indistinguishable from other girls in the patient’s age group. Another thing I look for is how frequently the patient dresses in the clothes of the opposite sex. Of the same group, many started dressing as girls occasionally, in secret. Others were dressed up by a sister or other female relative. I also have several patients who dress as girls as often as possible. Some of them dress in secret for as much as several hours a day, but are afraid of serious repercussions if any family member catches them dressed as girls. Others have parents, especially mothers, or siblings, especially sisters, who encourage their dressing as girls. Some even go out on occasion dressed as girls. I also ask the patient whether he/she is emotionally, physically and romantically attracted to boys or girls. More often than not, many of my patients are attracted to boys. For nearly all my pre-teen patients, their sexual interests have not awakened. If the patient is referred to me in his/her teens, then I might ask the patient if he/she is sexually attracted to boys or girls. Many of the transsexual patients I see are attracted to males. Only a handful of my patients are transgender lesbians. The

most important thing I ask my patients is whether he/she strongly identifies as male or female. Most often, the patient indicates a strong female identity. When I confer a diagnosis of gender identity disorder on the patient, I then refer him/her to my husband, who gets the patient going on the transition from male to female.”

“What’s the age distribution of your patients?”

“My patients come from a wide range of age groups. The youngest patient I have is seven years old; he’s been dressing off and on as a girl since he was three years old. He lives in a house full of girls; his mother is divorced, and he has three older sisters. My husband and I don’t know if this person has a strong female identity. If he does, then we may try to start treatment as soon as possible. Most of my patients are between twelve and fifty-five years old. My oldest patient right now is sixty-four years old, and is in the final stage of her transition from man to woman. As a man, she had never married, despite the fact she has owned a nightclub in West Hollywood for the past forty years. She first came to work as a woman just after she turned thirty years old; she began living full-time as a woman after turning sixty. She’s on track for a sex-change operation next month in San Francisco.”

“Let’s say that I have a nine-year-old son, and he feels that he is really a girl, trapped in a boy’s body. How would I get a referral to a gender specialist like you?”

“Many major cities have referral services that provide the names and addresses of professionals who work with transgender patients. Most of the referrals I get come from parents and patients entering words like ‘transgender support services’ and ‘transgender refer-

ral services' on their favorite search engines on the World Wide Web. More and more professionals are seeing younger patients these days. I'm sure you would enter those words into your Internet search engine to look up professionals that work with transgender patients, especially transgender children, in your area. If you're in a smaller city like the one you live in, you may have to drive to the nearest large city to obtain these services for your child. Since you live in Toledo, there are several professionals that offer these services for patients throughout northwest Ohio and southeast Michigan; one doesn't have to drive to Detroit or Cleveland to obtain such services. I am just one of many professionals who work with transgender children in southern California. Most of my patients are from this part of the area. I have several who live in Canoga Park, but many come from places like Van Nuys, Hollywood, West Hollywood, Reseda, Pacoima and even the San Fernando Valley."

When Erica finished asking that question, her husband, Dr. Eric Bentley, walked in to the room. He had just finished his session with a patient. He was a tall, light brown-haired man who looked younger than his forty-three years can attest to. He was dressed in a navy blue suit with a maroon tie and reddish-brown dress shoes. "I'd take it you're Bill Stevenson," he said as he approached me.

"I am," I added.

"I'm very pleased to meet you. I'm Dr. Eric Bentley, Erica's partner in this practice, and I'm also her husband," he said as he shook my hand.

"She's given me a bunch of good answers to my questions so far," I said as he sat down next to her and gave her a kiss.

Ian set up his camera to shoot several pictures of Eric and Erica together. He encouraged them to act like they were discussing a case for several shots before getting several shots of the couple kissing each other. After he took a last shot of the couple in a deep kiss, he said: "Go ahead with the rest of the interview."

My first question for Eric was: "What made you decide to work with transgender patients as a psychiatrist?"

"Erica, my beautiful wife, was a major influence in my decision to work with transgender patients. She was very fortunate to receive the services of qualified professionals while she was transitioning from male to female. She told me about the need for professionals who work with transgender patients before we graduated from high school, so we decided to make this our life's work. We went to college together; she started at a group practice as a social worker, working with transsexual patients. After I was finished with residency, we decided to set up our practice, which was the realization of a lifelong dream for us. We have answered the call to work with adults and children who are dealing with a conflict with their gender identity. Not only have we grown professionally since we started our practice, but also grown as a couple."

"You and Erica met when you were very young, even before she started living as a girl."

"She was a boy named Eric Bunsen when we met at a very young age. I did not know anything about Mary, her older sister, dressing Eric up as a girl as early as six months of age. Our fathers were very good friends since the Korean conflict, and our families were close. We lost contact with the Bunsen family after their father was killed in a cargo plane crash on Taiwan dur-

ing the Vietnam War. While they relocated back to the States, first to Minneapolis and then to Los Angeles, my family moved around to different Air Force Bases after combat activities wound down in Vietnam. I moved with my parents to Los Angeles after my father retired from the Air Force when I was fourteen years old.”

“When you met Erica in your freshman year of high school, did you have any idea that she used to be Eric Bunsen?”

“I had no idea that Erica was born a boy. On my first day of high school, I noticed a very pretty girl in a cheerleader’s uniform. She noticed me, too. She looked vaguely familiar to me. As she approached, I thought she was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. We introduced ourselves, and before long, we were spending a lot of time away from our classes together. When every girl I asked turned me down for a date to the Homecoming, I asked Erica, and she accepted. When I finally asked her to be my girlfriend, some two months after we met, she revealed to me that she used to be my friend Eric Bunsen. She told me about the transition she went through starting at the age of seven and her sex-change operation when she was twelve. I told her the only thing that mattered to me was that she was a beautiful girl now, and that I was in love with her. The feeling was mutual. We were hardly apart after that.”

“Could you add to his story, Erica?”

“He was so sweet when he told me that he had fallen in love with the girl I had become. I thought his parents would not be too keen to his dating a transsexual girl. But, he told me about a gay brother; when I finally met his parents for the first time as a girl, they were impressed at my transformation and my beauty.

They approved of our relationship; my mother approved of our relationship from the start. I have never met a guy like him, and he's never met a girl like me."

"How has your perception of the transgender community differed from other men?"

"Being married to a transsexual woman, I feel that my perception of the transgender community is a lot more... well, accepting than most men. Many people get their perception of the transgender community from the sensationalist talk shows that are all over daytime television, and I think that perception is wrong. The kind of patients we work with are more than just models and entertainers; they're students, doctors, lawyers, scientists, business people, journalists, even college professors. My perception of the transgender community is that they're people, just like you and me. We're thankful for each and every transgender person we've touched. My life with Erica is a continuing education in the issues transgender people face on a daily basis."

"You have six adopted children. How has your work with transgender patients influenced them?"

"Erica and I always wanted to be parents; that dream came true fourteen years ago when we adopted Eric and Sarah. Eric is seventeen years old now, and entering his senior year at Canoga High School, the school we graduated from. Sarah is fourteen years old now, getting ready to enter her freshman year of high school. Both of them have dealt with transgender classmates; Eric has two transgender girls in his class. One girl, Jessica, began transitioning when she was a sophomore in high school; the other girl, Stephanie, began her transition from boy to girl at the age of eleven. He met Stephanie in the eighth grade; Jessica transferred to

Canoga from out of state when she finished her freshman year in a small Alabama town. Eric referred both girls to us. Jessica had her sex-change operation two weeks ago in San Francisco; she'll be headed home in the next couple of days. Stephanie underwent her operation in Philadelphia when she was thirteen years old. Sarah is very good friends with the transsexual girl in her class. She met Heather when they were both eleven years old; Heather was a boy named Heath when they met. One evening after they finished seventh grade, Heath told her that he hated being a boy; he wanted so much to become a girl. She referred him to us; before long, he started living full-time as Heather. She's now in Montreal with her mother, recovering from her sex-change operation."

"Our two middle children have also dealt with transgender classmates, who were referred by them to me. Rachael is now twelve years old, and entering the seventh grade. Toward the end of this past school year, she told me about a male friend of hers. His name was Trent, and he told her that he was a girl, unfairly trapped in a boy's body. Rachael sat down with him for a while, and when he told his mother that he wanted to become a girl in front of Rachael, she told them about us. Within a week, we were seeing Trent and his mother. We told them about a school for troubled and transgender girls in the Hollywood hills; it's the Los Angeles campus of The Rainbow School for Girls, which has its home campus in San Francisco. Trent is now known as Tiffany, and will be a seventh grader at Rainbow in the fall. Michael, who's now eleven and entering the sixth grade, dealt with a similar situation involving a classmate of his named Zachary. One night, when he came over to show him something he found while hiking in the Angeles National Forest, he found

him wearing his sister Renee's pink bridesmaid gown from when their Aunt Misty got married. Like with Rachael's experience, Michael referred him to us. He's right now conflicted as to whether he wants to remain as Zachary, or spend more time as Zoe, his feminine alter ego."

"Our two youngest adopted children haven't had to deal with transgender classmates just yet. Larry and Laura are just four years old, and we haven't told them that their adoptive mother was born a boy. Erica and I feel we should wait until they're a little older before we tell them. They're both in preschool now; they won't be in kindergarten for at least another year. My wife's transsexual nature has made our older adopted children more ready to accept the challenges of helping their classmates who are dealing with a gender identity conflict than the average person."

"Do any of your children plan to become a psychologist or psychiatrist?"

"Eric is planning to study psychology when he graduates from high school next year. He's been working as our office manager during the summer the past couple of years, as well as at night, after he gets his homework done. Sarah is undecided on whether she wants to be a psychiatrist; she has a few years to decide on the course her life will take. We were smart to start college funds for our children when we adopted them; after all, this was Erica's idea."

"Before my father died, he set up trust funds for me and my siblings. I thought it would be a great idea to set up college funds for our children once we adopted them. My husband went along with the idea; he also had a trust fund set up by his parents while his father was still in the Air Force."

My last question was: “With both of you as partners in your practice, how has this played a role in your marriage and family life?”

“Being partners in this practice allows us to spend more time with our children. We work out of our home, so we usually set our own hours. Eric takes Larry and Laura to pre-school around eight o’clock in the morning, while our older kids are out the door by eight-thirty. Our first appointments are usually around nine o’clock; most days, we’re done by the time Rachael and Michael walk in the door at four o’clock. I usually take a break around the same time to pick up Larry and Laura from pre-school.”

“The only evenings Erica and I have to work are the nights when we have our support groups. We facilitate a support group for adult transgender women on Tuesday nights, and another support group for pre-teen and teenage transgender girls on Friday afternoons. Sometimes, Erica takes the younger girls shopping after their support group; Sarah and Rachael go with the girls so they could spend time with their mother.”

“As for our marriage, we feel that it’s enriched by being partners in our practice. We spend a lot of time together in our practice; the only time we’re apart is when we have separate speaking engagements. We also speak together at various transgender conferences across the country, primarily on the West Coast. Eric and I are as much in love now as we were in high school.”

“I agree with Erica. I never felt as complete in my life as now with her. She’s the perfect compliment for my day. We spend more time with our children than most parents due to the fact that we both work out of our home. Not many women like Erica have the kind

of marriage we have. In December, we'll be married eighteen years. It's rare for a successful woman like Erica to be married, let alone married this long. Not many transsexual women marry a man who loves her as the woman she's become, like I have. I was very happy on the day of our wedding. I had always dreamed of seeing my Erica in a wedding gown. We have made our dreams come true; we worked very hard to get to where we are now."

"Oh, Eric, you're so sweet," Erica cooed before she kissed him.

"Thank you, Bill, for a fantastic interview. I hope we can read it soon," Eric added.

"Bill, Ian may stay for our next sessions. We're also providing photographs from our support groups for inclusion in the article. Our oldest son took these pictures," Erica informed me. After receiving a DVD full of photos from their support groups, I walked outside to sit in the minivan and review my notes. Erica had an appointment with a seventeen-year-old pre-op transsexual, while Eric's appointment was with a young transsexual fashion model. While I was waiting for him, two teenagers approached me. The young man was over six feet tall, average build with short red hair, wearing a Los Angeles Dodgers jersey, a pair of blue jeans and a pair of white sneakers. The young lady was five-seven, slender build with long red hair, wearing a fuchsia sleeveless dress and a pair of fuchsia flats. "You must be Bill Stevenson, the journalist," the girl said, making a guess at my identity.

"I'm Bill Stevenson," I informed them.

"I'm Eric Bentley, Junior," the young man told me.

"I'm Sarah Bentley," added the young lady.

"It's a pleasure to meet you two. I've heard some glowing things about you from your parents," I said to them.

"Our parents are the best," Sarah complimented.

"They've done a great job of raising us," added young Eric.

"Where are you coming from?" I asked them.

"Oh, our parents know where we've been. We were at the high school, giving a lecture on how high school students should handle transgender classmates," Sarah replied.

"I have to pick up my kid brother and sister from pre-school in five minutes," added young Eric.

"Michael is at Boy Scout camp in the mountains; Rachael is at a Girl Scout camp near the coast," Sarah then added before she went in through the back door. The next thing I knew, Eric pulled out of the driveway in a 1999 Ford Crown Victoria, and turned right on the street toward the pre-school to pick up Larry and Laura.

When Ian emerged from the house just before five o'clock, I ran to the door to pick up one of his camera bags; he was carrying the other camera bag and the tripod for his camera. As soon as we got our personal effects in the van, we drove back to the hotel to review the pictures and my notes. We were looking forward to a relaxing evening; Ian and I would both get surprises when we returned.

## Seven

When we arrived back at our hotel around five-thirty, Ian and I went straight to our suite. I saw one surprise outside one of the ballrooms: a reunion of

The Krazy Girls of L.A. Tina hadn't arrived yet; she was still at work at her women's boutique. When we arrived at our suite, we got another surprise: Ian's fiancée, Vicki, had flown in from St. Louis. One of the bellhops put her in our suite. She was wearing a pink tank top shirt, a pair of blue jeans and a pair of white running shoes.

"Hi, honey," she cooed before kissing him.

"How was your trip, babe?" he asked her.

"It was a great trip, except for the turbulence over the Grand Canyon," she replied.

"Did you get your profile done?" I asked her.

"Yes, I did. Stephanie Thomas gave me some great material on her shop," she replied.

"Who was with you to take pictures," Ian then asked.

"Kara Magruder," she replied before the phone rang.

I picked it up, and said into the receiver: "Stevenson and Ashford's room."

It was Tina on the other end. "How are you doing, Bill?" she asked me.

"I'm doing great, thank you. I spent over three hours interviewing Erica and Eric Bentley at their residence this afternoon," I replied.

"Did you know about the reunion of The Krazy Girls of L.A. tonight?"

"I walked by it when Ian and I came in. Vicki arrived in town this afternoon."

"Who's Vicki?"

“She’s Ian’s fiancée. They’re going out to dinner tonight.”

“When are you going back to Toledo?”

“I leave Saturday night, and arrive in Toledo early Tuesday morning.”

“Would you like to come to tonight’s show?”

“I would love it.”

“Shall we meet around seven o’clock?”

“I’ll see you then.”

Ian quickly showered and changed into a maroon polo shirt and a pair of khaki slacks, while Vicki changed into a white sleeveless dress and a pair of white mid-heeled sandals for their night on the town. I decided to relax for a few minutes before I took a shower and changed into a beige golf shirt, a pair of khaki slacks and a pair of brown loafers. About five minutes before seven, I took the elevator down to the first floor. When I walked off the elevator, Tina was waiting for me. She was in a peach cocktail dress, a pair of white stockings and a pair of peach flats. I gently took her hand; we walked to the ballroom where the show was being held.

After I paid my seven-dollar cover charge, Tina showed me to a table in front of the stage. I sat down in a chair at the table, ordered a Caesar salad and a pitcher of iced tea before the show. The show began at eight o’clock, with a group of tall transgender women in evening gowns of various colors, prancing out on the stage and lip-synching an opening number from a Broadway musical. Tina was decked out in a bright yellow ball gown; she was one of the tallest girls in the show. After the first act, I picked up the program for the show, and looked at the cast biographies. I found

out a few facts. Tina was the third tallest girl in the show, the most successful of the girls that found careers outside show business, and one of only four of the sixteen girls that had been through sex reassignment surgery.



The tallest girl in the show was an African-American girl named Brittani; she came in at a whopping six feet, six inches tall in stocking feet. She had become one of the top models and performers on the entire West Coast. The shortest girl in the show was a Hispanic girl named Alexa, who was five feet, six inches tall. According to the program, she became a model and consultant at her sister's bridal shop in San Diego. The second act was from Felicity, a six-foot-tall brunette who was telling bawdy jokes. Tina was back in her cocktail dress as she sat down at my table.

"How did you like the opening number?" she asked me.

"It was fantastic; a first class performance," I replied.

Tina ordered herself a glass of iced tea while we sat and watched Felicity telling her sometimes X-rated jokes. I turned the page to a brief description of Felicity in the program. I found out something interesting about her that jumped out at me: she was from Toledo. I set the program aside, and took a long look at Tina. She flashed a wide smile; the next thing I knew, we shared a tender kiss. She took a look at my watch, and suddenly remembered something.

"Bill, I have to go back to the dressing room. I'm on after the next act," she said with a little urgency.

"I look forward to your act," I said softly before giving her a kiss. She got up, and walked toward the stage, where a young woman met her, and took her to a dressing room across the hall.

The next act was Alexa, decked out in a short, informal wedding dress, with a bridal tiara and a short veil and white high heels, lip-synching to a light, romantic

song. I turned to the back of the program, and saw a picture of an old friend I knew when I was working for a San Bernardino radio station back in the early 1990s. After Alexa finished her act, a five-foot, eleven-inch blonde named Jennie came out on stage, taking her place on the left side of the stage. She was decked out in a royal blue satin, curve-hugging gown adorned with sequins, and a pair of white pumps. The spotlight shone on her as she walked onstage to talk about the man who managed them.

“The reason why we decided to reunite on stage is to pay tribute to our longtime manager. His full name was John Roy Dyer, but we all knew him as Roy. He owned a talent agency, based in San Bernardino. Born on January 31, 1955 to a law enforcement officer and a dressmaker, he came to California from Lake Charles, Louisiana when he was eight years old. His family settled in Paramount, a suburb of Los Angeles. After graduating from high school, he enrolled at the University of Southern California, where he studied business, with an eye to becoming a talent agent. From the time he was ten years old, he was fascinated by the entertainment industry. He originally wanted to become an actor, dreaming of someday being a romantic leading man. After failing several auditions for roles in stage plays, he realized he was not cut out to be an actor. Since he was very good with numbers, he decided he wanted to pursue a career as a talent agent when he entered his junior year in high school. After graduating from U.S.C., he went to work for a top Hollywood talent agency. When he received his MBA from Harvard in 1981, he formed his own talent agency. The JRD Agency initially represented models, singers and actors from different areas of entertainment, mainly those who were taking their initial steps in their careers. The

name of the agency was changed to JRD and Associates on January 1, 1987. By 1989, it was one of the largest talent agencies in southern California.”

Another spotlight came on, revealing a six-foot, four-inch red-haired girl named Melody, decked out in a red satin, curve-hugging evening gown with sequins and a pair of red flats. “While Roy represented all kinds of acts, one of his favorite forms of entertainment was female impersonation. Roy saw his first female impersonator show in Los Angeles when some of his friends took him out to a club for his twenty-first birthday. He was amazed at the ability of the performers he saw to present themselves as women. It was at that point he wanted to manage a female impersonator revue. In February of 1990, just after he turned thirty-five, he began auditioning several transgender women for what would become The Crazy Girls of L.A. This would be a sideline to JRD and Associates. Initially, seven girls, three female impersonators and four pre-op transsexuals, made up the group. The Crazy Girls made their debut at a bachelor party in Hollywood in April of 1990. Over the next decade, The Crazy Girls of L.A. expanded its company as the ‘90s progressed. I came to L.A. from the college town of Manhattan, Kansas after graduating from college in May 1992; I joined The Crazy Girls in July of 1992. Jennie joined us in January of 1993 after arriving from Rochester, New York. As several girls left the group to strike out on their own during the course of the decade, they thanked Roy for guiding them in their careers, and often sought out his advice on various matters. Our biggest moment in the spotlight came in August of 1995, when Bill Stevenson, a reporter for a San Bernardino radio station at the time, interviewed several of us for a news magazine program. Of the original

seven girls in the group, just two female impersonators, Brittani and Jacqui, and a pre-op transsexual, Thalia, were still Krazy Girls at the end of 1999. Alexa was the last girl to become a Krazy Girl; she joined in January of 2000."

Jennie continued: "After Tina departed in March 2000 to open a women's fashion boutique and Thalia left in May 2000 to have a sex-change operation, we had a steady lineup of thirteen girls for the next five years. We usually performed in teams of at least two girls, performing at everything from bachelor parties to charity shows. Many of us also modeled throughout southern California. September 11, 2001 changed everything for us. We were performing at fewer venues after that terrible day; our appearances at fashion shows sustained us for a while. We finally decided to tour the clubs of California and Nevada; we toured northern California in 2002, made our first appearances in San Francisco and Las Vegas in 2003, our first appearance in Reno to ring in 2004, and our only appearance outside California and Nevada in May 2004, when we appeared at a club in Chicago. We finally decided to do one last tour of California and Nevada in the summer and fall of 2005 to celebrate our 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary. On December 17, 2005, The Krazy Girls of L.A. performed for the last time in West Hollywood. Tina, Thalia and one of the original members of the group, Karen, returned for a final performance. The Krazy Girls of L.A. officially disbanded on December 31, 2005. Roy was there for the last performance."

Melody then continued: "Many of us have found success in the entertainment business, while others have found success in other careers. Some have completed the transition to women. Jennie had her sex-change operation in January 2006, while I had mine

in May 2007. We now own a photography studio with Jennie's twin brother, John, and his best friend, Phil, who became my husband in October 2008. Tina, as you may know, owns a women's fashion boutique here in town. Brittani has won several pageants since The Crazy Girls broke up, and made it to the Miss International pageant in Bangkok in 2009. Jacqui has been mainly living as a man since the breakup, living with her female spouse and their four children on a ranch outside Lubbock, Texas. Thalia is now a happily married woman, taking a nice man named Seth as her husband in 2004. She's a full-time housewife, while he's a senior partner with a law firm in suburban Dallas. Alexa has found success as a fashion model in New York."

Jennie would continue: "While Roy prided in the work we did as entertainers, his talent agency was still his primary focus. While we enjoyed his company, he had a wife, Dahlia, and four daughters, Rhonda, Donna, Jennifer and Amanda, to think about. He once made a joke to me that he had so many women in his life that he just didn't know what to do. When his oldest daughter, Rhonda, got married in 2003, we were all there; Alexa was one of the bridesmaids in the wedding. We were all very close to Dahlia and the girls throughout our time with him. He was most proud of his wife and daughters, the five most important women in his life."

Melody went on: "The saddest day of our lives came on April 24, 2007. That afternoon, I got a phone call from Donna. 'Melody, my dad has been diagnosed with inoperable cancer.' I shed a tear as I told Jennie; I had the task of contacting the girls via telephone or E-mail. Dahlia and the girls showed incredible strength during his three-year fight with liver cancer. He sold

his agency to his two youngest daughters, Jennifer and Amanda, at the end of 2008. Both girls followed in his footsteps and became talent agents themselves. As he was laying on his deathbed at U.S.C. Medical Center, he asked Amanda to get The Crazy Girls together for a reunion performance. This would be his last request. On May 29, 2010, Roy lost his battle with cancer. He was fifty-five years old. Tonight, we are fulfilling his last request. All the proceeds from tonight's show will go to cancer research. Roy was a guiding force in our lives, and he would be proud of us, watching us tonight from Heaven."

The lights faded from Jennie and Melody before a big platform, in the shape of a multi-tier cake, was rolled out on stage. While the song "The Stripper" was playing on the sound system, there would definitely be no stripping in this act. When the music started, the top of the platform opened. Tina emerged, wearing a sexy yellow sequin dress and a pair of pumps. A technician, inside the platform, raised her to where she could easily step out of the platform. When she stepped out, she sashayed down the tiers of the platform to the stage, where she would begin dancing seductively, like a burlesque queen. She danced her way down to the end of the stage. There was a set of stairs in front of my table, so she stepped down from the stage, and began dancing seductively around my table before doing a lap dance. She had a very lustful look on her face as she continued her lap dance in front of me. My hands found their way to her back, while I was looking at her body with romantic anticipation. She finished her dance by sitting on my lap, whispering "I love you", and giving me a deep, tender kiss. As if on cue, I swept her off her feet, and carried her backstage like a groom carries his bride on their wedding day.

I returned to my table, and enjoyed the rest of the show while Tina changed into a red baby doll nightie for the closing number. It was just after ten o'clock; all of the girls were in romantic lingerie while all of them sang "I Remember You". Everyone gave them a standing ovation when the performance concluded.

I met Tina backstage; she had changed back into the outfit she wore when she arrived at the hotel. We held hands as we walked around outside the hotel. "I'm glad you enjoyed the show tonight," she said.

"I really did enjoy myself tonight. It was really a great wrap to a great day. The interview with Erica and Eric went very well. The big task lies ahead; putting everything into two magazine articles. We have until the end of August to submit the final drafts to the editors," I added.

"Speaking of writing, I was asked to write an article as a guest contributor for Magruder's. I spent my spare time writing a memoir of my life working with Roy for the September issue. I got the request from your boss shortly after his death."

"Ian and I will be looking forward to reading it."

Just as eleven o'clock approached, Tina realized that she needed to get back to her place; she had to be at work at nine o'clock the next morning. We parted with a loving kiss before I went back to the hotel suite to watch the eleven o'clock news and turn in for the night. Ian and Vicki didn't get back until after midnight; when I woke up at seven-thirty the next morning, they were still sleeping. Ian was only in a white pair of boxer shorts, while Vicki was in a black teddy. I walked down to the restaurant to have pancakes, bacon and a glass of milk for breakfast. I got back to the suite to work on an outline for the interview with the

Bentleys, E-mail it to Melanie, and start work on the interview with Stephanie Thomas from the outline I put together on the train into Los Angeles. Ian spent the whole day looking at the photos from the interview. Just as I was about to call Room Service to order lunch, around eleven-thirty, I suddenly remembered something. I forgot to give him the support group photos that Erica gave me the day before. I still had the DVD in my briefcase. I found it in the front pocket, and gave it to Ian.

“What’s this?” he asked me.

“It’s the DVD of the pictures of Erica Bentley’s support groups. I forgot to give them to you,” I replied.

“I’ll take a look at these later. By the way, Vicki is at Tina’s boutique; she’s been in need of a few nice dresses for three weddings we’re attending later this month, when we get back to Toledo,” he added.

“By the way, what would you like for lunch?”

“I’ll have the B.L.T. with carrot and celery sticks, and a glass of unsweetened iced tea.”

I called Room Service after Ian gave me his order. I ordered a 12-ounce porterhouse steak with baked potato and sour cream and a garden salad with Italian dressing. While we were eating lunch, the subject of travel plans came up.

“Have you made any changes in your travel plans?” I asked him.

“Vicki and I have been itching to go to San Francisco for the longest time. We’re flying up tomorrow afternoon. Renée is still with Vicki’s parents back in Toledo. We’ll be there for four days,” he replied.

“My aunt and uncle have a summer home on the lake north of Chicago. They’re in England visiting my cousin and his wife, and they won’t be back until the end of July. My uncle gave me the key to the house before they left the States I’ll be able to finish the articles there,” I added.

When Vicki got back from her shopping trip after two o’clock, Ian was on a break from his work. I had just E-mailed my outline for the Bentley interview to Melanie. I got up just long enough to make another pot of coffee. “After trying on so many dresses, I’m really looking forward to a cup of coffee,” she told Ian.

“Coffee will be ready in a few minutes,” I informed her.

Vicki was showing the dresses she bought to Ian. “They all look beautiful,” he complimented.

“Thank you, sweet thing,” she whispered before giving him a kiss.

That evening, I took Ian and Vicki out to dinner at a restaurant at the hotel. They had salads, while I opted for roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy and a side salad. After dinner was ordered, Vicki asked me: “The tall girl at the dress shop who helped me today, is that the same girl who spent Wednesday night with you?”

“That’s her, Vicki,” I replied.

“Well, Tina told me that you’ve been very kind to her throughout your stay in California. I sought her counsel today on what dresses would best suit me for the weddings Ian and I have to go to this month,” she added.

“Her old group, The Krazy Girls of L.A., had their reunion show at the hotel last night. Bill went to the show while we were out on the town,” Ian then added.

“Tina wrote a guest article for our magazine’s September edition on their late manager, John Roy Dyer. He managed the girls for fifteen years, from its formation in 1990 to their breakup at the end of 2005. It was a benefit for cancer research, as Roy lost his battle with cancer in May,” I told them.

“When does the September edition of Magruder’s hit the newsstands?” Vicki asked.

“August 20,” I replied.

## **Eight**

Ian and Vicki flew out of LAX on the afternoon of July 10, headed for four days of sightseeing and fun in San Francisco. I had to be at Los Angeles Union Station at eight o’clock that night for the long train ride to Chicago. I arrived on the afternoon of July 12. During the train ride back to Chicago, I spent several hours in my compartment on the train, finishing the Thomas article. When the train made its first stop in Arizona, I E-mailed the Thomas article to Melanie for her input. I waited to pick up my E-mail again until the train made it to Albuquerque. In an E-mail I received from her, she approved the outline for the Bentley article. She was proofreading the rough draft of the Thomas article during the rest of the ride into Chicago.

I spent ten days at my aunt and uncle’s place, a peaceful retreat on the lake that was closer to the Wisconsin line than to Chicago. There, I continued polishing the Thomas article, and began writing the Bentley article. My cousin Caroline and her friend, Emily, still had my apartment for another two weeks. On the evening of July 16, I caught up with Ian and Vicki as they got off the train from San Francisco.

“How did it go?” I asked them.

“It was great. We visited many of the major tourist attractions, had lunch near Fisherman’s Wharf, and even took in a female impersonator show the night we got into town. We both used our snapshot cameras, since our cameras were full of pictures from our assignments,” Vicki replied.

“How are the articles coming along?” Ian then asked.

“I just finished what I hope will be the final draft of the Thomas article today; I’ll E-mail it to Melanie as soon as I get back to the lake house,” I replied.

“When are you going to be back in Toledo?” Vicki asked me.

“I’ll be back next weekend. My cousin and her friend still have my apartment until next Friday,” I replied.

“Her parents have Renée until Monday. We’ve decided to spend the weekend in Chicago,” Ian added.

I took them to my aunt and uncle’s lake home. I gave them the master bedroom, while I continued to sleep in a guest bedroom. Vicki was finishing her profile of Stephanie’s Brides and Belles, while Ian continued to look over the photos from the two interviews we did. They took their breaks at the beach not far from the house, while I went to a nearby nature preserve to partake in one of my favorite activities: hiking. Late on the night of July 18, Ian and Vicki boarded the train back for Toledo. When I got back to the lake house, I got an E-mail from Melanie, approving the final draft of the Thomas article. I continued work on the first draft of the Bentley article, E-mailing it to Melanie the next afternoon. I wrote four drafts of the Bentley ar-

ticle until I finished what I hoped would be the final draft of the article just before I boarded the train back to Toledo on the evening of July 22. I wanted to surprise Caroline and Emily on the final day of their internship.

Arriving just after four o'clock in the morning in Toledo, I hailed a cab to my apartment building. Arriving back at my apartment at four-thirty, I set my briefcase and suitcases down in the kitchen, walked into the living room, where Caroline was sleeping on the couch and Emily was sleeping on the floor, like typical college students. My bed was neatly made when I walked into my bedroom, and crashed on the bed.

The next morning, as Caroline got up to make breakfast, she discovered my suitcases and briefcase. Emily walked into the kitchen, and asked her: "Who walked in while we were asleep?"

"My cousin Bill must have gotten home while we were asleep," Caroline replied.

I slept soundly while Caroline and Emily got ready for the last day of their internship. When I woke up around ten o'clock, they had their personal effects all packed. I walked to the auto repair shop to pick up my car; the bill was just under \$300. I drove to the office to not only consult with Melanie, but also to turn in the receipts from the trip to do the articles. When I arrived around eleven o'clock, Caroline and Emily immediately noticed me. "How was your trip?" Emily asked.

"It was a great trip. I had a great time, not only with work, but I also was able to relax and meet new people," I replied.

"At least you didn't go overseas, like the others did," added Caroline.

I showed them to my cubicle, where we sat down. "Let me tell you ladies something. In a job like this, expect to travel extensively to get a story. I began working for this magazine nine years ago. For the last four years, I've been working with Ian. Our assignments have taken us places as diverse as Bangkok, Helsinki, Nairobi, Rio de Janeiro and Brisbane; we've also covered stories as close to us as Rossford and Bryan. Expect to cover varied subject matter, too. When we went to Nairobi, for example, I interviewed two-track and field coaches about how Kenyan runners train. In Rio, we covered their equivalent of Mardi gras. In Helsinki, we did an article on that country's hockey fans. In Brisbane, we did a story on a group of social workers who worked with aborigines. I just got back from a trip to St. Louis and Los Angeles to interview two successful transsexual women. This is not the first assignment in which we covered transsexual women; we went to Bangkok to do a story on transsexual entertainers two and a half years ago. Your assignments will depend on the magazine or newspaper you work for, and the target audience of the readers. The two magazines Mr. Magruder owns go toward two different audiences. Romantic Brides cater mainly to brides-to-be and bridal consultants, while Magruder's targets the socially conscious reader, primarily between 21 and 54 years of age," I explained.

"Does the job even include risking your life to get the story?" Emily asked.

"Again, this depends on your audience. There have been times when I risked my life to cover a story. I haven't been in a dangerous situation since my days in radio, when I did a feature story in one of East Saint Louis' worst neighborhoods twelve years ago. The house I was interviewing a subject in for the story was

shot at by members of a street gang in a drive-by shooting. I hit the floor to get out-of-the-way of the bullets. My subject also hit the floor to get away from the bullets being fired. Thank God the guys who did the shooting were caught. Journalism can be a dangerous occupation," I explained.

I attended a reception for the interns that afternoon. I sat down with Melanie during the reception. "You've done a really good job on the articles. All I need is the pictures from Ian," she said to me.

"I'll call him and see what time will work best for him," I informed her before calling him.

After I got off the phone with Ian, I informed her that we would be meeting on Monday at twelve-thirty. I continued to enjoy myself at the reception; I drove the girls home to allow them to rest before they went back home to Illinois. The next morning, I got up early to take Caroline and Emily to the station to catch the seven-thirty train to Chicago. I had the weekend to rest from my long trip before I returned to the office on the afternoon of July 26.

## Nine

When I arrived at the office at twelve-twenty, I arrived holding a small all-meat pizza for Ian and myself, and a small vegetable pizza for Melanie. We were the first collaborators to return from our assignment; two others were due back later that week, and the two remaining collaborators weren't due back until late the following week. Ian knocked on the door of her office; Melanie was on the phone when she directed us in. I put Melanie's pizza on her desk, while I set the

all-meat pizza on an end table between where I sat down and where Ian sat down.

As soon as Melanie got off the phone, she asked Ian to close the door. "Bill, Ian, I took a look at the material you've submitted for the article. You have done an excellent job of covering these two successful women for our special issue," she complimented.

"I took the time while traveling on the train and in the hotels to painstakingly review my notes and recordings, and write the replies as the subjects wrote them, word for word. This was an easier article to do than the one I did on transgender entertainers in Thailand. I even spent some time at my aunt and uncle's lakefront home north of Chicago to finish the Bentley article. As I remember, it took us two months to complete the article we did in Thailand. These articles took less than half that time to do. I was very pleased with the answers they gave me; they gave me more of a picture of what these women did for a living, and allowed me to further understand their contributions to society, despite all they've gone through," I explained.

"I took roughly 600 pictures of both Mrs. Thomas and Dr. Bentley and their husbands on this assignment. I also have over 200 pictures of Erica Bentley's support groups on this DVD. These pictures are so good, I'm having a hard time selecting pictures that would go well with the text Bill has written," added Ian.

I explained further: "I looked over Ian's pictures while we were on the trip, and they were very good, too. I also have been having a tough time selecting pictures to go with the text I wrote. The best thing I think we could do is use the best of the rest of the pictures to do a traveling exhibition."

“What would you say if I helped you select the pictures for the article?” she asked us.

“We would appreciate it very much,” Ian replied.

Ian and I walked down to a conference room with Melanie, where we spent several hours selecting the pictures for the article. She first looked at the support group photos for the Bentley article. While she was looking at the pictures, she asked: “Who took these pictures?”

“Eric Bentley, Junior, their oldest adopted son,” I replied.

Ian pointed to two photos on the DVD; one of the adult transgender support group in action, and another one of a shopping trip with the youth transgender support group. “Who are the two girls in front in the picture?” she asked us.

“They’re Sarah and Rachael Bentley, their two oldest adopted daughters,” I replied.

“Let’s use these two pictures,” Melanie added.

We had a bit of an easier time with the pictures Ian took of Erica and her husband. We selected one of her sitting in her office as the first picture of the article, as well as one of her sitting on the couch in the living room, and one of her and Eric looking over their wedding album. He even found “before” and “after” pictures of Erica; he used a digital image picture to put a picture of her as a five-year-old boy in an inset, within a picture of her as a thirteen-year-old girl, six months after her 1979 sex-change operation. Ian burned these pictures to a blank compact disc, marked them “Pictures for the Bentley article,” and gave the disc to Melanie.

We had a harder decision with the pictures for the Thomas article. Ian also found “before” and “after” pictures of Stephanie; these were E-mailed to him while he and Vicki were in San Francisco. In an inset, he created another inset with a picture of Stephanie as a man, taken shortly before the start of her transition from man to woman, within a picture of Stephanie modeling at a St. Louis bridal fashion show three months after her 1996 sex-change operation. We looked over the pictures he took of Stephanie in the bridal shop first. We kept coming back to one of her posing next to a mannequin modeling an elaborate wedding gown. “Let’s use this one,” I suggested.

“I concur with Bill,” Ian added.

“I think this is the perfect picture for the first picture of the article,” Melanie said.

We had a bit of an easier time with the photos with her husband. We selected one of them trading reading material; Stephanie giving her husband a bridal magazine, while he is handing her a copy of one of his recent romance novels. “This one is a fantastic one,” Ian informed us.

“I like this picture, too,” Melanie added.

“I think we should use this one,” I agreed.

The hardest time we had was with the pictures of Stephanie helping Lexi with her fitting for her wedding gown. “Who is this bride?” Melanie asked.

“The bride-to-be is Lexi Bermudez. She is a friend of one of Patricia McGillicuddy, one of Stephanie’s consultants. She is a post-op transsexual who will be married to her longtime boyfriend next month. Lexi works as a part-time model and owns a boutique for big and tall women in St. Louis. Patricia is the consultant on the

right, helping her with the veil. She's also a transsexual. Stephanie is the one on the left, helping her with the train on the gown. The other two consultants are Haleigh Smith and Stephanie Kenton, they were both born female. Mrs. Kenton is the original owner of the shop; she works there part-time. Haleigh has worked as a consultant since Mrs. Kenton owned the shop; she's Mrs. Thomas' most trusted consultant," I explained.

"I think we should use this picture, Melanie," Ian added.

"This is an excellent picture to give the reader an idea of the kind of work she does," she then added.

"Should we use this wedding portrait of Stephanie and E.S., too?" I asked.

"I think this is a beautiful picture. I recommend using it," she replied.

"I like this one," Ian added.

We didn't finish choosing the pictures for the article until after seven o'clock. Before we left for home, Melanie allowed us to return to working on the emergency preparedness story. When we got out on the street, Ian asked me: "Have you got plans for dinner tonight?"

"I'm going for Chinese food," I replied.

"Vicki made a pot roast for dinner," he added.

When I got back to my apartment with a large order of beef fried rice and an order of fried wontons, I turned on my DVD player, and watched classic television shows until the eleven o'clock news. Our emergency preparedness assignment that we would resume didn't take us too far, only to the Dayton area.

## Ten

The special issue of the magazine came out on September 19; we had anticipated higher sales than usual. We were commended for the respectful and realistic way we treated our subjects. We got E-mails and letters from readers, telling us that our articles gave them a more realistic view of the transsexual community than they got from the rest of the media. It even inspired numerous transgender people who read it. Sales of the October issue of *Magruder's* were five times that of the August issue, and more than twice that of the September issue.

The weekend of October 23 was not only the weekend the nominees for the top journalism awards came out, but also a weekend in which a rare event occurred in my life: a woman keeping her promise. When I was out in Los Angeles, Tina promised to make a side trip to Toledo to visit me. She kept that promise.

It was four o'clock in the morning when Tina arrived at the train station. She was in a pair of pink slacks, a white blouse, and a pair of pink flats. She had flown from St. Louis into Chicago's Midway Airport, took the el downtown to board the train at Union Station. We embraced as she walked in the door from the train. "I'm glad you came," I told her.

"I told you I would keep my promise," she said before we kissed.

Tina and I went to my apartment, where she crashed on the couch. I took her suitcase and set it on the recliner, and went back to bed. I woke up around ten-thirty, and made a late breakfast for her.

"That smells so good," she said as she woke up.

"I'm making French toast," I informed her.

After breakfast, she took a shower, put on a gray sweater dress, a pair of black tights, and a pair of black flats. I showered after her, changing into a blue Toledo Mud Hens T-shirt, a pair of olive drab green slacks, white ankle-length socks, and a pair of blue running shoes. We walked to a nearby park, where we walked around for a while. We found a bench, close to where a wedding was being held, and sat down. "How did it go with Stephanie Thomas?" I asked her.

"I had a wonderful time with her. She took me on a tour of her bridal shop, and introduced me to the consultants and the seamstress. I took notes on the kind of inventory a shop like hers stock, as well as the services provided to potential brides. I was also given some advice on how I should go about promoting the bridal business to the transgender community. I also had dinner with her and her husband at their residence. E.S. Thomas gave me an autographed copy of his latest romance novel. In my part of the Los Angeles area, I see a need for a transgender-friendly bridal shop," she explained.

"She always gives those who come into contact with her good notes," I added.

While Tina and I were taking a walk, hand-in-hand, in the park, my cell phone rang. It was Ian. "What's up?" I asked him.

Ian was in his cubicle at the magazine's offices. "The list of nominees for the Professional Lens and Letters Awards came out. We've been nominated for our articles on Stephanie Thomas and Dr. Erica Bentley," he replied.

"What were we nominated for?" I then asked.

"I've been nominated for best original photography for both articles. I also got a nod for best photo editing for the before and after pictures of both women. You've been nominated for best interview for the Stephanie Thomas article, and for best writing for both the Thomas and Erica Bentley articles. Our magazine has been nominated for best special issue for our October issue," he replied with a sense of pride.

"That's great!" I said with excitement before asking him when the awards ceremony is.

"It'll be on Friday night, December 17th, in Los Angeles," he informed me.

"By the way, Tina is in town; do you and Vicki have any plans for tonight?"

"No, we don't, but we can make something special for you two. Will seven o'clock work for you two?"

"Seven o'clock is fine, Ian."

"We're looking forward to meeting her."

After I got off the phone with Ian, Tina asked: "Who was it you were talking to on the phone?"

"That was Ian Ashford, the photographer who collaborates with me on magazine articles. He's invited us to his place for dinner tonight. He also informed me that the articles we did are up for several awards; we have to be in Los Angeles on December 17th," I replied.

"Well, you have yourself a date for that event," she added.

"You read my mind; I was about to ask you to be my date!" I added, surprised at what she said.

Tina and I did some sightseeing around the Toledo area before we returned to my apartment to rest before

going to Ian and Vicki's house for dinner. I changed into a blue polo shirt, while Tina changed into a stonewashed denim skirt, a baby blue top, and a pair of off-white flats. We arrived at their house before seven o'clock.



“We’re happy to have you over, Bill,” Vicki said with a smile as she let us in.

“Vicki Tomlinson, this is Tina Stevens, a friend of mine from Los Angeles. Tina, this is Vicki Tomlinson, a writer for *The Romantic Bride*,” I said in an introductory manner.

“Ian has told me a lot about you,” Vicki said to her.

“I’ve read your stuff, Vicki. It’s very good,” Tina added.

“It’s great to see you again, Tina,” Ian said as he came into the living room from the kitchen.

Vicki showed us to the dining room table, where Tina sat down at one end of the table. I sat down next to her, and Vicki was facing Tina. Ian surprised us with the dinner he and Vicki made.

“That looks good,” Tina complimented.

“We’ve made roast beef with mashed potatoes and gravy, a garden salad and homemade bread,” Ian informed us.

After we ate dinner, the girls went into the living room. Vicki asked her: “What brings you to Toledo, Tina?”

“I own a women’s fashion boutique in Los Angeles, where I live, with my best friend and her sister. This past week, I was in St. Louis, visiting with and taking notes from Stephanie Thomas. My boutique is getting ready to add a bridal and formal section, which we plan to open on Valentine’s Day. I have been in the women’s fashion business for the past ten years; before that, I was a showgirl in a revue that worked mainly in the Los Angeles area. I left the group before they started touring California and Nevada. I met Bill online

fourteen years ago, just after he relocated from San Bernardino to St. Louis. We met in person this past summer, when he and Ian were in Los Angeles to interview Dr. Bentley. He also got to see the reunion show for my old troupe," Tina explained.

"That was the night I came into L.A. to surprise Ian," added Vicki.

"The night we spent together, I asked him what he thought if I made a side trip to see him in Toledo. He thought it would be a great idea. So, after he left L.A., I decided that I would surprise him after my business trip to St. Louis. I got into Toledo early this morning," Tina told her.

Ian and I were in the office, where I read the E-mail he received from Melanie. "This is really awesome," he said with excited anticipation.

"It's quite an honor to be nominated," I added.

"I think you should also see this. It's from E.S. Thomas' Web site."

I looked at the headline at the top. It read, in bold letters: "E.S. and Stephanie to Adopt Child." I read the announcement with interest.

"I don't know if Stephanie told Tina while she was in St. Louis," Ian said to me.

"I'll have to ask her. It says the announcement was posted this morning at ten o'clock," I added.

Ian and I walked into the living room, where his fiancée and my friend were waiting. "Tina, did Stephanie tell you anything important while you were with her this week?" I asked her.

"She didn't say anything important about her personal life," she replied.

“Bill and I were just on E.S. Thomas’ Web site. He’s announced that he and Stephanie are going to adopt a child,” Ian added.

“That’s great! They will make great parents,” Tina told us.

“By the way, where’s Renée?” Vicki asked him.

“She’s fast asleep. She’s had a long day at the playground,” he replied.

I sat down next to Tina, and looked lovingly at her. “Do you have a date for the awards ceremony in L.A. in December?” Vicki asked me.

“I’m sitting next to her,” I replied.

“Vicki will be coming with us to L.A. for the ceremony. Melanie, our editor, will be with us, too,” Ian added.

It was just after ten o’clock that Tina and I returned to my place. We were lying down together in my bed just after eleven-thirty. She was in a red baby doll nightie, while I was in a blue tank top and a black pair of shorts. She had her head on my chest, while I was filing my fingers through her hair. “Ian has a very great girl in his life,” she whispered.

“He and Vicki are getting married next spring,” I whispered.

“Do you ever think about finding another girl-friend, let alone get married?”

“It’s been farthest from my mind. I would love to be your man, but our careers are in two different cities. You have your boutique in L.A. My life, right now, is here in Toledo. You’re the first woman I’ve trusted on a date in a long, long time.”

“Bill, it’s been too long since you’ve had a girlfriend. I can be able to come and visit you whenever I feel like it.”

“I don’t know when I’ll be back in Los Angeles again after December 17th. If I ever get back out that way, I’ll be very happy to go out with you again.”

“I love you, Bill,” she said before we shared a long, tender kiss.

## Eleven

It was just after five o’clock on the morning of December 13th when Vicki, Ian and I met Melanie at the office. Mr. Magruder arranged a limousine to take us to the railroad station to catch the train to Chicago. We left our cars in the underground parking lot at the office. We were in Melanie’s office, getting ready to leave for the train station. The phone rang at five-thirty. Melanie picked it up; it was the security guard downstairs.

“Melanie Davis,” she said into the receiver.

“The limousine has arrived to take you to the train station, Ms. Davis,” the security guard informed her.

“Thank you, Jamal,” she said before she hung up.

“What are we waiting for?” I asked them.

We grabbed our suitcases, headed for the elevator, and took it down to the first floor. When we emerged, we headed for the non-revolving door. “Have a safe trip,” Jamal said with a smile.

Ian went out first, carrying his and Vicki’s suitcases. I then held the door open for Vicki and Melanie, who were carrying their makeup cases. I grabbed my suit-

case and Melanie's, and walked out the door toward the limousine. The driver, an Armenian immigrant named Victor, helped us with our luggage. We arrived at the train station just after six-fifteen.

"It's been a long time since I departed from this station," Melanie told us.

"I must admit, parts of this have needed work for a long time, but it's not bad. It certainly isn't the show-place station that Chicago has," Vicki added.

We had coach seats on the train into Chicago, but would travel first class on the train to Los Angeles. I got a small compartment, Melanie also got one, while Ian and Vicki got a larger room between my compartment and Melanie's. We relaxed pretty much the whole way to Los Angeles. Our train arrived in Los Angeles an hour and forty-five minutes late because we were held up by mile-long freight trains in New Mexico and Arizona. Another limousine, also paid for by Mr. Magruder, took us to the same hotel Ian and I stayed at when we were interviewing Dr. Erica Bentley. We had a nice, leisurely breakfast in the hotel restaurant before we checked in at one o'clock. Ian and Vicki shared a one-bedroom suite, while Melanie and I shared the same two-bedroom suite Ian and I shared when we were on assignment.

California turned out to be home for Melanie; she grew up in Pasadena. Both of her sisters and three of her five brothers also live in the Los Angeles area. Ian and I both knew that she was thirty years old and single. As it turned out, all of us had connections to the Los Angeles area. My twin brother, Eric, works as a climate consultant; his office is located in Santa Monica. Like me, he was a bachelor, but he has a four-bedroom house within walking distance of his office, and has a

boat docked at Marina del Rey. He looks like me, but he's taller, at six-five, and thinner than I am. Ian's older brother, James, works as a Los Angeles County firefighter paramedic and resides in Downey. Vicki's Aunt Phoebe lives in Hollywood, where she is a makeup artist for a motion picture studio. Later that evening, Ian and Vicki took her Aunt Phoebe to dinner since James was on duty at Fire Station #110, Melanie had dinner at her parents' house, and I met up with Eric at his office.

"I heard you were in town, Bill. How do you like Toledo?" he asked me.

"The weather is more varied than it is here in L.A. While I don't have to shovel a driveway living in a one-bedroom apartment downtown, I help Ian with his when we get a huge lake effect snowfall," I replied.

"What brings you out here?"

"Ian and I are nominated for three awards each. I'm up for best interview for my interview with a bridal consultant named Stephanie Thomas, and for best writing for the same interview, as well as an interview I did with psychologist Erica Bentley. Ian is up for best original photography for both interviews, and best photo editing for putting together a 'before and after' montage of the two women."

"I heard you interviewed them for a special issue on successful transsexual women. My administrative assistant, Lisa, is also a transsexual. She had her operation before coming to work for me. She's married now and living with her husband and two stepdaughters in West Los Angeles."

Eric and I walked to a nearby sports bar to have dinner and a few drinks. He still hadn't lost his eye for

the girls, even two months after turning forty-four. "I have to admit something to you," he told me after he took a sip of his beer.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Bill, I've dated transsexual women, too. I went out on my first date with one shortly after the state climatologist assigned me to Los Angeles in 1994. I've dated several others since, but I've dated mainly genetic females since I dumped Susie after I finished graduate school," he explained.

"The girl I'm taking to the awards ceremony Friday night is also a transsexual. I'm sure you've heard of Tina Stevens."

"She's the owner of Christina's Boutique. My assistant and her stepdaughters shop there all the time."

"I met her online over a decade ago, but we finally met in person this past summer, while I was out here, interviewing Dr. Erica Bentley. She's one sexy woman, and she would be the perfect girl for you."

"When will I meet her?"

"I've invited you to a post-awards dinner Friday night. Make sure you wear a tux."

When I got back to the hotel, Melanie was waiting for me. "How did it go with your twin brother?" she asked.

"I invited him to the post-awards dinner Friday night. I already called in the reservation; we had three other places to fill," I replied.

"I finally got a date for the awards ceremony," she added.

"Who will you go with?" I asked.

"I'm going to the ceremony with my nephew, Mel; that's short for Melvin. He's the oldest son of my big brother, who's also named Melvin. He's a junior majoring in journalism at U.S.C., and just turned twenty-one last week," she replied.

"Didn't you graduate from U.S.C.?"

"I got my Bachelor's at U.S.C. I went for my Master's at Missouri."

"Vicki has invited her Aunt Phoebe to the post-awards dinner with her and Ian; he called the reservation in."

On the afternoon of December 17th, the folks at the major local newspapers hosted a luncheon for the nominees. We dined on grilled salmon, butter herb rice and Caesar salad. Around four o'clock, Melanie and I were sitting in our suite. She was about to make a stunning confession.

"Bill, I know you've been spending some time with Tina over the past six months, and I know that you two just want to be friends. I've wanted to tell you something since we first started working together three years ago. I've really been admiring you from afar," she said rather frankly.

"You have?" I asked, very surprised by what she said.

"Yes, I have. When I found out that you have been through so much heartbreak, I really felt sorry for you. I mean, you've had to bury that in your work. But, there's something about you that I really admire, and I'm not talking about your work ethic. It's the way you have treated your subjects over the years, and the way you treat your co-workers. You've always treated your subjects with the respect and dignity they deserve. You

don't look at the person's race, religion or sexual orientation when you do your interviews, like some writers I know. You really get to how and what the person is thinking, and write it as they said it. Everyone who works with us knows how friendly you are, and how helpful you are to them. You're even willing to help them with a personal problem. These are not only qualities that Mr. Magruder and I look for in the people who work for us, but they're also the qualities I look for in a man. I not only admire you as a co-worker and as a friend, but also as a person. I must confess, I have romantic designs on you," she explained.

"Melanie, these are exactly the same qualities I look for in a woman. I am very flattered and honored that you have romantic designs on me. When we get back to Toledo, let's explore those feelings. You have those qualities I look for, and you have an advantage over Tina."

"Isn't it obvious?"

"The fact that you were born female isn't it. Tina also has the qualities I look for in a woman, but the advantage you have is she lives here in L.A., and you live much, much closer to me."

"Bill, I never thought I would say this, but I love you."

"Melanie, we've been friends since you came to Toledo at the beginning of 2007. I'm beginning to feel that I love you, too."

Once I confessed my feelings to her, we shared our first kiss, a tender one. We then went to our bedrooms to lay out our clothes for the awards ceremony. Since our rooms had individual showers, we both took ours at the same time. I got into my navy blue tuxedo with

matching bow tie. It was quarter to five that I walked out into the main room of the suite and poured myself a cup of coffee.

Melanie emerged fifteen minutes later, wearing a royal blue satin dress with chiffon overlay and a pair of blue and white high heels. "You look absolutely beautiful, Melanie," I complimented.

"You look very handsome, Bill," she cooed before we shared another kiss.

At five-fifteen, I got a call from Ian in the lobby. "The limousine is here to pick us up," he informed me.

"We'll be right there," I assured him.

Ian was in his black tuxedo with a blue bow tie featuring the Toledo Mud Hens logo, while Vicki was in a red satin strapless party dress with tulle overlay on the skirt, a bodice adorned with sequins, and a floral lace design on the skirt. Both of them had their hair tied back. When Melanie and I got off the elevator, Vicki asked us: "What kept you?"

"We were complimenting one another on how we look," Melanie replied.

"Tina and Mel are waiting," Ian added.

Tina was decked out in a pink tea-length satin dress with short lace sleeves and a skirt trimmed at the hemline with lace; Mel was in a black tuxedo with a red bow tie. I sat down between Melanie and Tina, while Ian and Vicki sat with Mel. Melanie began the introductions.

"Bill Stevenson, Ian Ashford and Vicki Tomlinson, this is my nephew, Mel Davis. Mel, this is Bill Stevenson, my top writer at Magruder's, Ian Ashford, one of my top photographers, and Vicki Tomlinson,

one of the top writers at *The Romantic Bride*," Melanie said.

"I've heard a lot about you, not only from Melanie, but also by reading about you in the college journalism reviews," I added before introducing Tina.

"Tina, you've met Ian and Vicki; this is the editor I work for, Melanie Davis, and her nephew, Mel, a journalism student."

"You wrote a beautiful piece for the September issue," Melanie complimented.

"Thank you, Melanie," Tina returned.

"I've also heard a lot about you from my fellow journalism students. My professor used your article in a lecture he did on guest contributions and op-ed pieces for an editing class I took this past semester," Mel added.

"You're going to be in for a treat, Tina. My twin brother, Eric, who's also single, will be joining us at the post-awards dinner Mr. Magruder's son, Zack, is hosting after the ceremony," I informed her.

"You'll also meet my Aunt Phoebe tonight. She's a makeup artist for one of the studios," added Vicki.

It was five-fifteen when we arrived at the awards ceremony at another hotel, this one in downtown Los Angeles. The only photographers present were those assigned by the newspapers and the trade journals. Melanie came out of the limousine first, on the arm of her nephew. Tina and I came out next. We were photographed quite a bit, as they immediately noticed her stunning six-two frame next to my six-one frame. Ian came out last, holding hands with Vicki. When we went inside, an usher guided us to a table near the stage.

The ceremony began at six o'clock. The ballroom was packed with journalists, photojournalists, their friends and co-workers. We went through an hour's worth of awards in different layout and design categories before coming to the writing and photography categories. The first one that Ian was nominated for, best original photography, was presented by a well-known actress; when the list of five nominees was read off, she opened the envelope. "And the award goes to... Ian Ashford, 'Stephanie Thomas: Romantic Dreams Become Real', Magruder's, October 2010." Ian got up from his place at the table, walked up the stairs to the stage, received a hug from the presenter, and accepted his award.

Ian was surprised and proud as he ad-libbed through his acceptance speech. "I don't know what to say, folks! First off, I'd like to thank the members of the committee for thinking enough of me to bestow this honor upon me. Second, a big round of thanks to Zachary Magruder; it was his idea to do this special issue. I'd also like to thank our editor, Melanie Davis, for having enough faith in me to give me this assignment. Bill Stevenson, you've provided the words to match the pictures for the article. Thanks for putting such thoughtful words to my pictures. Most of all, I'd like to thank my beautiful fiancée, Vicki Tomlinson, and our daughter, Renée Ashford, for all their love and support. I love you all," he said, occasionally choking up.

I was the one who presented the best photo editing award. A year ago, I was on the same stage, accepting my award for best investigative article for my exposé on the radio industry. I was at ease as I read through the nominees for the award. When I opened the envelope to reveal the winner, I must admit I was a tad nervous. "And the award goes to... Ian Ashford, 'Erica

Bentley: This Doctor is Always In', Magruder's, October 2010." Ian was doubly surprised as he walked up to accept the award. I embraced him, and said: "Way to go, bud!"

"Bill, this is my second award tonight. There are so many people who I've already thanked. I cannot thank the committee enough. We've worked together for the past four years, and it's been loads of fun throughout. Thank you so much for sharing this experience. Mr. Magruder, Melanie, thanks so much for your faith in my ability to get a quality job done, and to the love of my life and our daughter, my deepest love and gratitude," he said, in awe at winning two awards so far.

The tables were turned when Ian presented the award for best interview. He was more at ease. He started with a joke: "Now, I get to turn the tables, but on whom I don't know." After calmly reading through the list of nominees, he opened the envelope. "The award goes to... Bill Stevenson, 'Stephanie Thomas: Romantic Dreams Become Real', Magruder's, October 2010."

I got kisses from both Tina and Melanie as I walked up to the stage to accept the award from Ian. "Congratulations pal!" he said as we embraced. When I accepted the award, I joked: "You picked the right person to turn the tables on!" I faced the audience to make my acceptance speech.

"Gosh, what do we have here? Last year, I won for an exposé, and this year, it's for an interview! First off, I'd like to thank Ian Ashford for putting his hard work into this article with me. Thanks bud! In my twenty-plus years in journalism, I have never worked for a man who cares as much about the world we live in as Zachary Magruder. Mr. Magruder, thanks for

helping to make it a better world for all of us. I'm very fortunate to work for one of the best up-and-coming magazine editors in the business. Melanie Davis, thank you so much for putting me and Ian on this assignment. Ian and I especially would like to thank Stephanie Thomas for being a gracious subject for our interview, and her husband, E.S. Thomas, for his assistance. Thanks to the entire crew with the Magruder Publishing Group. I am eternally grateful," I said, trying to stay calm.

The second-to-last award presented was best article. Romance novelist E.S. Thomas presented the award. Before the nominees were read, he told us: "Stephanie couldn't be here to thank Ian Ashford and Bill Stevenson personally. She texted me a few minutes ago from home, and sent them her congratulations. She is very pleased that you wrote the interview word for word, and that's something not many journalists do these days." He then proceeded to read the list of nominations. He fiddled around a little bit with the envelope, acting like he was fumbling his fingers to find where to open it. When he finally found it, he opened it to reveal the winner. "The award for best article goes to... Bill Stevenson, 'Erica Bentley: This Doctor is Always In', Magruder's, October 2010." I got up from my place, again getting kisses from Tina and Melanie, but this time, I got a pat on the back from Ian and a hug from Vicki. I walked on stage and shook his hand. Just before I accepted the award, he excitedly said: "Well done, Bill!"

I turned to face the audience again. "I am so humbled by the awards bestowed on us tonight. First, I'd like to thank the members of the committee for bestowing these honors on me tonight. These articles wouldn't have been complete without the fantastic photography

of Ian Ashford. Thanks for the beautiful pictures, Ian! Thanks once again to Mr. Magruder for the idea of showing us a world where not even what a person goes through in life can stop them from realizing their dreams. Melanie Davis, thank you so much for allowing us to stay within the borders of the United States for these articles. I also would like to thank a very good friend for keeping me company during part of my time in Los Angeles. Her name is Tina Stevens. Most of all, I would like to thank Dr. Erica Bentley and her husband, Dr. Eric Bentley, for inviting us into their lives. You have my eternal gratitude."

The final award of the evening was for best special issue. This was when I found out that Mel won a college journalism award for an article he did on the plight of college graduates with disabilities trying to enter the workplace. He read a prepared text before reading the list of nominees: "The nominees for this award have put their reputations on the line and did issues focusing on a community, an issue or an industry. They have made sure they tell the story of a community, an issue or an industry in a civil and respectful tone, and made their readership aware of what the issue focuses on." He then read the list of nominees. When he opened the envelope, his eyes suddenly brightened. "The award goes to...Magruder's, October 2010, 'Transsexual Women of Success'. Magruder Publishing Group, Zachary Magruder, Senior – publisher, Melanie Davis – editor, Ian Ashford, Kevin Sanger, Karen Sanger, Keith Ronald and Michelle Lane-Smith – photographers, Bill Stevenson, Stephanie Felton, Katherine Sanger, Jennifer Thompson and Ernie Smith – writers." As we all walked up on stage, Mel informed us: "Zachary Magruder, Junior is accepting for his

father, Tanya Sanger is accepting on behalf of her husband, Kevin.”

We all decided that Melanie should go first. “Mr. Magruder couldn’t be with us tonight; he’s back home in Michigan, a little under the weather. Kevin also couldn’t be with us tonight; he’s on assignment in Florida doing photography for an upcoming article. All of us are grateful to the committee for selecting our October 2010 issue as being ‘the best of the best’ for 2010,” she said, a little choked up.

Each of us gave a brief acceptance speech. I was the one who was chosen last. My speech was written by Mr. Magruder himself; he E-mailed it to me the afternoon before the ceremony. “To say the least, I am very humbled by the award you’ve presented to me and my colleagues tonight. When Melanie made us aware that Mr. Magruder wanted to do a special issue on transsexual women who are successful in their chosen fields, he made sure he spread us to the four corners of the globe. There is one person who inspired him to make this special issue possible. Right now, she’s going through the same thing that these successful women went through. The woman who inspired us to show the world ten transsexual women who are successful in their careers is a photographer for our sister publication, *The Romantic Bride*. She also happens to be his daughter. Thank you, Kara Magruder, for inspiring us to put together this issue. All of us would like to thank the committee for bestowing this award on us. We are all grateful.” We got a standing ovation once my portion of our acceptance speech was over.

The post-awards dinner was at the hotel we were staying at. We arrived at the hotel shortly after nine o’clock. The room that Zack booked was the same

room I saw Tina perform in back in July. I walked into the room with Tina and Melanie; Ian and Vicki met her Aunt Phoebe near the concierge desk. I immediately noticed Eric waiting at the table that was reserved for us. Tina flashed a wide smile at him, and he flashed a wide smile at her. "He's just as cute as you, Bill," she complimented.

"He's very single, too, Tina," I added.

"A single guy who's still available is refreshing," she joked as Melanie was coming in the door.

"What was she talking about?" Melanie asked.

"Something about the availability of men," I replied.

Ian and Vicki caught up with us before we were shown to our table. They were with a middle-aged woman, five-seven, average build with salt-and-pepper hair, wearing a gray pantsuit and a pair of gray flats. Tina immediately went to our table and sat down next to Eric. Vicki introduced us.

"Phoebe Tomlinson, this is Bill Stevenson, and this is their editor, Melanie Davis," she said in an introductory manner.

"Pleased to meet you, Phoebe," I said.

"I'm honored to meet you, Phoebe," Melanie added.

"It's great to meet both of you. Vicki has told me a lot about you," Phoebe said with a strong Southern accent.

We headed for our table, where Tina and Eric were getting acquainted. Tina immediately noticed Phoebe. "What brings you here, Phoebe?" she asked.

"I'm surprised to see you here, Tina! Vicki is my niece," Phoebe replied.

"Bill Stevenson is a friend of mine; I'm getting better acquainted with his twin brother," Tina added.

Ian sat between Vicki and her aunt; I sat down between Melanie and Eric. Phoebe showed us a scrapbook of her work in Hollywood. "This one is amazing," I said, looking at a picture of a werewolf.

"Would you believe there's a young, handsome actor under all that makeup?" she asked me.

"I would believe it," Melanie replied.

Tina also passed around a picture of her before she began her transition from man to woman. "It's amazing what modern medicine can do. Most people would find it hard to believe that this nerdy-looking boy has become a stunning and sexy woman," Eric said about her "before" picture.

"I must admit, I was a nerd before I became a girl," added Tina, looking lovingly at Eric.

We were served a dinner of grilled chicken, garden salad and chicken-flavored rice. We spent much of the rest of the evening socializing with our colleagues, who congratulated us on our awards that night. Just as we were finishing our plates, Zack approached us. "Bill, Melanie, may I have a word with you?" he asked.

"You may," I replied.

He took us to a secluded part of the ballroom. "I've asked to speak to you privately. My dad called me before the awards ceremony tonight," he informed us.

"What did he say?" Melanie asked.

“He got word that Mona Leigh Roberts, who has edited *The Romantic Bride* since it was launched in 1995, is retiring at the end of the year. He wants to offer her job to you, Melanie. Bill, he wants you to take over as editor at *Magruder’s*,” he replied.

“I’ve dreamed of working for a bridal magazine since I was a little girl, but I didn’t dream of editing one,” Melanie told him.

“I’ve been waiting for a leadership opportunity for a long, long time,” I added.

“I wish you both the best of luck in your new endeavors, which will begin January 1st, 2011,” Zack told us.

“We won’t let you down,” I assured him.

“*Magruder’s* is also looking for a senior photographer. Vince King, who’s been our senior photographer since this magazine was launched in 1980, is also retiring at year’s end. Who would you recommend for this job?” he asked me.

“I can only think of one person who can do that job. Ian Ashford,” I replied.

When I returned to the table, Tina asked us: “What did Zack tell you?”

“Mona Leigh is retiring at the end of the year, and so is Vince,” I replied.

“Mona’s been my boss since I started at *The Romantic Bride* right out of college. Their offices are across the hall from *Magruder’s* in Toledo,” Vicki added.

“I’m a frequent reader of the magazine. She’s done a great job. Who’s going to replace her?” Phoebe asked.

"I am. I'm really looking forward to this new assignment," Melanie replied.

"Zack has promoted me to Melanie's job. He also asked who I would recommend for the position of senior photographer. I recommended Ian for the job," I added.

"You didn't!" Ian exclaimed rather jokingly.

"Yes, I darn well did! You've done so well ever since we started working together, I thought you would be a natural for the job," I told him with assurance.

"Bill, I won't let you down," he assured me.

It was after midnight when I returned to the suite with Melanie. The first thing we did was share our first deep kiss. "This is going to be exciting," she whispered.

"At least this will keep me in town more often," I added.

"I really mean it. I love you, Bill."

"I never thought I would say this, but I love you, too, Melanie."

## Twelve

Six months had passed since that night. A lot had happened in that span of time. Melanie sent Ian and Vicki to Los Angeles to cover the opening of the new bridal addition to Christina's Boutique for The Romantic Bride. The addition opened, as planned, on Valentine's Day 2011. Tina and Eric had become a couple; he asked her to be his girl on New Year's Eve. By Valentine's Day, she had moved in with him. I somehow knew that destiny dictated that it would be Eric who would fall madly in love with a transsexual woman, and not me. My cousin Caroline and her friend Emily

returned to Toledo in mid-January; I hired Caroline to write for Magruder's, while Melanie hired Emily to write for *The Romantic Bride*. I maintained the high standards that Melanie established at Magruder's; Ian and I continued to cover the occasional story, but they were mostly features about people with unique hobbies or occupations. It seems that every day, the writers and photographers would seek our advice on a wide range of subjects. Ian would answer the questions about taking pictures, while I answered questions about writing. The results were evident by the end of May; Magruder's readership had increased thirty percent since I took over, while readership of *The Romantic Bride* more than doubled since Melanie took over.

As for the budding relationship that was developing between me and Melanie, I finally asked her to be my girlfriend on Valentine's Day. She was very pleased to become my girl. At the beginning of May, Melanie and I decided to buy a house. It was a four-bedroom house on the edge of the city, along the road to Bowling Green. We continued to explore every aspect of our relationship.

Vicki and Ian selected June 25th, 2011 as the day of their wedding. They would have it at Crane Creek State Park east of Toledo. It was the place where Ian took Vicki on their first picnic three years prior. I would be the best man; Vicki's sister Vanessa would be the maid of honor. Renée would be the flower girl; Melanie would be the other bridesmaid. Among the guests the couple invited: Eric and Tina, who were now gingerly getting into talking about marriage, Eric and Erica Bentley, the couple we interviewed in California the previous summer, and Stephanie and E.S. Thomas, whom we met in St. Louis on that same trip.

As a gesture of thanks to our two magazines for our coverage, Vicki made several trips to St. Louis to be fitted for her wedding gown at Stephanie's Brides and Belles. The entire bridal party was also fitted for their dresses personally by Stephanie Thomas, with Stephanie paying all their travel expenses. It was a coincidence that the same weekend, a psychologists' conference was being held in Toledo; Erica Bentley was the keynote speaker. E.S. Thomas would be in Toledo that weekend for a book signing; Stephanie would be coming with him.

It was a beautiful, spring-like day at Crane Creek. I spent an hour in the limousine with Ian, awaiting the arrival of the bridal party. "Are you nervous?" I asked him.

"Not really," he replied, before asking me: "Who would you expect to be nervous on their wedding day?"

"I would suppose Vicki would be nervous," I replied.

"Vicki? Nah! She's as cool as a cucumber about these things. After all, she's written about the bridal industry for the past three years," he added.

One of the ushers walked toward the limousine as one o'clock approached. It was David King, a classmate from his college days. "It's time, Ian," he informed him.

"Steady, Bill, steady," he assured me as we got out of the limousine.

The only other groomsman was his brother, James. He was able to take his vacation around the time of Ian's wedding. We thought we would need a certified paramedic in case there was a medical emergency. We took our places to the left of Greg Morgan, a justice of

the peace who would be joining them in marriage. Greg and I went to college together back in the day.

Renée would be the first one down the aisle, wearing a cute pink flower girl's gown and carrying a basket. Then, Melanie would walk down the aisle, in a sleeveless lavender gown, followed by Vanessa, in an identical gown. Ian was brimming with anticipation as he awaited the arrival of his bride.

Vicki walked down the aisle on the arm of her father, an athletic-looking man in his mid-fifties. Vicki was in a simple, sleeveless white wedding gown with a floral headpiece, from which a fingertip-length veil cascaded. No blusher, since they have a daughter together.

The ceremony was short and sweet. There was only an exchange of rings. After the rings were exchanged, Greg asked Vicki: "Do you, Victoria Elizabeth Tomlinson, take this man, Ian Noah Ashford, to be your wedded husband; to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?"

"I do," she replied.

"Ian Noah Ashford, do you take this woman, Victoria Elizabeth Tomlinson, to be your wedded wife; to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?" he asked Ian.

"I do," he replied.

"With the power vested in me by the State of Ohio and the Counties of Ottawa and Lucas, I now pronounce you husband and wife," Greg announced to the

small gathering before Ian kissed Vicki without being prompted.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Mr. and Mrs. Ian Ashford,” he proclaimed before they walked up the aisle to an area near a waiting limousine.

After the wedding party pictures were taken, we went straight to the reception at a hotel in downtown Toledo. The wedding reception was in a fair-sized ballroom, while the psychologists’ conference Erica Bentley was a keynote speaker at the same evening was in a conference room down the hall. It was just after two-thirty that I arrived with Melanie, James and Vanessa.

“This has been a beautiful wedding so far, dear,” Melanie whispered in my ear.

“It has, indeed,” I said softly.

The Bentleys arrived just three minutes after I did. Erica was in a royal blue satin dress, while Eric was in a navy blue suit with pinstripes. “I didn’t want to miss this wedding for the world,” Erica told me.

“What time do you speak at the conference?”

“I speak at seven o’clock. It’s on early intervention of gender identity disorder cases,” she replied.

“I’ve been helping her on the presentation,” added Eric, her husband.

“I hear you and Melanie are now a couple,” Erica told me.

“We’re now living together on ten acres on the edge of Toledo,” I informed them.

“I didn’t know you two would become ‘an item’ after you won your awards for the interview you did

with us last year. I thought you would be going out with Tina Stevens," added Eric.

"She's now living with my twin brother, Eric, in Santa Monica. I'm getting the feeling he's going to pop the question before too long."

"Did I hear somebody is planning to pop the question?" asked Melanie.

"Well, it certainly isn't me; at least not yet," I replied.

"At least you're taking things a bit slower with me, honey," she cooed.

At quarter to three, Ian and Vicki arrived for the wedding reception. They received a standing ovation from the guests. Kevin Philips, a friend of Ian's from his college days, was the DJ. "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome two of Toledo's finest. I give you Vicki and Ian Ashford," he said into a wireless microphone.

Ian selected Dom Pérignon, 2001 vintage, for the champagne. After the glasses of the wedding party were filled, I got up, and proposed a toast. "Ian, I knew this day would come since you started going steady with her after he came to Toledo from his hometown in Illinois. When you came to work for Magruder's, I knew you would become one of the top photographers in the business, and my text would be the perfect companion for the pictures you took. Vicki, you have been his steadying influence since you both met. I knew that you would share your lives and this journey. That love has resulted in a very beautiful daughter." I paused for a moment, and proclaimed: "Ladies and gentlemen, to the bride and groom!"

"The bride and groom," all the guests said in unison.

Before they cut their wedding cake, Ian and Vicki asked me and Melanie to join them in a picture. We had several pictures of the four of us taken before we invited Erica and Eric Bentley and Stephanie and E.S. Thomas to join us for several more pictures. Stephanie was in a mauve satin dress with lace overlay, while E.S. was in a maroon suit with a navy blue tie. Another photographer was one from *The Romantic Bride*, who was covering the wedding for the autumn edition. Ian and Vicki were getting ready to cut their wedding cake when my twin brother, in a navy blue suit and red tie, borrowed the microphone from Kevin.

"I know that today is Ian and Vicki's day. I have been giving this a lot of thought, and said to myself: 'I thought the day of their wedding would be a great time to do this. I have been dating Tina Stevens for the past six months. I'd like for her to come to the dance floor,'" he said.

Tina, in a peach-colored strapless party dress, walked onto the dance floor. He got down on one knee, gently took her left hand in her right hand, and said: "Tina, will you marry me?"

She had tears of joy in her eyes as he opened a white box to reveal an engagement ring with a one karat diamond. "Yes, Eric! I'll be a faithful wife to you," she said lovingly. He got back up, slipped the ring on the ring finger of her left hand, and kissed her.

"That has to be the most beautiful thing anyone has ever pulled off at a wedding," Melanie told me.

"Absolutely beautiful, just like you," I whispered before kissing her.

It was after five o'clock that Erica Bentley left the reception to prepare to deliver her address at the psy-

chologists' conference. "I hope Ian and Vicki have a wonderful marriage," she said to us.

"They will, you can guarantee it," Melanie added.

"Where's Eric?" I asked her.

"He's back in our hotel room. He's resting before my address," Erica replied.

"Have a safe trip back," Melanie added.

At the end of the reception, just after eight o'clock, Ian and Vicki approached us. "We didn't want to head to the Bridal Suite without giving you and Melanie our most heartfelt thanks," Vicki said.

"I was very happy to be there through it all," I added.

"After tonight, I think the question is not whether he'll think about asking me to marry him, but when," Melanie added.

"After all, you two are a beautiful couple."

"I can say the same about my twin brother and Tina, and they're now planning to get married," I said.

When Melanie and I got home, I went online to check the latest news. I checked out E.S. Thomas' Web site, and found another important announcement.

"Sweetheart, did you see this?" I asked her.

"What is it?" she then asked.

"E.S. and Stephanie Thomas have just adopted a baby boy. They're naming him Eric, after the adoptive father."

"That's terrific! They're going to be excellent parents," she added.

“Adoption is the primary way for transsexual women to realize their dreams of motherhood. Right now, transsexual women cannot conceive a child. Erica Bentley, whom I interviewed last summer, adopted six children with her husband. Their oldest adopted son, also named Eric, is now eighteen years old; he’s their part-time office manager and has just been accepted at U.C.L.A. He has referred a number of young transgender girls to his parents; likewise with their oldest adoptive daughter, Sarah, who’s now fifteen and entering her sophomore year of high school. Stephanie is now forty-five years old; if she had been a genetic female, that’s pushing it as far as being a first-time mother is concerned,” I explained.

“Have Eric and Tina talked about this?”

“They have at length. They’re not going to start the process until after they’re married, though.”

“That’s good. Many marriage counselors who work with couples in which at least one person is transgender say that it’s best to wait until marriage before adopting.”

Ian and Vicki honeymooned on Barbados; they only took their snapshot cameras along, while leaving his professional cameras at home. Vanessa would be at their house while they were away, making sure everything that needed to be done got done. Vicki was feeling a bit queasy when they got back on the Fourth of July; a week later, they announced they were expecting their second child. I finally asked Melanie to be my bride on Christmas Eve 2011; she accepted my ring. On New Year’s Eve, Melanie and I were in Los Angeles for Eric and Tina’s wedding. It’s amazing how much life can change after you write an article that not only makes people aware of, and changes perceptions on, a

subject that's been hidden in the proverbial woodwork,  
but also how it changes the course of your professional  
and personal lives.

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