

# Under Cover



## Philippa Peters



A "Her Tv" Novel



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# UNDER COVER

by Philippa Peters

## \*\*\*\*\*I. PROLOGUE\*\*\*\*\*

I didn't set out, not in a million years, to be a crossdresser, a transvestite. I hardly knew what the term meant, even when I became an adult. When I learned about 'them,' I lumped them all in with sexual deviants as did all my comrades. To fit in, I made queer jokes just like everybody else and thought nothing of it. It was all part of growing up and being part of the team.

When the Lieutenant asked me, after I'd only been six months in uniform, to join the Vice Squad, I was naturally elated. Sue and I were married about that time and the first complaints were being raised about the hours I worked. But since crime didn't sleep, and our crimes mostly happened at night, I asked her to live with it for the time being. I was sure I'd be returned to more regular duties in six months or so.

Oh, and the money I was getting, the extra bonuses. Yes, SueAnn loved those. She even laughed and told me I could take as long as I liked in doing

whatever I was doing, so long as I kept on depositing the bonuses all in our bank account she had access to, which she considered to be hers. Okay, I was manipulating my wife, but, honestly, the cop work I was doing on the Vice Squad was a lot more interesting than my home life with Sue.

It hadn't taken me long, you see, to figure out why they took such a naive guy like myself into Vice. I looked much younger than I really was. Letting my hair grow, I didn't look at all like a cop as I'd used to. I entrapped more gays than I can even remember by strolling through one of the parks in what we called the Meat Market section of the East End. Surprisingly, I didn't get much work on the other side, with the ladies of the night. There, if anything, I was back-up for other operations.

I remember trying to arrest one really tarted-up blonde once, she in a short black leather miniskirt, a tight red sweater and with masses of blonde hair. On her high heel stilts, she towered over me. She smelled of cheap perfume. She had thick makeup on her face and laughed at me when I tried to arrest her.

"They're sending out the kiddie cops now, are they?" she asked in a surprisingly deep voice as she swung at me. I was used to the cracks about my height—thank goodness there wasn't a height restriction on our force—but I wasn't used to the strength with which she hit me. I went down like a ton of bricks and could only watch as she ran off, as best she could in her high heels, down Goldsmiths' Street.

She was tackled, and I mean tackled, by Ed Collins, a former linebacker, and knocked senseless against the pavement. Her blonde wig was knocked free to reveal short, black, slicked back, masculine hair.

"Meet George Rodriguez," said Eddie, getting up and flexing his shoulder. "Also known as Wanda Starr, or Wendy Rodriguez. He's got quite a left hook,

from his boxing days, I think. I should have warned you.”

My mouth must have dropped open a mile because Eddie laughed at me. He told everyone about me going only one round with Wanda, before losing on a TKO. For one night, I was the Kayo Kid to everyone on the Vice Squad.

Wanda was a revelation when she, I mean he, regained consciousness. He wanted to be put in the van with the girls, which was easy to do since we were making a big roundup that night of everyone on the streets, checking IDs and such. When he wanted to be in the holding pen at the station with the girls, the ruckus started.

I didn't blame the girls not wanting a man in with them, despite the way Wanda looked in a dress, but when we took him to the male pens, I couldn't believe the reaction of the men we were holding there. They didn't reject him, or tell us not to put him in there. No, they wanted him in there, with them, for some fun, they said. And he wanted to go, strolling past them like he was a queen or something. Which he was, of course.

We finally put Wanda in solitary, and called his lawyer, showing us he was one of Silk's 'girls,' as they had Henry White exclusively on call for them.

“You got an education tonight,” said Annie Phelan sympathetically, as we went off-shift together. Annie was an undercover, ‘like you,’ she'd told me, but I guessed that she wasn't anything like me at all. She was, after all, a woman, who dressed, when she needed a uniform, in the Women's Quarters, which all the policewomen and female detectives used.

I laughed and told her about Wanda, how I couldn't believe the attitude of the guys in our holding cells.

“It takes all kinds,” Annie said and proceeded to fill me in on all the kinky places there were in town that I

didn't know about. I learned, agog and sickened, about perversions I couldn't credit.

"You watch out," she warned me. Annie looked around Danieli's, the bar cops hung out in, after hours. We'd sort of wandered down there together. That's when she told me that she was like me. She was 'undercover' just as I was going to be. "You're gonna be put out there on some undercover job soon," she said, her voice lowered. "You don't look like a cop, you know. Anyone your size and with your fresh looks is going to be dropped in somewhere, probably in among the gay boys."

"There's a longstanding problem there with drugs coming in. The stuff's still coming in through the gay guys even after we closed down the South Americans and the street merchants. We've lost guys dead on that detail, before now. So, watch your ass, Charley. If I were you, I'd ask to transfer out now, before Polanski sets you up."

I didn't have time to really listen to Annie's advice because it was the next day that I had a one-on-one with Polanski; he recruited me into a bent investigation. I mean, I did think about what Annie had said to me, but when Polanski told me that he wanted me, with less than a year under my belt, to go undercover on the street, I was flattered.

It was only after a couple of days that I learned that I'd have to pose as a real swishy fag, perhaps even a drag queen. That was too much. I didn't want the job then. It was Annie who let me know that I wasn't going to be a 'street gay' for long. She said it was imperative that I be Alice, the alter-ego she and Polanski had cooked up for me. They wanted me to get really close to the ones well-connected to the drug trade whom she'd finger for me.

So my nerves, really affecting me, told me not to listen to or obey Annie. She said I had to pluck my eyebrows a little, affect a few queenly mannerisms, shift my voice up, you know, do a few little things

that made me swish. I realized too why Polanski had told me when I came on the squad not to cut my hair.

It was probably why he waited to set me up for so long. My hair was in a ponytail, a short one by then and, with a decent manicure, I was clearly advertising myself as what I was not. No, I would walk through a park and act gaily, a little bit, or sit in a bar, drink, and exchange queenly sex talk with a silly faggot, but that was all I was going to do.

That's what I said to Annie, who just shook her head at me, and asked me if I would keep getting the bonus she loved me delivering to her so much. No, I should never have discussed SueAnn with Annie, should I?

I tried to explain it all to Sue but she got royally ticked off with me, because the little changes I'd affected. I really had a problem with that. After all she knew I was into police work when we married. I expected better support from her. I was glad we hadn't any children after the rows about what I was doing started.

I stayed away from the apartment for longer and longer periods, claiming to be working. Actually, Annie Phelan and friends were better companions than Sue was for me. I was learning how to be a male hustler on the streets. It was excruciating to be sneered at and mocked by the uniforms on the beat as well as by the studs.

Annie, as an undercover, appeared to me to be a prostitute, a true professional. She told me, frankly, that she was. She made more money from the men she was seeing 'on the street' than she ever did from the Department, even with the bonuses they paid her.

"I can't pose as a drag queen," Annie told me. "I've tried it and I'm sussed out, discovered, each time." "That's why Polanski's thinking of a new way to get into the bent organization. He wants to use a cop,

who can be a hot queen. I bet he's got you lined up for the job, Charley, or should I call you Alice now? It's why he's brought us two together. I'm going to train you for the job, eventually."

If I swallowed once in that meeting with Annie in a gay bar, talking to 'her', I must have swallowed and been shaken up a hundred times. No, I couldn't do this. I couldn't be this kind of policeman, I decided, even as Annie continued giving me instructions on what I was to do, who to talk to, and what about, "nothing serious, just about stuff queens are into; where to buy clothes, fashionable, female clothes, and maybe a good pot dealer. I'll give you the info and you see how the contacts I set you up with react. I really want to know about anyone who talks about recruiting you, and for what, but don't say anything about you being interested in that unless I give you the word."

Some of Alice's 'friends', non-police, were gay. The good gays, she called them with a smile when I asked 'her,' nervously, hardly able to talk to or look at her when one of them, Kate, in a red wig, and green dress, so clearly a faggy queen to me, a bartender, if the gays Kate, who'd joined us for a drink, my treat, was pointing out to me everywhere on the block were good guys. That's when Annie started calling them good gays, as they weren't into the bent organization we were looking for.

When some of them and other guys on the street, laughed at me and taunted me, I wanted all the time to stand up and challenge them but Kate showed me how to embarrass them by coming on to them, in a faggy way. She made me lisp and break my wrist when I gestured to them, taking their insults as compliments and so driving them away.

I just had to get away from it all. Surely, SueAnn, my wife, would sympathize with the predicament I was in.



I snuck into our apartment and slipped into bed with her, and whispered sweet nothings in her ear. She really snuggled up to me as we made love in the dark. But in the morning she almost went berserk when she saw me for the first time in weeks, over my 'slightly' feminized appearance and mannerisms. She called me all the names I'd heard on the street already. I tried to reason with her, to be her husband, and to assure her I'd be over with this job soon. I thought I would be. She said she was going to see the Captain about what the Department was doing to me.

What could I say? I knew what Polanski and the Department wanted. I knew because Annie had told me that I was close to getting a good lead into what Polanski had called the leading drug supply and money-moving gang in the city. He'd called it a bent organization. I didn't know then that it was the Bent Organization, capital letters, organized by one Johnny Bent, a wise guy as they say.

I'd like to have been a fly on the wall at that meeting between the Captain and Sue. I knew, however, that it wouldn't do me any good with the Department. So, I went downtown after I left Sue, as quickly as I could. I hadn't really got close to Annie's or Kate's friends, other queens, as I had been told not to push it. I'd just been blending in, becoming part of the local scenery.

I was a hustling queen (contradiction of terms) who went by the name of Alice. Yes, Annie hung that one on me and started calling me that the last time I was in Kate's bar, *The Duchess of York's*. I wondered if I could speed things up. I knew some names. I could be subtle in my approaches. I could get this whole queen, gay undercover thing over in days, in a week, couldn't I?

Well, that was only true, up to a point, wasn't it?

**\*\*\*\*\*II. FLY ON THE WALL\*\*\*\*\***

SueAnn Howell had wasted no time in coming in. She'd waited patiently for over forty minutes to see Captain Lou Carson, her husband's boss. Her unsmiling mouth had been set in a narrow line ever since she'd perched herself on the wooden chair outside Carson's office.

Carson, of course, knew she was there and had guessed the topic she wished to talk about. The head of the City Police's Vice Squad, however, needed as much time as possible to compose himself after talking to Jeff Polanski about Charley Howell's assignment.

Carson had not been totally aware of what Howell was up to but he'd approved the operation in principle from the get-go. He'd been made aware, though, of SueAnn's distaste for her husband posing as gay for the Vice Squad. Sue Howell was not afraid to speak her mind over the phone, to other police wives, about that dislike of her husband being on the Vice Squad, even though she liked the extra 'danger' money Charley got for his undercover assignments.

The captain sighed and tossed the file back on his desk. He could think of nothing to satisfy SueAnn Howell's inevitable complaints. He pressed his intercom button.

"Yeah?" came Mulligan's irritating sneer tinnily from the ancient machine.

Carson sighed again. "Mrs. Howell is waiting to see me," he said. "Tell her to come in."

The words had barely ceased echoing from the speaker when the heavy brown wooden door was flung back and Sue Howell stalked in.

Carson scowled to himself. Trust Mulligan, he thought. Couldn't even get up off his butt to open the door for the wife of a brother officer. A 'hard' cop like

Mulligan probably thought very little of someone as undersized as Howell. But with the mob so tight and difficult to penetrate in Eastgate, tougher than anywhere else it seemed, a Howell, with his non-police looks, was worth a dozen or more Neanderthals like Mulligan.

With exaggerated care, Sue Howell caught the door, closed it and stepped forward the one pace necessary to sit down in the chair before Carson's desk. She sat ramrod-straight on one of the two wooden chairs he kept for interviews.

SueAnn Howell was a slender woman, about thirty, older by a few years than Charley he guessed, and not homely. Her wavy hair was light brown, precisely and expertly cut to frame her face with thick, straight lines. Her thin face was dominated by a prominent jawline that made her appear obstinate and prevented her from being really attractive or pretty.

Carson had met her on other occasions when she was relaxed and happy. The strong jawline in a smiling face had seemed to reveal only firmness and strength of character. Her light grey eyes humourlessly watched his assessment of her.

"Charley came home last night," she said briefly.

Carson frowned. "He shouldn't have done that," he said. "He shouldn't be breaking out of his cover when he's on assignment."

SueAnn Howell took out a white-tipped cigarette from her purse. Her hand shook only slightly as she lit it, ignoring the two 'Thank you for not smoking' signs on his desk. She wasn't at all apologetic about breaking the law forbidding smoking on city property. She took a long pull on the cigarette, the shadows beneath her eyes showing the strain and tension she was feeling.

Smoke issued from her mouth as she spoke. "How long is it since you've seen him?" she asked, her voice tight.

"Not for two months," Carson said, grimacing slightly. "But I get reports on his work. Regular reports. One in just today." He patted the folder on his desk.

"So you haven't actually seen him," Sue Howell snapped, her pale eyes boring into his. "You haven't seen what you're doing to him!"

"Well," Carson said, a feeling of apprehension rising in him. "This is a special job and Charley does get special pay. He shouldn't have broken his cover. Is he at home right now?"

"No," snapped the woman again, bitterness tinging her voice. "He went back. Back to his queer friends, just where you want him."

Her eyes challenged Carson to defend himself. He was too wise to fall into that trap. "If you have a precise complaint," he began slowly, waiting for the hammer to fall.

"He looks just like a woman," she flared. "You do know that, don't you? It is what you want him to be, isn't it?"

Only years of experience in interviewing criminals prevented Carson from showing any emotions. "This assignment..." he started to say. Then he tried again as she sneered at his words. "The extra pay. There have to be compelling reasons. It's not easy to explain."

"I understand what undercover work is," SueAnn Howell said angrily. "I knew he had to go in deep and didn't like him to be away so long. I wanted him to quit. Then he came home last night." She glared at Carson over the cigarette smoke. "He looked more like a woman than I do!"

Tears welled in her dark-lined eyes but Carson couldn't tell if they were tears of rage, unhappiness, embarrassment, frustration, or what.

"I did see him close up until this morning," she went on furiously. "I felt so unclean!" She shuddered. "It's as if a woman had made love to me last night and today."

Carson squirmed in his swivel chair. "SueAnn," he said. "Let me assure you about this." Inside he felt his own anger rise at Charley Howell, Jeff Polanski and whatever sick or bizarre game they were playing. If words like Sue's ever got out in public, well, it would be a scandal, for sure.

"You should have seen the way he left our apartment today," Sue went on, ignoring Carson's interruption. "He was wearing more eye makeup than I've ever worn in my life, and his hair," she shifted in discomfort at the memory. "He's had it permed! It's all wavy and curly! I tell you, Captain, that along with his eyebrows all plucked out and his nails so long and polished, he doesn't have to wear a dress to make him look like a woman!"

Carson raised a hand in a helpless gesture. He wondered what in fact he could do.

"You've got to stop him," Sue Howell insisted, tears gone as quickly as they had appeared. "I don't care to think about what he'll be like when he finishes this job, Captain. I only know that I didn't marry a woman! And I won't be married to one!"

"Oh Sue," said Carson, deliberately continuing with his fatherly routine, even though he was seething inside, and for the same cause as she was, though she wore her rage on the outside. "It may not really be that bad. Things do get out of proportion at times when someone needs to do a special job. How can things have gone too far if Charley's come to visit you, his wife? He missed you. Doesn't that tell you something?"

Sue Howell was not buying it. "Not at all," she snapped, her mouth hard and thin. "You weren't in bed with him last night, were you?" Her voice was more strident and accusing. "He's shaved off his body hair, you know. He was carrying a shoulder purse and he had his own makeup and hairspray in it."

Carson's chair squealed and creaked as he rocked in frustration. "There's only a little I can do," he said directly. "The job's really being run out of Narcotics. Technically, he's on loan to them. Of course, I'll follow up, talk to the guys running the operation."

Sue Howell had become very still as he began his bafflegab. "You're not going to do anything, are you?" she asked, her voice level but hard. "You don't care about the personal cost to husband or wife, do you? Just so long as the arrest is made. Well, how long do you think it will be, before you're reading about this in the newspapers?"

Her face twisted into a sneer. Carson didn't doubt she meant every word she said. Still he tried the official approach to such threats.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Captain Lou Carson said softly. "We'd just throw both of you to the wolves. We know all the rumours floating around and what we don't know, we can make up. We could just let the people he's playing around with know that he's a cop. What would you have then?"

Lou got up and moved around his desk, sitting on the edge, looking down at her, deliberately hulking over her. "If we were not protecting him, what do you think would happen to a spy?" he asked, his voice increasing in loudness and power. Sue did soften a little as she looked up at him, a troubled expression on her thin features.

"No," Lou went on. "You won't do anything to hurt this assignment or Charley's future with the Department, right, Sue? He came right out of this ghetto, Sue, and you know how he feels about the junkies

and druggies that live there. He's committed to cleaning up that sewer and he wanted to help wipe out this festering sore."

Lou Carson was stretching it. He knew nothing of Charley Howell's motivations. He didn't really know him at all and what he was learning about him from SueAnn Howell sickened him. He sensed that Sue Howell was not mollified, either. She left with the parting shot that if Charley wasn't back in a month, nothing would stop her from going public with her complaints.

At least, Carson thought ruefully, I got her to not blow her stack right away, a small victory. Now he must check into Charley Howell's assignment and what he was up to, right away, which meant treading on Jeff Polanski's toes and stirring up Narcotics. But what kind of officer, was it, after all, who took posing as a gay decoy for Vice into a lead-in for passing as some kind of drag queen? They never asked their officers in Vice to go that far. And if they did, what kind of man would accept such an assignment?

### **\*\*\*\*\*III. CHANGES\*\*\*\*\***

Every major city has its area of dubious fame, or at least a few blocks with ill-gotten notoriety attached to them. Knightsbridge was such a place. It was in one of the three-story sandstone buildings along Adams Avenue that Charley Edward Howell, me, was born. Adams Avenue was one of the cobbled side streets that led onto 'The Block', where the nightlife of the area had once had its artistic centre. Now it was all strip clubs or worse.

Of my mother, I remembered little. Whether I was deserted, deliberately abandoned, or if some catastrophe befell my mother soon after I was born, I had never found out. I had tried to look into it after I became a cop. My own earliest recollections, as I told the interrogator when I was being interviewed for ac-

ceptance into police training, were of many women showering various amounts of love and blame on me, usually accompanied by a distressing aroma of thick perfume and alcohol fumes.

I 'dossed' in the lower rooms of several houses on Adams Avenue, with the 'caretakers', as I called them, older, usually drink-sodden ex-members of The Life, I guess. They were in too much of a stupor, most of the time, to notice that I was growing up on my own.

I wasn't unhappy in this time of my life. There were other children just like me. We had good times together. Our few needs for sustenance and recreation were met by organized thieving, or 'collecting', as we called it, from the outdoor markets and stalls along Knightsbridge Avenue. This long, tree-lined street, with its outdoor 'garden-restaurants' along the sidewalks, served, from noon on, the affluent business section of the city, which was fortuitously located just south off Knightsbridge itself.

When I was about ten, a change came over my world. Perhaps I look back too glowingly to the years before that, seeing them as carefree and golden, when really they weren't. Maybe I just grew, mentally and physically. Others noticed and began to treat me accordingly. Anyway, however it was, I suddenly began to see the people of Knightsbridge as vicious and mean.

I saw a lot of my friends callously beaten and thrown out of the tenement houses we'd all known so well. They lived in the dark, dangerous hovels of alleyways if one of us couldn't sneak them into our own basement rooms where other kids, usually the younger ones, wouldn't tell on us.

The girls I'd known as playmates were sucked into the livings of the big townhouses. They never came back once that happened, to play with Billy Red or me. We learned all about Mr. H, heroin, and its sudden and easy proliferation throughout the ghetto. We

saw the pushers, flashy, well-dressed men. and knew how they got their money. We saw the dismal, brutish existence of men, women and children, in constant search of 'the fix.' Billy and I swore to get even with them all, pay back all the pushers, for the loss of our 'golden days.'

It didn't happen overnight, of course. We didn't know that there were other forces at work, changing the ghetto inexorably from a bohemian existence into abject poverty. And like all the other youth, who come from the street, I had still to pay my dues before the path I was to take in life gradually and painstakingly became clear.

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After I left Sue, still screaming about my appearance, I flagged down a taxi to take me back to my room in Knightsbridge. The cabbie eyed my fluffed-out curls and eyeliner about my lids. "Yes, miss," he said sarcastically when I told him to drop me on the corner of Knightsbridge Avenue and Lester, near to Conchita's.

I was used to the stares now and the sarcasm. I knew I could turn the cabbie around by just coming on to him as a woman would. He'd run a mile then. I'd have 'won,' but I couldn't be bothered. Even so, after the exchange with Sue, I was feeling worse about doing what I was doing, not better. It was all an act, I tried to reassure myself, then thought about Annie Phelan again and what she was trying to get me to do on a long-time basis, wear women's clothing.

Even thinking about it made me tremble. I'd said "No, I won't" to her again but she just gave me that funny smile of hers. I was getting used to that. In a short while, I saw the taxi driver secretly checking me out in his rearview mirror. So, I took a compact out of my purse and lightly powdered my nose as Annie had taught me to do, like a girl.

I fluffed out my hair, gently teasing a few wayward curls out to get a fuller, more feminine effect. I debated lipstick and decided against it. The driver was looking far too interested in my exaggerated femininity as it was. If he only knew, I grinned nervously to myself. I could have arrested him in the Meat Market, if I wasn't so deeply undercover, for the look he was giving me now.

I gave him a generous tip. As I held it over his shoulder, I saw the striking contrast between my white, slim, hairless hand, the nails soft, pink, and pointed, and the cabbie's thick brown mitt, with its sausage-like fingers. He took the bill shakily as I stroked his hand, his eyes widening when I told him to keep the change. I finished him off with a wink and a little smile. As I stepped away from the cab, I had to laugh, a shaky laugh, at the way he sat there just watching me walk. I could do an exaggerated walk as the queens did. Women have a subtler way of doing it, but I hadn't mastered a true woman's walk.

I waved back at 'my' cabbie as I sashayed up to Conchita's on the Row. It had changed so much since the 'golden days.' All the trees had long since disappeared. The city had projected a freeway through here and had begun the cutting. Some day in the future they'd carve out the roadway as well. If they ever got round to it. Black asphalt mounds were the only testimony to a gracious style of living that had once made Knightsbridge a place to go.

Now, stark buildings on either side of the divided street had many windows boarded over with planks. Where there was paint on any door or window frame, it usually hung in tatters awaiting its turn to fall in shreds to the sidewalk below.

A motley group of people were about on the streets. All races walked Knightsbridge Avenue. That hadn't changed. Most of the women here in the early morning were prostitutes, on the lookout for the last vestiges of 'trade'. They weren't interested in me, except

as a competitor. So, I got a lot of hostile glares, but nothing more so long as I kept moving.

No longer was this a place for businessmen and office workers to spend leisurely lunchtimes. No, Knightsbridge was now a garish oasis in the centre of the old city, and an eyesore, which the city's reform politicians promised to clean up vociferously at each election. But as some said cynically, night people and street people needed a place to be, to go to, away from decent people; and no decent person ever went into Knightsbridge, did they?

A pink-haired, black prostitute sneered at me as I crossed an alley leading down to Temple. Conchita's neon sign was hot and red and missing the vowels. "Not going in there, are you, girl?" the whore simpered at me.

I had a sudden flash of memory. I'd seen her before at the city's main precinct. She was one of Jimmy Stick's string of girls. The Stick was a notoriously vicious pimp who regularly beat up his girls to keep them in line.

I doubted that the girl knew me. I was very different now from what I'd been. "My man don't like your kind," the pink-haired girl said pointedly, gyrating her hips suggestively to remind me what she had and I didn't. I almost laughed out loud at such taunting. If she only knew how much I agreed with her.

So the Stick was in Conchita's, was he? It had become a hangout for pimps in the last few years, its days as 'The Flower House' long gone. The garden-restaurant had then boasted of freshly-cut flowers on every table and the most gorgeous waitresses in town.

The garden was now a paved forecourt, cracked and crumbling, tips of solid iron posts protruding here and there to trip the unwary, reminders of the parasol-covered tables anchored to the ground which

had drawn everyone of note to The Flower House on a warm Summer day.

I considered making a remark to the pink-haired girl, Bobo, that was her name. Then, I thought better of it. It was best I preserve some anonymity. I could be arresting her next week for prostitution. If she recognized me and spread it on the streets, well, I'd have to deal with it.

So I arched my thin, feminine eyebrows at Bobo's grinning white lips and minced on past Conchita's to turn onto Lester Street proper and into the 'queer' section of Knightsbridge.

Almost at once, as I reached the cobbled street, I was accosted by two young queens whom I knew only slightly. But they greeted me instantly as one of their own. Britney and Caroline both wore tight, leather miniskirts, halter tops and huge, glittering earrings. Each wore thick eye makeup and pale foundation cream and powder. Their pronounced stance and exaggerated movements, even the way they wore their shoulder purses, told what they really were.

"Don't let that bag put you on, honey," cooed Caroline, flicking 'her' wrist languidly at me. 'She' was very thin, and not wearing a bra or padding accentuated that. "She only thinks she can give a better head than we can." The last, in a high falsetto, was directed down the street.

Britney said nothing. 'She' rarely did because of the deepness of her voice. It had lost her many a score, she'd once lamented to me, talking to me as the drag queen, Alice, I claimed to be. Britney's voice did break up the other queens on occasion by its unexpected bass depth in the usual falsetto chirping of the lispng group gathered in JP's for an early morning coffee before bed.

Unlike Caroline who was obviously male and didn't try to conceal it, Britney was quite pretty. She was black with a moderate Afro and a lithe, slender ap-

pearance, enhanced by what I think were falsies, but it was hard to tell. Both 'girls' were well over eighteen, hooked on speed, users of anything they could get, both thinking they'd one day get that one big score and be gone from the ghetto.

"Too right," I agreed in my own raised voice. I was somewhat sorry for them. There was nowhere for them to go in the city but Knightsbridge. There was nowhere they would be accepted for what they were. I really didn't want to bust them. This was, after all, their social and spiritual milieu. Even if they ever did get out, I was sure they'd find their way back. Here they had a place. They were drag queens, male prostitutes. They were home.

I waved to them and gave them a friendly smile but I felt in great need of a drink. So, after exchanging a few words about how slow a night it had been, I went on up the west side of Lester Street to the Alleycat Club. My rooms were just four doors away.

The Alleycat Club was down twelve steps into the basement beneath apartments, which, like the Club, catered exclusively to drag queens, their companions, or others who weren't offended at being propositioned by a man in a dress. It was run by a small 'retired' queen who had the stubbiest fingers and longest nails that I've ever seen. Peggy was always on duty in her club, wearing long, voluminous, sequined evening gowns and several glittering necklaces about her throat.

Peggy smoked cheroots from a long cigarette holder, always held in a way to show off 'her' long fingernails and long, blonde hair, one side always pinned up to show off 'her' heavy silver or gold, earrings. 'She' looked sixty. I was one of the few to know that she was yet to reach fifty, aged before her time in camps in Eastern Europe for her very obvious deviant looks and behaviour.

Peggy nodded to me, as I'd been in many times over the last two months. She was talking to two

black-suited 'straights' as I would now have called them. In a booth toward the back, I spotted Ellie Rags, another street queen Kate had introduced me to. She was alone and obviously nursing a bottle.

Moving as fluidly as I could, conscious of the eyes of the suits on me, I joined Ellie. "Hi, darling," I said in my adopted murmur. It wasn't a female voice by any means. I did inflect just a little though, and that little was enough, along with my slightly altered appearance, for the queens to accept me as one of them. "What gives with the suits?" I asked, smiling inwardly at the limp-wristed gesture I'd made.

Ellie squinted at me and then smiled. She was dressed in her usual tatters and her long, dark hair was in desperate need of a good shampoo and conditioning. "Muscle for the Stick," she said in her high-pitched, babydoll voice. She smiled again at the bill in my well-manicured hand and pushed her glass forward.

I ordered beef sandwiches as well as beer for both of us. Dolly, the waitress, gave us 'her' usual sniff and walked away most provocatively, her hips swaying almost from one table to the other in the well-peopled bar. I looked after her pert figure in the black miniskirt, tights and high heels and wondered if Dolly realized what I was thinking. If she knew I saw her sometimes as a woman rather than as a drag queen, would that explain why she sometimes vamped me, a queen, supposedly like herself?

Ellie Rags bubbled over with gratitude at my treat and readily talked about the straights with Peggy at the bar. "Stick's horning in, haven't you heard?" Ellie said in her stage whisper of a voice. I saw one of the suits raise his head to listen in with interest. "The Campari collectors aren't about anywhere and the word is that Campari is out, far out. He's not to be paid off by the bars. Jimmy has the franchise now. He wants everyone paying him off, queens as well as whores. It looks like big trouble."

Ellie Rags rattled on while I tried to keep a still face, showing only mild interest. Arturo Campari out? It couldn't be. He was mob-connected. But then, where would a pimp like Jimmy Stick ever get the nerve, the muscle, or the chutzpah, to horn in on a mob-connected protection racket? The muscle in the suits, laying something on Peggy at the bar, seemed to indicate, however, that everyone, sooner or later, was going to have to answer to the Stick.

How could I get the word out, I wondered, as Ellie went on about Desiree, the blonde, glamor queen at the far table, and her trouble with Darryl, her boyfriend, two-timing her with Sue-Ellen, a black female impersonator, a Diana Ross lookalike. I was thinking of Campari retaliating for sure against the Stick's muscle. Unless he was dead, of course and couldn't. And that was a chilling thought, a very chilling thought, because that might mean a change at the very top had taken place. I'd have to report that, right away. It was what I was down here, in Knightsbridge, for, wasn't it? And that brought on more shivers as I recalled more of my last conversation with Annie.

As soon as I could, I dropped a five note on Ellie and half of my sandwich. The bar was almost empty, I noted, when I stood up and turned round. Clearly the word was out. I had missed it in calling on Sue. Likely, Polanski had it already and would be pretty scornful when I did call in. Dolly pouted at me as I passed her. I'm afraid that I did blush, thinking of Sue's gesture when she'd seen me preparing to leave that morning.

One of the strongarms suddenly moved across my path. A hard hand gripped my arm. "Where're you going, dearie?" sneered the smaller of the two stocky, broad-featured men.

"That's Alice," Peggy interrupted anxiously in her deep rasp. Wow, the word about me, my new name was spreading fast. "She doesn't whore. Not much, anyway. You don't need to bother her."

The black eyes on me narrowed but the sneering smile got wider. "That I don't believe," the littler one holding me snarled. "Why, I wouldn't mind this little piece myself. You take that waitress, Dom. That wiggly one you liked and I'll take this one. We can have ourselves a little party."

I saw Dolly's face at the bar. Now she looked as afraid as I felt. I knew I could disable this guy pretty quick if I absolutely had to but there were two of them; they had a lot of bulk on their side.

"Let go of me!" I said. I didn't have to disguise the fear in my voice.

"Oh, what a disappointment!" said the taller one at the bar. "She sounds like your brother, Vinny."

The shorter guy really twisted my arm as he looked at me, a savage gleam in his eye. "So, what do you do, Alice?" he asked in a low, urgent voice. "What kind of tricks do you turn? Don't tell me you work."

"I...I get by," I said as softly as I could, trying not to be attractive in any way at all. Suddenly, all the breath was knocked out of my body. My lungs gasped for air as the lower part of my body went numb with pain and shock. My legs gave way and I fell to the floor between the red-topped tables. The little guy must have had something about his knuckles to hurt me so much when he hit me. I had a glimpse of a knee and a foot coming into me. I rolled, the blows glancing off my shoulder.

"Hey! Don't break up my place!" yelled a frantic Peggy. I could hear the rustle of petticoats and skirts as 'she' came around the bar.

"Stay there!" ordered the bigger guy.

"You can't do this," Peggy persisted as I felt the foot resting on my head. I stayed very still, though I now felt more angry than anything. "Whenever's there's trouble, the queens stay away," Vera went on urgently. "It will take forever to get them back if just one

of them is abused in here. Alice there is typical. She'll take anything that's not nailed down and fence it in Morry's or the Paradise Pawn. It's only when they can't steal that they start whoring."

I felt the pressure ease. I felt like blowing my cover entirely. I was going to get up and smash the thug's face in, even if his buddy did get me. But they were both withdrawn to the door by the time I wobbled to my feet.

"From now on, it will be different," said the bigger guy, Dom, at the door. "If you're gonna rob, dearie, it'll be to pay off the Stick. You'll be on his book for two bills a week, just like everyone else on the street. No more freelancers. Everything is gonna be organized now."

I found my purse and picked it up. One of the punks started to snicker and pointed at me, whispering something to his partner. I wanted to throw it at him but they turned and left. Peggy, standing over me, was ordering me a drink on the house.

So, what was it that Annie had said to me that was provoking me into all this anxiety and stress? "To take the next step," Annie had said to me, after we'd been discussing the drug trade again, "you have to wear a dress, my pretty Alice." I was shaking my head immediately. "Polanski's given me a dress allowance for you. I can't wait to take you shopping, my girl. Then, when you're comfortable in drag on the street, we're going to put you next to a woman named Gina who's looking for pretty queens right now. Rewards, I think, to some of the gay boys who've done her favours. It'll be a soft job, Just keep your eyes, your ears and your legs open."

I almost vomited all over Kate's bar. I stood up, my temperature through the ceiling. I didn't know where I was going. All I knew was that it would be out of there, away from this horrible woman leering at me.

“Oh, sugar in the morning,” said Annie, reaching out to grab my arm. “You’re an effing virgin, aren’t you? Sit down and let me talk to you about that!”

“Eff you,” I snarled at her, very masculine in tone and not caring at all. “I’m married, Annie. You know that. And I’m never going to do what you think I have to do. I’m not wearing drag, ever!”

“Why don’t you go home to your wife then?” taunted Annie.

“That’s exactly what I’m going to do,” I snapped at her, grabbing my purse and leaving her the bill. “That’s exactly what I’m going to do!”

And I did. Look how that worked out.

#### **\*\*\*IV. HOW TO SOLVE A PROBLEM\*\*\***

Lou Carson’s call to Jeff Polanski produced little result at first. The young lieutenant was rarely in his office, a trait Carson admired. Polanski was a respected cop in the Department, respected for his outstanding police work. He was also one of the most despised by everyone at the rank of sergeant and above for the shameless way he’d jumped grades on the promotion lists.

Polanski himself cared little about the envy that surrounded him. He was small for a policeman and conducted himself in a brusque, officious manner that would have been guaranteed alone to make him enemies, never mind the favouritism that seemed to mark his career. He was very well-dressed, his suits always well-tailored. He looked like the successful young executive he must have supposed himself to be. All the new young officers admired him.

He bustled into Carson’s office just after lunch, his hair longer than regulation and clearly styled by a barber who must make more than a policeman’s pay. He immediately took possession of the chair that

SueAnn Howell had used earlier and threw open a file in front of himself. Carson recognized a photo of Charley Howell as a rookie in uniform clipped to the top.

“You want to see me about Howell,” said Polanski, fierce, dark brown eyes glaring at Carson. Carson had not said what he wanted to see Polanski about and wondered who was filling him in on what happened in Vice.

“His wife came to see me this morning,” the captain said briefly, setting aside the folder he’d been working on. “He was home last night and his femmy appearance shocked her.”

There was silence. Black eyebrows rose but the younger man still waited. Clearly, he thought there was more to be said.

“She is threatening to go to the press if we don’t get him off this case right now,” Carson said in the same monotone as before. “She’ll claim that we are turning her husband into a woman.”

“Damn,” said Polanski quietly. He raised a hand to his chin and rubbed it softly, thinking. Lou Carson looked stolidly at the beautiful, white, silk shirt, the heavy gold cuff links and the golden watch. The whole impression of success breeding upon success couldn’t be missed.

“I put her off for the short run,” said Carson. “But I think it’s time I knew more about Howell’s assignment, don’t you? Or do I just throw him to the wolves?”

Polanski’s eyes seemed riveted on the notices somewhere behind Carson’s head. “Why?” he asked at length with a frown.

Carson was not too surprised. This was Jeff Polanski after all. “You don’t seem at all perturbed,” Lou Carson said patiently, “by what happens to us, to you, if the details of an undercover case become

public. Even if it just became common knowledge in the Department, Charley Howell could be killed. We could also become laughingstocks of the Department. I, in particular, would not like that. Not one bit.”

The two held eye contact for several seconds before Polanski finally gave way and looked down at the folder in front of him. “Well,” he conceded. “You may have a point. Not everyone will understand what we’re doing in this particular case.”

Carson settled back in his chair. “What exactly is Howell up to at this moment?” he asked baldly. “I know as little about his assignment as his wife.”

Polanski frowned. “You remember what we asked for?” he inquired reflectively, still holding the information tight to himself.

“You asked for one of our undercover, someone who had worked with queens before,” answered Carson. “I offered you both Bailey and Mann, who’ve worked much more extensively with gays than Howell. But you turned them down and picked out Howell four months ago, no experience, not even time in uniform. You gave him to us for seasoning.”

Polanski nodded. “So, Lou,” he said, with another intensive look. “You’ve got all the information you need. You must have worked out a lot from that. You don’t want chapter and verse, surely.”

Carson folded his arms and considered. It was pretty obvious why Charley Howell had been chosen for an undercover job with queens. He had the slender stature and regular features to be able to appear as a convincing drag queen, at least to others who liked to see men in dresses.

Carson also knew that it had taken Polanski all of a week to persuade Howell finally to “see what he could do.” There were a lot of inducements in the package, some concerning bonuses and mentorship that would ignite other officers in the Department if

they ever saw Howell's file. Carson had actually been surprised when Howell finally gave in after a week's pressure from the Narcotics lieutenant.

"Organized Crime has asked me what's going on," Carson said at last, raising the ante. "How do they know you're doing an infiltration? They want access to the product if it's on the Bent Organization."

Polanski's eyes were hooded and his brow deeply furrowed. "Well," he said, stretching and putting his hands behind his head. "Next time you get that call, tell them to go right to the Commissioner. This is where this operation originates and where I get my direct orders from. Don't repeat that last item to anyone, Lou. It's on a need-to-know basis." He held the older man's gaze with his and tried to stare him down.

Anger welled up in Carson. The damned Commissioner. Trust him to be playing fast and loose with the Department so that a pipsqueak like Polanski could put it over his superior. "So I refer Mrs. Howell to the Commissioner?" he asked, letting his emotions colour his tone.

The young lieutenant snorted and stood up rapidly. He slammed shut the Charley Howell file and headed for the door. "That woman needs to get away for a while," he snapped, pausing in the doorway. "I'll take care of that. We don't want Charley ducking out to see her every five minutes either. He's got a cover to build. He's only on the fringe, as it is, right now."

Despite his bluster, Polanski was in fact badly shaken by Lou Carson's revelations about Charley Howell. He hurried off directly to the Commissioner's office. What would Charley do if his wife was suddenly to leave town on an extended holiday? He guessed that Howell would need sympathetic female company from time to time to alleviate the role he was playing but, very plainly, SueAnn Howell could not fill that role.

Polanski began to reorganize in his mind, thinking of the policewomen he could use as liaison with Howell. He would have to instruct them personally on how to behave with Howell now that the testing phase was coming up. Polanski could see it happening. So far, Howell had just had to fake a few gestures, thin out his eyebrows, backcomb the perm they had put in his hair. But there was so much more he could be called on to do before he was really accepted as a drag queen, not the least of which was wearing women's clothes. He hadn't yet, as far as Jeff knew, and didn't seem to think he would have to do. Polanski knew differently.

The Commissioner let him into his office, aggrieving his secretary no end. Grant Powers had silver-grey hair and the air of a professional diplomat, which he'd been before his appointment, rather than the poker face of a policeman. His light blue eyes were generally appraising and rarely touched by humour. He waved Polanski to a comfortable chair on the far side of his long office and came and sat beside him. He'd appointed Polanski Detective Lieutenant and had nothing but praise for the way the young man did his job. He often referred to Polanski as the problem solver of the Department, an epithet that did not sit well with the older men in charge of various departments.

"The Jack Bent investigation has hit a snag," said Polanski, coming right to the point. There was never any formality between the two men. "Howell's wife has seen him at home and she's upset enough to start some trouble, perhaps in the media." He paused under the intense scrutiny of the older man. "Already, O.C. has a line into Vice about something going on. We both know what that means in terms of leaks to the bad guys. Now the wife has got Vice upset. The more we tell them, the more will get out. It's getting riskier for Howell and for all of us. We could all get spattered here."

"This is the only way we can do it?" asked the Commissioner slowly, thoughtfully.

“We’ve tried everything else,” Polanski said, going over old ground. “We just don’t know enough. We need intelligence. We don’t even know where to put our wiretaps. I mean, Corona gave us our first look under the cover, so to speak, but with Bent himself dead...”

Polanski sighed, seemingly at a loss for words. “We could start a crackdown again,” he began again. “Push hard on everyone. See if Corona was telling us a tale?”

Commissioner Powers shook his head. “No,” he said. “If the information Corona gave us was only fifty per cent accurate, we have to go undercover. There’s no other way in such a sensitive area as this. Isn’t it ironic,” he smiled but it didn’t reach his eyes, “that Organized Crime only discovered why they called Parazzino ‘Johnny Bent’ now that he’s dead?”

“They do say that Maurizio’s taken over the Bent Organization,” said Polanski trying to give the Devil his due. “That last federal report says Maurizio was transporting the Chilean shipment they lost track of in San Diego. My guess is that it’s already on the streets and we’ve blown another one.”

Perhaps the Commissioner was the only one of the two who realized that each time they got into the Howell thing, they had to talk out the assignment and reconfirm to themselves that the job was necessary. Polanski, at least, had convinced himself again. His voice was firmer.

“Yeah, we have to crack this group,” the young lieutenant said firmly. “They successfully distribute narcotics to any city, in any quantity desired, anywhere in North America. There’s not an informer in the bunch. We don’t even know who’s who in the group. We need a line-up and then we can go to work. That means infiltrating and undercover work. It means a genuine drag queen working for us, or someone who can pass for one.”

“Can Howell really do that?” asked Powers doubtfully. “He could pull back...”

“I think the alarm shown by his wife is a good sign,” said Polanski confidently. “If she’s worried that he’s more of a woman than she is, you know he can pass the obvious tests about his sexual orientation.”

“Well,” said the Commissioner, spreading his hands. “What are your plans now?”

“A vacation for Sue Howell,” said Polanski. “And more support for Alice, that’s Howell’s street name.”

Powers nodded. “You know, the expense of this operation is going to be challenged soon enough. I’ll need some results from Howell soon. He hasn’t got into the Bent group yet, has he?”

Polanski shook his head. “I wish I had more to tell you,” he sighed. “We’re still following the game plan, establishing Alice as a player. We’ll eventually push her in front of the group but if they don’t nibble, we may just have to give it up.”

Grant Powers smiled. “You’ll have done your very best,” he said reassuringly. “And we will get them all, one way or another, you know. It would be so good to be able to look in on Maurizio’s family right now, though, wouldn’t it? If your undercover could show us that alone, it would be a success.”

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At the other end of Lester Street running parallel to Knightsbridge Avenue was a narrower street of five- and six-storey apartment buildings. Lock-up shops, clubs, bars and pool halls made up the lower storey levels below fairly affluent apartments. Redpath Avenue was the heart of the drug industry of Knightsbridge. Traffickers openly bargained for a myriad range of hard and soft drugs in the many bars. Millions of dollars were exchanged here every

week, Gilberto Corona had claimed, which was why there were so many banks clustered at the east and west ends of the thoroughfare.

Johnny Bent had operated from his club on Redpath, according to Corona, a distribution system for the full spectrum of narcotics across North America. No matter how the consignment came into the country, Corona had told his disbelieving interrogators, Bent could arrange from Knightsbridge its movement to a lab for breaking down, to a factory for packaging and to the buyer's home city at a designated drop.

Bent did not supply any of the cutters or packagers of the drugs, but he did supply able couriers which enabled him to give a previously unknown and undetected delivery service of money and drugs rivalled only by the biker gangs. It would still be unknown but for the fact that the death of its founder had brought about a power struggle in the Bent Organization.

Giuseppe Simoni had eliminated other Bent lieutenants, all but Gilberto Corona, who he had forced out of the distributing end of the drug industry. Many of Corona's listeners had found his stories too far-fetched to believe. As yet, however, no one had been able to disprove what he'd said. After six months of interrogation, that said a lot on his behalf.

It was known that Corona had tried to set himself up on the financing side of the drug trade. His inept performance, cutting drugs already stepped on more than once, had led his partners to attempt to kill him. His retaliation had been discovered by good police work, yes, he had been informed on, and so, in his turn, facing three indictments for murder one, Corona had begun to bargain for a deal.

Federal authorities denied such an organization could even exist. Corona was fabricating stories, they said. They'd done a complete about-face, however, when a taped conversation between Chicago and St.

Louis capos revealed a complaint that without Johnny Bent, all the families were suffering transportation difficulties. It was being looked at, 'at the national level,' Chicago confided. Bent's operation was 'too distasteful' for the Chicago capo to talk about or want to take over but licence was going to be given to Tommy Black, an alias later found to be that of one Giuseppe Simoni, to take over and run the Club 'in the same way as it was operating before the death.'

Corona wasn't immune to catching the sudden interest in his stories. For a month, he refused to talk about Johnny Bent. Only when he had immunity and a sliding-scale deal on the three murders he had committed did he open up, as far as he was able, to a special group of interrogators that had included newly appointed Detective Lieutenant Jeff Polanski. Together, they agreed that if Corona was telling the truth, he was giving them all an immense problem to solve.

### \*\*\*\*\*V. ALICE\*\*\*\*\*

Having shaved closely and backcombed my hair again, a trick it had taken me a week of continuous practice to learn under the eyes of a scornful policewoman, I prepared myself carefully to take a trip down to Redpath. In the mirror, I saw a slender, young man looking at me, the thinness of his eyebrows and femininely combed hair very disconcerting.

I was doing a lot for the department, I thought, as I began to apply makeup to my face. It was disturbing how eyeliner, rouge and a little lipstick transformed my face. It was definitely a feminine face then. No wonder I was being propositioned so much by the johns who go for drag queens. I put them off, trying to be cheery about it. I really wanted to arrest the guys as I had on my stint through Vice, when such offers had been made to me, when I was the bait in a

round-up. There was no way of course that I would ever, or ever even wanted to, take anyone up on their offers.

“Picky Alice,” Peggy had said to me when I turned down one guy who looked like a college student. He’d somehow ended up in Dolly’s arms before the night was over. Speaking like a queen, I bemoaned the fact she didn’t even thank me.

I studied my features in my mirror. I was quite regular in looks. A light application of powder to my face didn’t change the fact that my skin was clear and unblemished. It was the mascara and eyeshadow that made my neatly outlined eyes stand out as they never did when I wasn’t trying to be Alice. As I was beginning to be more adept with brushes and pencils, I was beginning to look more and more feminine, female, even beyond what my policewoman tutor had taught me.

My eyebrows were always difficult, probably because thinking of myself as ‘feminine’ definitely made my hands wobble and shake. I managed it, this time, with only three erasures, an omen of an auspicious evening. The pink lipstick I had bought in one of the shops that specialized in sales to queens, down in ‘The Hole’ across Redpath, in streets that led to the canals.

I studied myself as I blinked my heavily fringed eyelids. I felt a catch in my throat as I realized that, from the neck up, I did look just like a woman. It wasn’t that way when I’d started. It had just been a job, a laugh to be so campy. This was sick, I told myself. I gulped as I thought of women’s clothing. In women’s clothes... I forced that thought away. There was only so much I was going to do for Polanski. I’d already passed my limit in that regard as it was.

Anyway, I gave myself away by every gesture I made as I walked, ate or even sat down. I wasn’t worried about that, of course. I wanted to be known for what I was. That was the whole point, wasn’t it?



There was only the rare queen, like Dolly, who could actually sustain any kind of female performance after a casual scrutiny of the group Kate had introduced me to. There were others, like the showgirls from *Base One*, female impersonators, whom I'd heard were indistinguishable from women. I must admit I was very skeptical about that. Besides, obvious queens like me were never admitted to places like *Base One*. So, how could I ever find out?

I put on a purple shirt and a white pair of pants. I was fairly thin but I thought I was pretty masculine when undressed nevertheless. My tutor Annie had suggested, early on, that I wear a padded corset. It would give me some alluring female curves but I'd declined that. I wondered what she was thinking in making such a suggestion. I guessed that she'd wanted to get me into drag just to humiliate me in some way. I wouldn't do it. She'd left in a huff, probably thinking she could 'shame' me into doing it.

I didn't see any of the queens on the streets in the day in full drag. So, as far as I was concerned, it wasn't necessary for the job I had to do. If it looked like it was going to be necessary to be in drag all the time, I fully intended to inform Polanski that the job was over.

I looked at my thin gold watch, actually one of Sue's. The ache of the blows I'd taken at the Alleycat Club had worn off but it had made me late starting to make myself up. It was getting late for meeting my contact on West Redpath and passing on the street gossip about Stick. I hoped Polanski would nip Jimmy's rise in the bud. I didn't want to have to endure more beatings, without a fight back, if I didn't fence my 'stolen goods' with Jimmy's boys.

I picked up my purse and a white sweater and left my room slowly, shuddering a little from the cold air, and what I knew I was going to have to endure from the knowing looks I received from everyone I met that night. I'd rested up that afternoon, dozing and catch-

ing up a little on the sleep I'd lost in visiting Sue. I sighed at that memory.

Sue wouldn't understand that I had to match my hours to those of the queens on the block if I was going to complete this assignment. The only way I was going to get it over with quickly was if I tried harder to be more queenly. But that was asking too much, I thought, as I saw Ellie Rags talking animatedly to two fine 'queens,' at least I thought they were by how tall they were, outside the Gator Club.

Ellie darted over to me when she saw me coming up the Row. The other two followed. I could see now that they were both men, despite their high heels, short skirts, and feminine figures. Each had big hair, one red-haired, the other brunette, long and tumbling over their necks and shoulders. They had heavily made-up faces and did look like women, particularly from a distance, but I'd seen too many queens in my two months in this quarter. I was rarely fooled now, even from down the block.

"How are you, Alice darling?" Ellie Rags asked me urgently. "I was telling Desiree and Raquel all about your being beaten up." Ellie's hair was 'her' own, long and straggly about her face. "They shouldn't be allowed to get away with that, should they?"

"I don't know," I said cautiously, looking at the two feminized faces staring at me.

The red-haired one smiled a little. "Take it easy," 'she' murmured to Ellie, her voice neutral, not obviously masculine. Her loose sweater, tented at her chest, was a dark blue, almost black, slimming her wide shoulders and generally stocky figure.

These queens were definitely out of Ellie's league. Ellie really was one of the most sexless people I've ever met. I seriously doubted Ellie ever engaged in any sexual encounters at all. Ellie did delight, though, in soft feminine clothing and was always irritating other queens by his persistent requests to

touch and fondle new materials. I wondered sometimes if Ellie had just drifted into the street life of the queen to indulge what was really a harmless fetish.

These queens were of a different sort. They had wary, knowing eyes, despite the extra false lashes they wore. I didn't doubt that these two were for sale to anyone with the price on Upper Redpath. There was something provocative in the way they stood, hands on rounded hips, one hand relaxed and the other stiffly supporting them, parodying fashion models. Their eyes constantly flicked up and down Lester Street as if afraid of missing a prospective trick.

"Are you going to deal with the Stickman?" asked the brunette, her smooth tones not quite male, but not quite female either.

I shrugged. "What's it to you?" I asked. "Who knows? I could just move on."

The answer seemed to satisfy them. Their interest in both Ellie and me quickly evaporated. They swept off down the block. Ellie had tagged on to me which made it difficult for me to follow the others and see what they were up to. Ellie hung onto me until we reached Redpath where there were a few queens out cruising the block. A few waved to me. One or two I knew were out but would never attract any business. Like Ellie, they relied on handouts of some sort to exist.

Ellie rushed over to a little group and began a detailed account of How Alice Got Beaten Up In The Gator Club to two queens as ragged as herself in the doorway of the Lester Hotel.

I slipped away quickly and headed up Redpath towards First. The upper part was lined with cheap hotels, bars, and clubs. Some had fanciful names, such as the Paradise or Tropics. The queens who worked regularly at straight jobs often roomed here or found employment in the bars or kitchens. Some hotels al-

lowed only an overnight, or by-the-hour, clientele. It was to one of those hotels that I went to pick up my pipeline to Polanski.

Only when I entered the Bellamy Gardens to enquire archly of the bored desk clerk for Mr. Jackson's room did it occur to me that I'd been in there before. Kenny Ball had been caught here, in a tourist's room, rifling through a guy's pants. He'd pegged the guy as a drunk and thought he was passed out. The guy used his belt buckle on Kenny and left him a terrible mess. I shuddered as I remembered it. The old, sad-faced clerk looked up at me in surprise.

"Someone just walked on my grave," I said in the light voice Kate had said would pass as queenly.

The clerk nodded knowingly. "In high heels, I bet, dearie," he said gruffly.

"Naturally," I said with a smile of my pink, painted lips. I sashayed down the foyer to the old open-grille type elevators they had in the Bellamy. As I waited, I remembered that Billy Red had called the police about Kenny, his eyes all closed with the bruising from the beating he had taken. The police came and picked up Kenny but they didn't even go into the hotel to check out what happened.

That had shocked me more than the beating. Getting bloodied was a way of life for us all at fourteen. I looked back across the foyer and saw that nothing had changed, not even the dusty, red and gold chesterfields under the pictures of flowers. One of us would sit there doing something like filing our nails with stiletto blades while upstairs the others would be rifling the rooms we could get into.

I looked at my softly manicured hand with the painted nails as I pressed again for the elevator. Tourists no longer came to Redpath, or if they did, it was just for an hour, like the man who was waiting for me.

I could see that Eddy Westham was trying his hardest not to show his disgust with me when I eventually got to the room he'd taken. Eddy had been undercover himself and primed, along with me, by Polanski himself when I was still debating taking this assignment on. He'd acted with revulsion at the idea of a cop pretending to be a queen. It looked to me that he still wasn't over his initial reaction to the job I'd taken on.

Eddy didn't know how to treat me when I came mincing in daintily, playing the queen meeting a john, in case there were prying eyes about us, or pricked-up ears. They should be convinced after my chatter asking him how he liked my new, curly hair and how I'd bought a new, pink lipstick just for him because he liked it so much, and how did he like my new eyelashes, that I'd curled just for him? I was going to be too much woman for him, I just knew it, I declared, as I shut the door. Eddy backed across the room, his face a sickly shade of yellow, matching the grimy curtains.

I didn't see Westham's reports on me until very much later. I didn't know he was telling Polanski I was changing, that I was actually looking more and more like a woman, facially at least, and was very attractive as one. Westham had written that even my gestures didn't give me away for I was acting confidently (if he only knew!) and unaffected. He'd seen far more manly women than I was. My frilly shirts and tight pants weren't out of line with what women were wearing. With my hair in curls at my neck, he'd have sworn I was a woman, Eddy reported on me.

I went on blithely about my run-in with Jimmy Stick's men, and the conclusion about Campari. I didn't know that Westham would be telling Polanski that my voice was low but steady and not at all at odds with my appearance. "I thought I was interviewing a woman," he later told Polanski. He asked if it wasn't time to get me out before I became a total pervert?

“How about Johnny Bent?” Westham asked when I was finished. “That’s where the Lieutenant wants more action. Kate gave you some leads there, didn’t he?”

I noted how he kept his genders straight. “Kate’s gone,” I said. “Blew town. I told you she wouldn’t stick around. She was far too nervous after introducing a cop to her friends. Luckily, she didn’t rat on me before leaving. As for Tommy Black, I’ve only heard whispers. The queens don’t seem to pay much attention to mob dealings. This thing with Jimmy Stick might be Tommy stirring things up. As it is ...”

I stopped for a moment and looked into my purse for my lipstick. I would have to redo my lips before leaving, in a darker shade, I thought. I took out a cigarette. I carried them but rarely smoked. All the queens I knew did. It was supposed to cut appetite and make them thinner. So, I’d learned to smoke but I didn’t do it normally unless I had to. Or unless I was nervous, as Eddy’s disgusted glances were making me.

As I put the cigarette to my lips, though, Eddy Westham stood up and came across with his lighter to light it for me. We both became aware of what the gesture meant in the same moment. He coloured. So did I, but I think my makeup concealed my flush.

“Thanks,” I said, not changing my tone. There was lipstick all over the end of my cigarette. I should be using non-stick types of lipstick but queens do like to leave evidence of their femininity everywhere. So, I’d become used to leaving lipstick bows on glasses and cups wherever I dined.

Eddy was studying the building opposite with more interest than grey concrete deserves, as I went on. “I’ve identified a number of queens who might be what Corona described,” I said, blowing the smoke in Eddy’s direction. I was angry at him and at myself. At myself mostly, for letting it matter what Eddy thought of me for doing a job he couldn’t possibly do.

"These queens are not on the street, not obviously anyway," I went on. "They're in the clubs a lot, the most expensive, naturally, and they all seem to live well but it could still be high-class whoring. One of them, known as Diane, has been on a trip West since I first got here. She passes as a woman, I'm sure, which is why I can't quite fathom why she's here unless there's a certain type of guy she likes. You know, one who likes queens as you're supposed to."

"Not much, is it?" growled Westham, still looking out of the window, his ears pink at my remark about him liking queens. "By the way, I'm supposed to pass you another message. Don't duck out to see Sue for a while, will you? She won't be home for a while. She went on a holiday to France with her mother."

I gaped. "France?" I asked. "We don't have that kind of money!"

"I heard the Department paid," admitted Westham, risking a glance at me. "Heard you broke cover, I guess. They don't want it happening again."

I stubbed out the almost complete cigarette in his ashtray. I picked up my purse fitfully. How like Sue, I thought angrily, to take off just like that, and without telling me. And Polanski. If he had the money for that, I should be asking for a way bigger bonus to do what I was doing.

"Oh," said Westham, his mouth dropping as I took out my lipstick and compact and began to do my lips again. I didn't think at all how feminine a gesture it must have been to Eddy. "You're going to be having a new contact, in place of me, too. Annie Phelan's working undercover again. She'll be talking to you from now on. Polanski thinks you two have more in common than you and me."

I looked hard at him. I could tell by his expression that Eddy knew what he was saying and was trying to put me down. "I'm sure we do," I said, rubbing my red lips together, trying to get a perfect, feminine bow to

my lips, not thinking first before I spoke as I usually do on the street.

Eddy's face reddened. He looked at me so furiously that, for a moment, I thought he was going to be violent with me. "Just get your ass back on the street," he said, striding over to open the door. I saw such a look of loathing on his face I was afraid just to pass him.

I could have told him that I didn't want Annie Phelan as a contact any more. He could tell Polanski that I wanted to keep him, Westham. No, I didn't want her suggestions about me putting on skirts, curling my hair and brushing it curvaceously along my chin to make it appear more feminine. No, I didn't want to wear panties and bras. I wasn't going to. This acting disguise was as far as I'd go. I don't know. Maybe saying that to Eddie would have impressed him. But the look on his face as he stared at me suggested that nothing I said would ever get Eddie Westham on my side.

"My money," I said, putting out my hand. Polanski found this a good way to reimburse me so that I had enough, but not suspiciously large amounts, on the street.

Eddy was counting it out into my hand as two good looking, that is feminine, queens strolled by. Desiree raised her hand in salute while Raquel gave me a knowing smile.

"Wait up, girls!" I called, grabbing all of Westham's wad and hurrying after them. They held the elevator doors for me.

"Hey!" yelled Eddy, coming down the hall after me. "That wasn't all for you!"

I blew him a kiss as the doors closed and we sank from his view. We could hear him as he cursed me all the way to the bottom of our ride down.

“Well, you got more than we did tonight, isn’t that right, Raquel?” the red-haired Desiree said to her brunette-wigged partner.

Raquel nodded and began to laugh. “Did you take all that guy’s stash?”

“No,” I lied. “But he got more than he paid for anyway. He’s leaving town, as it is. I deserved a going away present. Maybe I should call his wife, too.”

Desiree laughed and slipped her arm through mine. “Since you scored

so well,” she said in her lilting, affected voice, “you can buy us drinks at the Hilo.”

I smiled back and let Raquel come and take my other arm, the three of us queens causing many comments and starting a lot of banter as we went down Redpath.

“I could use a drink,” I said as their high heels clicked on the sidewalk. They towered over me as we crossed the street to the alley that led to the Hilo, the current ‘only-place-to-be’ in Knightsbridge. “Mr. Jackson and his wife will be glad to treat you royally.”

The bouncer looked at us suspiciously as we went up the steps to the heavy double doors that preserved the Hilo’s privacy from the outside world.

“Alice’s okay,” said Desiree as the bouncer looked at my white slacks and unpadded shirt. “She’s one of us. Gina wants to meet her.”

Gina? My temperature rose at that one. There was a Gina mentioned by Corona. He had been very down on her. Called her the whore who had wormed her way into Jack Bent’s Organization and nearly wrecked it, until Johnny had to put her in her place. She’d been a top recruiter, according to Corona, but he didn’t explain what that meant or who Gina was recruiting. He’d held onto that information, saying he’d talk about it later, when he had a deal. Which he

still didn't really have, but he did have his life, he said, as if content with just that.

## **\*\*\*\*\*VI. THE HILO CLUB\*\*\*\*\***

How did Johnny Bent get his nickname, the investigators wanted to know. Giovanni Parazzino had been 'Johnny-the-One' for so long. That was because of his exploits with the ladies, said Gilberto Corona eventually, but somewhere along the way Johnny-the-One had begun to use his talents as part of a blackmailing scheme.

Johnny had learned that there were some secrets so powerful that people would pay anything to keep them secret. He'd run girls for Old Man Unger and had undoubtedly found that deviates would do anything to avoid publicity of their strange habits reaching their families.

How long the idea for a special organization was nurtured in Johnny-the-One's brain is impossible to say. He used to say he'd lost too many payers to suicide, running black ops for Unger, long before they were half sucked dry. He must have thought that sooner or later some mark would stand up to him, rat him out to the police and he would go down. Somehow he'd formulated the idea of using his victims, rather than bleeding them, though he must have done that, too. But there were some he'd used for a very long time.

Let Johnny discover that a businessman's secret vice was that he was a transvestite and he'd feed the habit, gaining all the evidence he needed for blackmail along the way. His blackmail was more a form of persuasion. On each business trip, the respectable businessman took a message to a certain anonymous drop and was paid off in the coin he loved best, the chance to indulge his hobby. Soon, there were a string of eager participants in Johnny's schemes.

Johnny, it was said, could bend anyone, anyone with a certain bent nature, that is. Bent was his nickname or Johnny-the-One, until the two names were fused over time. Johnny Bent organized a string of female impersonator clubs and tapped a previously unorganized source for criminal activity.

Unlike others before him, Johnny Bent didn't see drag queens as mixed-up, sexual misfits. He saw them as distinct personalities and used them, in the same way he used his other victims, first as rewards to his messengers and then as messengers themselves. He was prudent. At the end, he rarely used blackmail at all. He sifted through his recruits and kept only the best for permanent work. If some of the mob knew what he was doing, well, it worked. His Bent Organization remained unpenetrated and, until the infamous Chicago to St. Louis conversation, unknown to the major crime-fighting forces of the United States.

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The Hilo was for insiders. It was not a place for Ellie Rags or the less convincing queen. She would never have got past the bouncers. I thought I'd never get in the place. I wouldn't have, I was certain, without Raquel and Desiree escorting me in. The bouncer scowled at the way I was dressed, in male pants and shirt, ignoring my feminine hair and makeup.

Nor would any 'tourists' be generally admitted without being escorted in by someone like Desiree. It was a meeting ground, however, for all types, with some money, of course, but it was usually favoured by one group or another for a time. Now, it was favoured by men who dressed fully in women's clothing. They dominated the tables. But it was also here that prostitutes, women, relaxed after filling their quotas, part of the 'good life' they were so often promised.

In a perverse way, I was happy to be let in. It was a mark of good fortune. It was a mark of being accepted as a foxy queen. But it was so odd to be thought of that way. As we headed for a wall booth, I saw that the management had a fine touch in personnel, too. There were both male and female waitresses but both were dressed in exactly the same way, in revealing miniskirts and black fishnet stockings. Only their name tag colours revealed what they were, pink for queens and yellow for girls.

The dance floor was crowded with couples of all kinds. The Hilo kept two bands on the go all the time which also made it popular with anyone dressed as a girl. It was also known to be well-connected, a 'class' bar, that had not been raided for ten years.

Of course, 'normal' tourists had to be discouraged, I realized, as I watched the interaction of men and those dressed as women. Casual visitors would not know how to comport themselves in the presence of men fully dressed as women, acting like women with their boyfriends. Like the prostitutes who came in after a night's work, all in a dress or makeup were treated as women.

There were even those, from transvestite clubs, I heard, who surprisingly were there with their wives. I could never have brought Sue to the Hilo. One look at how some of the nicest-looking queens were carrying on with some very appreciative men would undoubtedly have made her ill. I felt pretty squeamish at some of the French-kissing and touching going on in some of the booths.

Desiree and Raquel steered me to a trio of other heavily made-up queens in possession of a wall booth with a three-sided couch about the small table. Almost immediately, precedence was given to Desiree. One queen tripped off across the crowded dance floor to return with a chair for herself.

On my right was a black queen with tight, black curls, heavy grey and white eye makeup, and a tight,

black dress to match. She was drawing on a marijuana cigarette. She smiled at me as I couldn't help looking at her very large, well-shaped breasts.

Our waitress, a young boy who didn't look eighteen, in a long blonde fall, huge, triangular earrings, glamorous makeup and an excellent padded cleavage, eyed the cigarette in disdain. She withdrew for a moment, swinging away on black, patent high heels before returning with a small, swarthy man in an evening jacket and bow tie. He leaned over and whispered to Desiree who nodded and looked haughtily at the black queen, tossing masses of red curls and waves over her shoulder.

As soon as the man had stepped back apologetically among the grinding dancers, Desiree glared at the black queen. "Kiki dearest," she said in her affected speech, and it took me a moment to realize she was talking to the blonde who had gone for the chair for herself. "Andrea needs to get some fresh air, don't you think? As her very great friend, you'll see her home, won't you? After all, with the Stickman on the prowl lately, a girl can't be too careful, can she?"

The two queens' faces showed their fury. The blonde stood in her short black dress and adjusted it about her wide hips. The black girl stood unsteadily to pass me. I was almost overpowered by the aroma of Chanel and marijuana. The two swirled their hair about their bare shoulders and stalked out regally, stopping here and there to relate the story of their banishment to other larger, female figures.

"There's a room for that," said Desiree, "if that's your style, or for anything else that's relaxing. But not in here, you understand?"

I think I did. I remembered hearing that the Hilo was never raided. There were those transvestites and their wives in the private areas beyond the main bar. Would they be upset by the smell of grass being smoked? I really didn't think so in this day and age. Mentally, I outlined all the charges I'd noted that

could be brought and against whom charges could be laid, after what I'd seen so far. But, with propriety restored, our waitress, Geraldine, returned and in a near-perfect breathy Monroe voice, asked us what we truly desired.

It had to be white wine or some other feminine drink, though I would have loved a beer. Geraldine minced away, much better in her walk as a female than me, her dark seams making her long legs seem slender and shapely, her frilly panties very tight. It was something in her walk that reminded me of my very first encounter with a boy dressed as a girl.

Arturo Mommalia had been part of Billy Red's gang until he was thirteen at least but then had given up thieving and attended fewer and fewer meets for our organized 'collecting.' It was Jeffy Ferrillo who had reported that Grease, as we called Mommalia, was queer. He'd seen him with a mark at the Paradise, the haunt of queers, and a place we didn't collect from. So, we thought we'd seen the last of Grease.

On Saturday nights some of us guys would break into the Windsor Theatre on Redpath to see the adult features free. On the inside we'd meet up with girls, tough girls, the ones who hadn't yet been forced, often because of their looks, into 'the life' yet.

It was on one of those occasions that we'd come across these old guys cuddling up to some young and very delectable chicks. It hadn't taken more than Vince Burns' flick knife to scare off the oldsters and the two frightened chicks had belonged to us, me, Vince, Billy Red, and a thin, wild kid we all called Ferret because he looked like one.

The girls were downright attractive and sexy. After their fright had subsided, they were quite willing to partake in a little necking with us while the movies on the screen worked us up. The taller, dark-haired girl threatened to scream when Vince put his hand up her tight skirt. Since we didn't want the management on us again, we made him behave like the rest

of us. I did my share of kissing, necking, with each as they were so attractive, so soft and feminine, and so giggly when we changed places and shared them among us.

It was when they wanted to leave, after giving us a couple of hours of their time that Vince turned nasty and tried to force himself on the small blonde one. Her shriek brought two ushers and the manager on the run. A fight naturally erupted. In the confusion, I got out with Billy Red and, as we stood on the corner in front of the Windsor, who should come out of the emergency exit than the two girls.

With a whoop, Billy Red had stepped up to the blonde and took her arm. The dark one turned and looked in fright at Billy. I saw in profile whom I'd been kissing and fondling in the back seats of the Windsor. Despite the mussed up lipstick and long, ruffled dark hair, I knew well I was looking at the face of Arturo Mommalia. Grease gave me a sideways look from under thin, feminized brows, just like my own these days. I could tell by the expression on his girl-ish face that he knew that I knew who he was.

The fear of exposure in Grease's face was an expression I've never forgotten. Grease looked utterly distraught, I'd thought, at being exposed to an old friend for what he was, and for what he had been doing with old friends. I don't know why but I felt suddenly sorry for him.

I rarely showed sympathy for anyone at that time but I did then. I stepped up to Grease, slipped my arm into his and talked in as normal a way as I could if he'd really been a girl named Donna. I tried not to let on in any way that I knew who Donna was. I didn't know why I did it afterwards. Grease and I had never really been close.

The girls had an apartment on Jefferson Avenue, another backwater between Redpath and the Row. Susan was eager for us all to go back there but Donna was reluctant. In the end, we split up. Billy

Red and Susan, hand-in-hand, went off to the Jefferson apartment. I took Donna to the Spyglass Tavern, where they didn't care at all about the age of customers, only if you had money.

We talked about nothing. I was surprised how feminine Donna was even though she wouldn't look me in the eye. She repaired her makeup with long, red-tipped fingers and then said she had to go to work, to a real job, or so she said. I walked her out onto Redpath. We stood there awkwardly for a moment.

"Thanks, Sprat," she said suddenly, turning and looking at me with bright, shining eyes. Donna threw her arms about my neck and gave me a whole-hearted, passionate kiss. She had used my gang nickname. "Thanks for being kind. Maybe we'll meet again." She trembled as she kissed me on the cheek. She went off quickly, her walk graceful and female, or so I thought at the time, her high heels clicking. I almost went after her. She did look back from the corner of Spellman. Perhaps she wanted me to go after her. But I didn't and I never saw her again.

Billy Red met me an hour later outside the Spyglass, cursing and swearing. Susan, it seemed, had turned out to be nothing more than a frigging drag queen. Billy claimed he was still revolted by the heavy petting he'd gotten into with Susan. They'd gone pretty far by what he said. He'd been thoroughly aroused.

I saw then that Billy's knuckles were skinned and smeared with blood. He grinned and said he'd taught the luckless Susan not to play tricks on straight guys like us. "You were lucky that Donna didn't take you home," he growled. "I bet she was a queen, too. If I see her again, I'll take care of her, too."

I didn't tell him about Donna. I hoped at the time I'd see 'her' again first. Billy Red and I went into the Spyglass, since incorporated into the Hilo Club, and

blew all the money we had in one glorious drunk. Or so I remembered it.

Geraldine came back with our wine, handing off the glasses with a daintiness that caricatured overly feminine and fussy women. Her mannerisms still reminded me of Donna and thinking of that distracted me from what the others were saying. I told myself to wake up and found Raquel's eyes on me, studying me wryly.

"Darling," said the blonde queen who had been at the table earlier. "Guess who I saw today? Angela! And she is still married! Can you believe it?"

Raquel and Desiree exchanged glances, saying nothing. The blonde squirmed in her short, sequined dress. "Oops," she said huskily, her pink mouth smiling nervously. "What did I say that was wrong, darlings?"

Desiree smiled too and took a drag from her cigarette. "It isn't healthy, Shirley dear," she said in a syrupy voice, "to speak loosely of any of our friends, especially, in front of someone you've only just met."

The blonde suddenly gave me closer look, taking in that I wasn't in a dress and that I wasn't shaped like a woman, even though my face told her I was a queen, or at least I hoped it did. Oh, what a weird, dumb thing to say to myself. I didn't want, ever, to be thought of as a queen, did I? She said nothing more then but she did get up and invite some young men to join us.

I'd seen boys like the ones invited over, before. They'd swear that they weren't gay but were male hustlers. They hung out with queens but would say that the queens hung out with them. I know that some queens praised them and did whatever the boys wanted, treating them as if they were their boyfriends, though the hustlers actually treated them like dirt.



Shirley acted like a teenaged girl in heat when the boys came over and was soon draped over a shorter boy on the dance floor. Desiree and Raquel were cooler. I was surprised how warily the boys treated them. When Raquel stood up suddenly and wanted to dance, a tall dark-haired boy went with her right away and held her and caressed her familiarly while she seemed to purr in his arms.

Desiree ordered Greg to dance with me. I tried to resist but she smiled at me from heavily made-up eyes. I guessed that it was a test. So I danced with a man who held me as if I was a woman, his arm about my waist, pressing me tight to him.

“You look pretty real,” Greg said as I swayed in his arms, my colour surely high beneath my makeup. “Why aren’t you in a dress? I like my girls to wear dresses.”

“I’ll bear that in mind,” I said as he turned me. I tried to behave as I saw the other ‘women’ and ‘girls’ about me behaving. Luckily very few paid me any attention as if it wasn’t odd to see a man like me, in makeup, dancing with a man like Greg.

The music turned to rock and roll. Greg began to twirl me as if I was a girl. I had often twirled girls on the dance floor, with difficulty at times because I was so short. Greg had no problem moving me but I felt ridiculous, humiliated, to be made to spin so often, to have his hands about me, on my tush, directing me where to go.

He ended up with his arm about my waist. “You dance good,” he said with a leer at me. “But you do need to loosen up. It shouldn’t be so hard to swing you.” I wanted to take a swing at him right then. I’d enjoy it when I busted him at the end of this assignment.

I took his arm from my hip and headed back to our table. But then I had to dance with Kenny, with all the boys in fact, in turn. I could feel Desiree’s eyes on

me, particularly when she danced too, her head on Greg's shoulder. He looked nervous when she kissed his cheek but he kissed her nervously, I thought, on her beautifully outlined lips.

In the slow dances, Kenny and Tim wanted me to lay my head on their shoulders or put my arms about their necks. I joked that I didn't know them that well but it didn't help. I would have had to fight Tim right there if I hadn't let him put my arms about his neck. I had to let his hands stray down the small of my back, onto my white pants and hips, pulling me tight to him, as I'd so often danced with girls before.

Dancing like that with him, I felt totally humiliated. I had to close my eyes and lay my head on his chest and shoulder so I didn't have to see how others looked at me, a queen dancing with 'her' man. And yes, just like Desiree had started our group doing, I had to kiss Tim, yes on the lips, and pretend I liked another man getting off on my soft, receptive mouth. Ooo, it really was weird, particularly how I felt. It really wasn't that bad at all.

I did get to sit at last with Tim's arm draped possessively over my shoulder, wondering what I was doing in this bar with these guys. Tim wanted to kiss me more and so did the other boys now who suddenly all wanted to dance with me. Oh, the shudders that ran through me as each first kissing session began. I should be busting these deviates, not letting them touch me with their lips. I wanted to leave. I thought I would when Desiree suddenly spoke sharply to Shirley and the boys she'd brought to us.

"Darlings," she said. "It's time to go to Shirley's pad. She has a selection of whatever you need there, don't you, dear? You'll take care of every need these gorgeous boys have, won't you, darling?"

Shirley was all over Kenny as it was. She was delighted to be off in the company of four studs, as she called them, not even objecting to Kenny's hand on her backside as she sashayed off obediently with her

retinue, giggling and hanging on to Kenny's and Tim's arms.

"Not you, Alice dearest," said Desiree when I stood up to go too. A soft hand closed over mine, the extra long fingernails digging into my palms. "One of our close friends is here to talk to you. And here she is."

Desiree had indicated across the dance floor where a wooden railing separated the floor from a series of doors. Out of one came two women and the little man who had spoken to Desiree earlier. To the platinum-haired woman, he was indicating the table where I sat with Desiree and Raquel.

The woman, I was sure she was from the word go, swept over imperiously to our table. Raquel immediately vacated her spot so that the woman could sit opposite me. Despite her platinum hair, so shiny that it had to be from a bottle, I thought, she was a strikingly attractive woman with a haughty, almost patrician air about her. I think she knew she was slumming to be associating with the likes of us.

She was very conservatively dressed in a grey suit but her soft, dark grey silk blouse was exquisite. Her string of pearls looked to be genuine. I was sure they were. She laid a long, black purse on the table, took off her black kid gloves slowly, and studied me. She laid her gloves on top of her purse. I wished I wasn't as made-up as I was. I wished I hadn't backcombed my hair or put on earrings and perfume. I wished I was really a man. I would die to have her look at me like that if I were dressed as a man.

Her violet eyes appraised me carefully and coolly. I felt so awkward and gauche under that stare from that perfect china-skin face. Who did I, as a queen, think I was trying to emulate? I could never do it, never be a real woman like her. It was one thing to try to hide behind the queen's mask too but I sensed that this woman wanted to know who I really was. I nearly blurted it out to her right there, anything to make a good impression on her.

She turned her beautiful head and spoke quietly to the dark-haired woman who had followed her. “Angela,” she said. “I have business to attend to here. Why don’t you be a good girl and go play with some of your friends?”

Angela pouted and moved off gracefully. “I’ll powder my nose then,” she said softly. I understood immediately that she was speaking in code. Another entry for my list of offences, I thought, as Angela went like a queen through the throng, stopping here and there to greet her subjects. Nothing in the way that she moved, dressed or talked to give away that she was not a real woman. It was only Shirley’s words from earlier that came back to me about Angela being back in town and married to a woman still, that suggested that anything might be different from what it appeared.

I shifted my attention back to the platinum-haired woman who was smiling at me, her perfect teeth revealing a perfect smile. “You’re very astute,” she said in the same quiet voice. “Angela usually fools everyone, until she gets them into bed, of course. But she does have my help.”

I think I grimaced which made her smile even more broadly.

“Angela is my husband,” she said softly. If she expected that to stun me, she must have been surprised at my reaction. A smile tugged at the corner of her pinkly painted mouth. “How much does she know?” she asked Desiree.

Desiree gave a small shrug, an oddly mannish gesture with her female appearance. “Nothing as far as I know,” she said. “Shirley Rae started talking while Alice was sitting here, but I cut her off. You said you wanted a cool one who doesn’t use. As you can see, Alice fits the bill.”

I didn’t open my mouth, couldn’t. I knew I was getting into something that was going to lead to some-

where deep in Knightsbridge. I hoped it meant the Bent Organization and that this masquerade would soon be over. I didn't want to have to dance with Tim or Kenny again.

The blonde woman was looking at me very directly. One thin eyebrow curved up attractively. "Well, Alice darling," she said, a lilt of amusement in her voice. "Don't you have anything to say for yourself? Don't you wish to know who I am and what I want from you?"

I thought I knew but I didn't want to blow it. "I suppose so," I murmured in my highest queen's voice. "But I guess you'll tell me if you want to and in your own good time."

The woman smiled again but her attention suddenly wandered past me to the tables of drinkers. Angela suddenly moved past us hanging on to a tall, well-muscled man and led him onto the dance floor where she began to dance a very tight lambada with him. I knew the guy, Spanish, the police called him, and as queer as they come. Anger crossed the blonde's face, though I didn't know why. Angela wouldn't have been Spanish's type. He wasn't into anything womanly.

"Raquel," she snapped, her mouth now thinner and spoiling some of her looks. "Go and tell Angela that Mama is watching."

Raquel got up from her chair and left, her sashay almost gone in her haste to apprehend Angela. The blonde's attention came back to me. She spoke almost apologetically. "Angela knows I don't like her associating with that kind of person," she said, and then smiled openly. "No matter how well they dance the lambada. Much too unstable. Gossipy."

I saw Angela suddenly leaving the dance floor with Raquel beside her. She looked very angry as she headed to the bar where two young whores instantly made room for them.

“People in this area call me Gina,” said the blonde woman. I tried to keep my made-up face stiff so that she wouldn’t see I’d already guessed it was her.

Gina waited to talk further while Geraldine prettily served her with a small glass of liqueur. She smiled encouragingly at him and was rewarded with a pout and girlish flounce as Geraldine minced away. “Nice legs,” she commented before taking a sip of her drink.

Desiree gave a low, erotic laugh quite out of keeping with the feminine image she wished to project. Gina looked at her in further amusement and then came back to me.

“I’m a recruiter, Alice,” Gina said more briskly. I was so happy to hear it. I’d contacted the Bent Organization at last, I was sure of it. What made it even better was that they had reached out and contacted me.

“Everything I hear about you is good,” Gina went on, now studying me for the impact of her words. “I have a job for you, a well-paying job, if you are prepared to do exactly as I tell you. Not many men like to take orders from a woman, not one who’ll keep you under her thumb as I will. Can you take a job like that, Alice?”

Her tongue rested on the upper lip of her partly opened mouth as she stared at me, awaiting my reply. Her look made the blood beat faster in my veins. Gina must surely have seen the flush on my skin and known how she attracted me. I was not supposed to be attracted to women!

I swallowed and spread my hands wide, my slender, feminized hands on the table before me, the nail polish gleaming in the light. I tried a small shrug as she frowned.

“You won’t like it here, not working for me,” Gina said returning to her calm, quiet voice.

“The beating today was a warning?” I squeaked, hardly able to get words out to talk to someone as beautiful as her.

“Necessary,” Gina said, a smile on her lips.

“I could move on,” I said. I didn’t have to fake my nervousness. “If a gang war is erupting, it’s best not to get caught up in it.”

“You wouldn’t,” Gina said quickly. “Actually, yesterday afternoon was a mistake. It won’t happen again. Take my word for that. Desiree says that you’re smart and ready to move up to some real action. We can use a smart queen.” She smiled. “You look the type to know what an oxymoron is. A smart queen is a fine example.”

She looked at Desiree. “You know where Alice lives?” At Desiree’s nod, and a re-shake of her long hair, she smiled at me. “Come with Desiree tomorrow to the Bagman’s. Dee knows where that is. If you want to make some real money, that is. Now, I have other things I have to do tonight.”

Gina rose and swept away from the table without a backward glance. She put her arm on Angela’s as the brunette waited for her at the wooden railing, pouting and looking like she wanted an argument. Gina propelled her forward on her impossibly high-heeled shoes, however. Her hand rested on Angela’s backside for a moment and the dark-haired queen shot forward as if she had been assaulted. I guess she knew what was to come.

“Well, darling,” drawled Desiree, signalling to a man who had been watching us from the bar. “It looks like you are now one of us.”

I’d played this part over in my mind many times, wondering how it would be if I was actually taken in by the mob. I thought I’d have to guard against the strong elation I would feel. It was nothing like that, though, now. All I felt was tiredness and depression.

“Yes, Desiree,” I said. “Look. I’m going to split. I don’t know if I’m sickening for something or not but my head feels thick.”

I saw Desiree pull away instinctively even before the guy joined her and treated her as if he thought she was real. Most queens are hypochondriacs in this day and age, I’ve found out, very careful about the spread of anything contagious. They disappeared in an instant if they thought you were sick. Desiree only put up token resistance to my leaving.

Lo and behold, as I was being ushered out by a bouncer who towered over me and regarded me most intently, who should come in but Diane, the queen I’d mentioned to Eddy Westham. She’d been on a trip. She was followed by a line that must have been show-girls of both sexes, a whole raft of men, and some obvious queens. She didn’t even notice me but swept over to Desiree. The two hugged and kissed in welcome and immediately began to head into one of the inner rooms for what I was sure would be an extended party. If I had stayed, what loose talk and rumours I could have picked up!

One of the stragglers, an older man who looked like old Doctor James, Sue’s family’s doctor whom I had gone to for cold remedies, grabbed my arm and tried to usher me after the others. “Come on, sweetie,” he said, his tongue almost hanging out. He shook a pocket that rattled. “Don’t you want to party?”

“She doesn’t,” said the bouncer, disengaging the man’s arm. “She’s going home.”

“Home?” giggled the older man. I could see that he was lit up on something. “But it’s not midnight yet, is it? The night is young!” He went strutting away after the line of very pretty girls whom I was sure were from the drag revue at *Madame George’s*, an upscale drag club, if there can be such a thing. He didn’t give me another look.

I looked up at the bouncer. He looked back stolidly at me. It was too late to change my mind. I smiled at him. As I walked away out of the door, he goosed me.

I turned back, appalled. "Come in a dress next time," he said with a grin on his face, "And I'll be sure to get some time off. Show you where I live."

"Can't wait," I said bitterly, rubbing my hurting backside, imagining the big oaf in handcuffs for assaulting a police officer. He was laughing heartily as he closed the big reinforced doors.

I got back to Lester Street with no problem. I saw what I was sure was a team of muggers looking for a mark but they just took one look at me and ignored me, a queen not even in girlie clothes. As I lay on the old, padded mattress in my room, I replayed the words in my head that Gina had used about Jimmy Stick and his boys.

Could Gina possibly have the clout to reprimand the Stick? I'd never heard of the Bent Organization having street muscle. Were they branching out? Was it just the old group under new management, for certain? I didn't understand, either, what had happened to Campari, the supposed boss of this area. Gina's words seemed to confirm what Ellie Rags had told me. Campari must be out. This wasn't a gang war in Knightsbridge. This was the winner, taking stock, maximizing profits.

## **\*\*\*\*\*VII. TIMEOUT\*\*\*\*\***

At first, Corona's interrogation had shown that the questioners had thought Gilberto Corona's description of Johnny Bent and the Bent Organization was nothing but a fantasy. That there was a mob figure named Johnny Bent was known. That he was involved in some kind of courier system for the gangs was also known. That this Organization was superior to other means of moving mob money and goods was not known.

Then the evidence began to come in from a careful sifting of past tapings. There was the infamous Chicago-St Louis tape. Before that, a capo in New York grumbled about Parazzino's death. A man should always have an heir ready, one capo pronounced, one who'd know enough to be able to carry on a going business.

Corona laughed when he heard the tape. "That just wasn't Johnny Bent's way," he said. "He kept his secrets better than any closet queen."

"Isn't it just too incredible," asked his straight-laced interrogator, "to believe that some of the greatest criminal minds in America depended on a bunch of drag queens, transvestites and degenerates to transport important materials to the mobs of different cities? You want us to believe such a fiction."

Corona had broken into a gale of laughter. "Of course," he said. "It's ironic and so stupid when you put it like that. But you haven't really understood it at all if that's the way you think. You still can't believe that a queen caught with a package of drugs or a huge wad of money is mob-connected, can you? Or some poor old doctor who just happened to be caught with more drugs on him than he should have?"

"Well, why haven't we caught some of them?" the questioner asked the still smiling Corona.

"You have," Corona guffawed. "You've caught one or two of Johnny's specials over the years. Of course, you never knew they were connected. Johnny made sure they all made bail and then, naturally, they disappeared. You got your witness protection service, don't you? Well, Jack ran one, too. Actually, it wasn't very profitable when he did it, for other mobs.

"The guys he hid would just start up again as wise guys and get into trouble again as they had before. He said he kept it going for the protection of the messengers, as he called them. An insurance policy. They

knew they might be embarrassed a bit if they were caught but they also knew Johnny would come and get them away, sooner or later.

“You also don’t seem to understand that Jack used all kinds of people in his Club, prostitutes, lesbians, drag queens, anyone with a kink. But he always said that transvestites were the best, the ones you could rely on. And if you think about it for five minutes, you can guess why.”

Corona began to check points off on his fingers in imitation of Johnny Bent but the questioners did not know that. “They were better educated, you know, degrees and stuff,” the gangster went on persuasively, “and a lot of them were married. You wouldn’t believe how many if I told you. They were more scared of being found out that they liked to dress as women than they did of being found to be drug smugglers.”

Corona shook his head. “It would have been cheaper if it was the other way round in bail money,” he sighed. “But Johnny just said it was an expense of doing business and we really didn’t have that many stopped, considering how much we were moving these last few years.”

“We need some evidence of all this,” said the still skeptical interrogator.

“I’m better on dates,” Corona said. “I can tell you when things went wrong. I knew that. And when we had to pay out. But Jack kept identities to himself. You’ll just have to try to match what I tell you to court records, if you can. I tell you it will be a thankless task. I don’t think you can catch anyone that way. You’re better off to infiltrate now if you can. While things are a mess and while they’re starting to recruit again.”

The police were also doubtful about the need for such an Organization. “It’s cash flow,” said Corona, shaking his head at their disbelief. “There was always actual cash that had to be moved for payoffs and

laundering, stuff like that. And Jack was real careful, you know. He wouldn't use messengers for real hard stuff, like drugs, if they were crying about doing it. He got them shifting money first, that's easy, and they worked their way in, wanting bigger cuts.

"You know why he stayed here? He said anyone who lived in Knightsbridge, or who was visiting it regularly, was criminal at heart. It was up to us, Tommy, Gina, Abby, Ron and me, to recruit right. He said you can't ask someone to do something they absolutely couldn't or wouldn't do.

"I never did any recruiting anyway. Not after Gina really messed up a couple of straight TVs, getting 'em to play girlie games with a couple of queer big shots from the East. She had 'em real scared, in her pocket, ready to do anything she told 'em but Jack wouldn't let her use 'em, or the real queers, after he found out. Said that they hated her too much. Said they'd find a way to drop the job to the cops and get out themselves. Couldn't trust 'em, not after what she put 'em through.

"That was a year before he died, by the way, that he brought Gina up. Abby wanted out, wanted to retire to Vegas, wanted to see panties on women, not men, she told me. Jack tried to set Gina up as recruiter, showed her how to set up the game. But she was too heavy-handed. Had to be, considering her old man. She blamed me, of course, for Johnny being mad. Said I shoulda spoken up for her. Soothed the old guy down.

"Couldn't do it, though. Johnny'd made up his mind to dump her, I think. Then he dies. The Big C got him. Nobody had his contacts. The thing just fell apart. The gangs all went their own ways. You see what happened. They had to get it started up again. I told Don Maurizio I could do it. He says work it out with Tommy. Tommy didn't want me; and here I am, ratting him out."

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By daybreak, I couldn't stand my unheated room any longer. I was tired and shivering. I found my jeans, a t-shirt, my heavy jacket, a pair of socks, my runners, and dressed before I got out of there. My hair was a frightful mess, not feminine at all, but I didn't have time to primp and backcomb it. I wanted to pass on the contact I'd made before Desiree came looking for me again. Surely, she'd be sleeping off last night's party past dawn somewhere.

My fingers were so cold that I could hardly press the comb through my hair. The brush flattened my blonde-streaked hair, which lay lank around my face. I'd washed off my face makeup and creamed myself the night before as all women and queens were supposed to.

My eyebrows were awful, definitely feminine. My eyelids still showed traces of eyeliner with mascara on the lashes. I was a sight. Not a girl but definitely not the regular guy who should be looking back at me from my mirror. I tried to wipe some of the indelible lines off, becoming aware then of my brightly polished and manicured fingernails.

Inwardly groaning at all the details I'd have to attend to when I got out of Knightsbridge, I turned up my collar and left the house furtively. There were few people on the street. I hurried along, noting that Caroline and Britney were still in the same doorway on the Avenue, still in the same leather miniskirts. They had someone with them, a mark by the way he was fondling Caroline's stockinged thighs. I waved as Britney turned to me, yawning as well, as she waved back.

I'd hoped to be unnoticed but that, it seemed, was impossible in Knightsbridge, where I was resident. I went up the Avenue, crossed and cut through a couple of back alleys I knew, deserted as I'd hoped. I was into the home area of the whores who'd have beaten

me, or tried to, if they'd seen me 'working' their area. But the cold had driven them inside. I came out on Jackson Row. I had to look for a particular house. I spied the number over a garish poster for a rock concert and went past until I found the tunnel that led into the back of the huge tenement houses. I counted back carefully and so found the back entrance to the right house.

I went up the two sets of iron steps until I came to the thin wooden door. It couldn't hold me out, not even with cold hands. I carefully locked the door behind me again, nothing stirring in the rubbishy backyard of the building. There were nameplates at the front and mailboxes. A pencilled card said that 'Walker' was in Number Three. I set out to find it, creeping along bad-smelling hallways that would have made toilets pleasant places to visit.

Three was written largely in black pen on the doorway that I knocked on lightly and apologetically. I felt someone looking at me through the spyglass on the door and then it was flung open. I was met by a blast of warm air from a large, portable oil heater in the centre of the apartment. A cover on the bed was thrown back. Annie Phelan had always said she was a light sleeper. I was really glad to see her, and didn't really know why I was glad. Was I because it was evident only one person had slept in her bed?

"What are you doing here so soon?" Annie asked, frowning. "Didn't Eddy tell you I'd contact you first?"

"He didn't have time," I said, kneeling down beside the wonderful heater. I told her briefly what had happened between Eddy and me and how I had snagged his money roll, which made her laugh.

Annie Phelan was an undercover like me but I thought her job was much more dangerous. She posed as a prostitute. We all knew how often girls like her were assaulted or found dead someplace. But she was careful. Her johns were cops, or friends thereof, she'd said to me. They helped her build her cover.

She was good enough that I'd heard she'd used the 'Walker' cover for over a year. I'd known exactly where to find her because she'd told me, over a drink with my squad, one night. If I went undercover, she'd joked, she'd be there to back me up.

So here I was, more than a little embarrassed at the way I looked and what she thought of me. She'd sat on the floor opposite me as I talked. She took one of my hands in hers.

"Boy," she said sympathetically, examining my nails, with a thoughtful air. "Are you ever cold? Don't you have heat on Lester?"

I shook my hair, realizing how funny it must look with the blonde streaks. She was still holding my hand, even stroking it. "Not just that," I said. "I've been contacted by the Bent Organization." My voice trembled as I said it. I began to realize just what it was going to mean if I went in with them even for just a little while.

"Not now," she said firmly. "Breakfast. Coffee's on. I'm starving for bacon and eggs. How about you?"

"I'm on a diet," I said. She smiled at me. Annie was quite plain and ordinary but when she smiled her face lit up. I had to smile too at the ridiculousness of me being on a diet to be femininely thin.

"It's been a long time," Annie smiled more at me, "since I had a man to share breakfast with."

I felt warm all the way through. How Annie Phelan could say that to me, with my hair femininely long the way it was and my face partly made-up as it was, I didn't know, but I was glad for it. A little while later, warm coffee in hand, fed until I could eat no more, I felt human, no, I must confess, I felt manly again, despite the touch of my earrings on my neck, thanks to Annie and the demure, encouraging smiles she'd given me. The gloom that had descended on me ever since Gina Freeman, one of Jack Bent's principal lieutenants, had made me an offer I wasn't supposed



to refuse, dispelled as I relaxed in Annie's easy chair. She did the dishes, refusing my every offer to help.

"Annie," I sighed, closing my eyes. "You don't know how much of a godsend this break is."

I heard Annie laugh. "I can guess," she said. "There are days when I'm ready to quit this whole frigging mess. Believe me. I know how you feel. If it wasn't that what we do is really useful, and the only way to clean up this garbage, well!"

I opened my eyes as her voice trailed off. She was looking out of the back window. Her chores were finished but Annie seemed rooted to the spot.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"Just thought I saw someone," she said. "A woman out back. It's usually the teen boys who have that territory. Anyway, she's gone now. Hope she's all right."

Annie went and sat on her bed, gathering her robe about her, putting her feet beneath the covers of her bed. "Now," she said. "Tell me what brought you to my bed on this cold morning." She opened the cover. The invitation was plain.

I hesitated only a little, thinking of Sue. Then all I could remember was the hatred in Sue's face for my appearance, her poisonous words, telling me not to come back until I could make love like a man again.

Annie snuggled up to me and began to kiss my neck. She loved my earrings, she said. She was a sucker for a man with long hair. I began my report to her unsteadily about what had happened since I'd left Eddy Westham in the Bellamy. I don't know how much she heard because she soon had me out of my clothes, beneath the sheets. We made love and it was wonderful. I'd never felt so good since Sue and I were first married. In fact, I don't think I felt so good then.

“So what does it all mean?” asked Annie, sleepy, cuddling up to me in our warm bed, as naked as I was.

“I’m sure the Bent Organization has been revived,” I said, caressing her generous breasts. “There’s some kind of deal with Jimmy Stick, probably for girls to set up blackmail schemes ...”

“Or to pay off as Bent used to, with favours,” Annie put in, squirming under my touches.

“With Corona and Ron Louis out of action, Tommy Black has to start from scratch unless Bent left a list, a power package somewhere,” I murmured as she began to arouse me, too. “I don’t think so, the way Gina was acting and talking. Has anyone seen Campari lately, either? It seems to me Tommy has carte blanche to resurrect Bent. He’s using Freeman, Stick and the Hilo for recruiting. Desiree is a spotter on the queen side. And Raquel.”

Annie wanted it again. Somewhere in the middle, she said, “You’re right about Jimmy. He’s definitely top man on the block. He’s dividing his herd. Snake and Jojo are pimping for him. Snake made me an offer.”

When we were done, I had to let her know how much her words chilled me. It seemed to me it was going to be very dangerous for her out here for quite a while.

“Please watch it, Annie,” I said. “Those guys are pretty quick with a shiv, you know. Stick’s tried what, three times already, to bring the independent girls under his wing. Now, if he’s protected, it’s going to be much worse.”

Annie laughed at me. “How like a man!” she exclaimed, as I saw my long, painted nails against her pale skin and thought how my eyebrows and hair must look to her. “Who’s the rookie here, Howell? You just do your job, Charley, and we’ll put them all away for years.”

That worried me, too. I was really alarmed by the thought that I was being depended on solely to destroy a proficient criminal organization. I also had to think what sort of job Gina would have for me, thinking me to be a drag queen. I had a lot of fears I would have liked to talk over with Annie but I didn't get a chance as she sat up and prepared to dress.

"You know we'll only pull off a few arms from this octopus," I said wearily. "We're nowhere close to the top guys. And the arms will grow back in time."

"Not this time," said Annie drowsily. "This time, you're going to get them all. I know you will. You've got me to help you and show you what you have to do."

Only, showing me what to do was inevitable, I suppose. I think I said, "No, Annie, not that!" twenty times. But after all she'd done for me on that warm morning, how could I refuse her. Yes, I became a crossdresser for her.

When she laid out a roll of tape on the side of the bath she insisted I follow her in, I had to ask stupidly, "What's that for?"

"It's what girls like you use so that you can control your excitement," said a smirking Annie.

I struggled out of the bath. "I'm going to get into my clothes ..." I began, meaning the clothing I'd come to her apartment in that morning.

"Can't do that," said my already dressed contact, holding black panties and a black bra in her hands as I tried to dry myself. "No men's clothing allowed in here, darling Alice. I gave all your stuff to the super. That was who was at the door. I called him and he's taken your stuff down to the furnace."

"My ID, my money, my credit cards!" I yelled, heading rapidly out of the bathroom. There was a shoulder purse where my clothes had been draped.

“In your purse, Alice darling,” said my traitorous lover. “Don’t you think that this is a perfect time for us girls to get acquainted as I’ve been saying we should? Yes, darling, it’s the tape first, then some of my loveliest lingerie. With the money you stole from Eddie Westham, we girls are going to have the greatest time buying you your own stockings, pantyhose, panties, bras, underwear and high-heeled shoes, never mind a dress or two. I have some warm coats that will fit you beautifully, Alice. The sooner we get you started, the sooner we can get this investigation started, and the sooner we’ll finish!”

It was a fight, all morning long. But, in the end, what could I do? I couldn’t go out, naked, down her hallway, all the way back to my place. I’d have been attacked along the way, most likely while still in her place. I didn’t want to put her clothes on but she waited patiently for my rants to stop and moved in on me, pushing me down and putting on me what she wanted to.

I didn’t know how strong, how tricky, how trained Annie was in jiu jitsu or something. It took her a while and I was hurt a lot but I was taped between my legs. I did have panties on me. I did have a corset fastened to me, a bra, and I was padded! I was flipped over two chairs and was going for a third fall, when I tried to rip the bra off me and tell Annie to get lost.

But when she said this next toss would break my leg, I let her fasten ‘my’ bra, pad it and put a silky slip over my head. Yes, it was clear I’d be dressed as a woman, completely, this day, and that I had to do it. I tried screaming at Annie. I tried reasoning. I tried fighting back and was flipped again on my back, a smiling woman leaning over me. Needless to say, I was soon in a frilly, long-sleeved pink blouse and a straight, fairly tight skirt that a leggy woman would have worn.

Ooo, the way that I felt was indescribable. “You should have taken more self-defence classes, darling Alice,” purred my assailant. “At least, you’d have

learned how to fall and not rip your pretty panties as you have!”

Annie whipped them off me as I lay in my back but I had to put on even frillier, dark blue panties, with little hems that shivered against my legs, making me feel them all the time and shiver really badly as well.

“I bought this for you,” said my tormentor, caressing the skirt against me. “Cross your legs, Alice, as you sit in that chair. Oh, yes, that looks really good on you. You really look like an Alice and I haven’t done your makeup or brushed out your lovely hair yet!”

Needless to say, with many vented swear words from me, Alice completed the task she had been trying to ‘persuade’ me to do, for so long. I should never have gone to her apartment for warmth that morning. When I wobbled up on my feet in her high heels and looked at myself in her long mirror, I wasn’t me any more. I was this ‘girl,’ Alice. No, it wasn’t obvious that I was a queen at all.

I had to walk across the room in front of the long mirror, wiggling my tush as Annie made me do it, her hands on my tush. I’d come right up to the mirror and it was me, changing only when Annie had me sit, brushed my hair, and tied red ribbons to hold back my long braids or pigtails. Oh, and the earrings bouncing on my neck, my lips so shiny and red. She could make my eyes more vivid than I could.

I felt so absurd, the skirt preventing me from striding as I normally did, while Annie’s high-heeled shoes on my feet threatened to trip any time I moved. Worse was all the feelings that my body sent me, of a band across my chest, pushing up my chest muscles.

Oh, and my waist was gripped and belted in so tightly. Then there was the softness of a silky shirt, as I thought of it at first, and stockings against my legs. Then the skirt gripped me, rising over my knees, as I sat. The scrape of the stockings on my legs was

awful. A glance in the mirror, or downwards, showed me womanly legs that I admired occasionally on queens, but much more often on real girls. I felt my throat grabbing as I wanted to throw up. I was a girl, dressed and feeling like one.

Yes, I was a girl in the mirror. I didn't doubt that when we went out, and I was sure we were going to, no one around the neighbourhood was going to think I was a 'queen.' Even walking like a queen only made me appear more womanish. I seemed to forget that I'd practiced all the femmy movements that I made as I tried to tiptoe down Annie's hallway to go shopping with my girlfriend. No wonder Annie and Jeff Polanski had recruited me first for this investigation. I was clearly qualified for undercover work as a woman. No, I couldn't possibly stand being dressed like this, being a real drag queen all the time.

I thought that we'd go into some drag stores. The queens I knew always talked about *Jenny Penny's* and *Drag Sensations*, which had 'our' sizes, as Kate used to say, making Annie smile.

"Alice doesn't need a special shop," I remembered her saying to Kate. "She can buy off the peg at *Wills* or *Creative*. They were department stores in Knightsbridge, where you could buy anything from perfume to women's clothing as well as men's workwear and aftershave.

Annie seemed determined to demean me, even when the salesgirls called me 'Miss' all the time. "Oh, isn't that pretty, Alice," I heard, trying not to blush in front of all the girls' eyes on me. "Yes, she is going to try it on," she'd go on to some assistant. "We'll take an eight and a six and see which suits Alice best."

If putting on a skirt was terrible, putting on a dress was worse, particularly as Annie kept the door open and talked to the salesgirl about everything feminine as I changed. I had to model the dress for the girls as well, who added their comments about how it fitted

me. It seemed that everything looked good on me. I was a really adorable girl, wasn't I?

Oh, and I didn't have to worry about prices, not even with the dresses from the boutiques I was hauled into, not wanting to explode in male oaths at Annie. Not with so many girls gathering about me, sensing sales, I thought afterwards, as Annie paid with credit cards my supposed boyfriend had given her. He wanted me to be 'tarted up', she said, which made the salesgirls laugh and say that their boyfriends were the same.

We had to get a cab back to my rooms on Lester, the sky now dark. Annie wanted to make sure that I put all my new clothes away properly. Well, I could pawn them all, take the money and head south, I thought, to somewhere warmer. Though a sudden movement of my dress against me and I felt hot flushes coming onto me.

"I, I'm not going out like this!" I said to Annie, pulling the ribbons out of my hair.

"No," she agreed slowly, staring at me. "Did you see ...?"

"The queens following us around this afternoon?" I asked her. "I think it started at your place."

"Blast," said Annie. "Well, you get into some of your fighting or running gear, Alice. We'll braid your hair tightly. Look, I'll call up a cab from the Bellamy. I'll playact a bit that I'm waving to you at the door while you're slipping out your escape route. I know you'll have one or two. Get down on the Avenue and look for me in *Dweebs*."

"Tonight might be a night for a time-out, get a room across the line, on Polanski's credit card. Yuck, you don't look anywhere near as pretty as you were this afternoon, Alice darling. Look, you still need a little eyebrow pencilling and eyeliner and a little lipstick. Got to keep up appearances, my girl. And tomorrow we can go shopping in town proper. Still got

three, four thousand to bust from Polanski's card. There's a darling little black dress down in *Angelina's* on Presidents' Way. We can get one for you, and one for me. Really be sisters, can't we!"

\*\*\*\*\***VIII.GINA**\*\*\*\*\*

Two men were waiting for me as I slipped out of the narrow tunnel between the high houses, almost on the Avenue. I recognized them instantly as the guys who'd been in the Alleycat Club, Jimmy Stick's boys. I had an idea for a moment to turn and run back to my Lester Street room, for the gun I kept in the kitchen cupboard, behind the sugar container. I saw Desiree saunter suddenly from the front somewhere, wrapping herself tightly in a fur coat. I put away the idea of running and slunk forward.

"Well, if it isn't our old friend, Alice," said the short guy, smiling.

"Where've you been, darling?" asked the taller one, as if he didn't know. "Where are all the pretty clothes you were wearing and trying on this after noon? Spent a fortune, Raquel said. How can anyone make out the woman in you dressed like that?"

I almost gave it all away by punching out the guy but Desiree came to my rescue. "Leave her alone," she said. She looked at me through thickly painted eyes. "When you are given an order, you are supposed to obey it."

I pulled my jacket around myself and looked at her fur coat longingly. "I was cold," I said. "Trish," that was the name Annie used in her work, "has an oil heater. You didn't say when you'd contact me. I thought you'd still be sleeping this morning but I was heading back to the Hilo now to check out if anyone was looking for me."

“Bring her along,” Desiree ordered Jimmy’s boys, marching off in her high-heeled boots up onto the Avenue.

To my considerable astonishment, the muscle obeyed her, someone they clearly knew as a drag queen. I’d never seen anyone like them do that before.

The shorter one grabbed my arm with a show of great distaste. “Gina wants a word with you right now,” he snarled. “That lady’s one person you don’t keep waiting one second longer than necessary.”

The other one took my other arm. I was hustled up onto the Avenue where Desiree had got into some black luxurious car and driven off. I was hustled down the Block, surprisingly empty of people as if they knew something was up.

We crossed over and went down Adams, more tall buildings and rows of apartment houses but the fronts and steps were surprisingly clean and well-painted. This was the wealthier centre of Knightsbridge where the madams had lived in times past. I didn’t know it well. The brothels here had been very high class, or so I’d heard. Vittorio (Big Victor) Campari had had a place here, by reputation, for the members of the city council. There was your original Bent Organization. It was a pity Arturo Campari wasn’t like his old man, Corona had said. He had allowed infighting, laughed at it, instead of cracking heads as his old man used to do.

Suddenly, I was catapulted up the steps of Number One Hundred and Four. The door opened as Raquel was there to welcome me. “Ah,” she said in her low, throaty voice. “You’ve returned to us, Alice, from Wonderland, we hear. Thank you, boys.”

Raquel actually vamped the two strong arms She did a pout and pirouette in imitation of a model at the end of her walk down a runway. Over her shoulder, her heavily painted eyes were half-closed as she said

with great affectation from wet, shiny, reddened lips, “Why don’t you boys stay around after I’ve taken Alice in and we can get together?”

I thought the tough guys were going to shoot across the little foyer and attack Raquel, but she just threw back her long, brunette waves of hair and laughed at them in a deep-voiced chuckle.

Then, from up above, a female voice suddenly called down the stairs, “Raquel, what’s going on there? Haven’t Stick’s boys found Alice yet?”

“The darlings have just returned,” said Raquel, swinging her hips and letting her dark evening gown swish about her legs, smiling back at the frustrated expressions on the hoods’ faces. “Alice is here with them, although,” she grimaced at me, “she’s not as cute as we all thought she’d be after all the time she spent shopping today. She isn’t wearing anything that she bought!”

A shudder went through me. What had they been doing? Following me for a long time, it was clear. Were they trying to find out my contacts, seeing if they’d made the right choice of queen for whatever they wanted me for? Oh, for you-know-who’s sake, don’t let anything happen to Annie Phelan, the first person I’d headed for after leaving my rooms that morning.

The guards remained in the hallway, glowering and mutinous, I would have sworn, as Raquel indicated to me to go ahead of her up the carpeted stairway. It turned quickly out of sight of the hallway. The house was pleasantly warm. Central heating and a furnace that worked! Those were rarities in the Knightsbridge area where I had a room.

Raquel pushed me on across a wide carpeted landing, mirrors and paintings on the wallpapered walls, and into a large room, painted white with high, ornate ceilings. There was a grouping of divans and

chairs, all covered in what looked like red velvet in the white carpeted centre of the room.

On a low, glass-topped table, in front of a seated Gina Freeman, were stacks and stacks of dollar bills. They were arranged in bundles. Gina was pushing several together, making notes and putting them on top of the bundles, then doing it again.

Raquel pushed me onto one of the divans. I sat cross-legged, after hearing Annie's voice in my head, telling me to do that, perched on the end for a while as Gina finished her arranging. She finally looked at me and did a swift double-take.

"My god!" she exclaimed, tossing her pen onto the table. "Who the hell are you now?"

I smiled warily and couldn't think how best to answer that question. I thought it was best to be dumb, considering where I was and where I'd come from. I didn't want them beating on Annie to get information about me. I could see that happening real soon in my mind, worse for Annie if she tried her martial arts out on them. They'd shoot her for sure went through my mind.

"You look like a real man," Gina said bluntly, as if it was supposed to be an insult. "I thought you wanted to work for me. If you want to be a man," her lip curled, "you'd better try Jimmy. He's looking for a few good men. Are you any good as a man?"

I couldn't answer that out loud, either. Gina Freeman studied me as I tried to repress all the snappy answers I could have given her. This wasn't going well. I was going to get thrown out and part of me rejoiced. Her next words, though, dashed my premature rejoicing to be rid of makeup, hair curling and painting my nails.

"I had wanted to use you today with a friend of mine who likes blonde, cute bits of fluff. Little boys who act like Marilyn. But that isn't you, is it?" Gina asked, her voice calm and thoughtful. "For you ..."

Her words were cut off by the opening of a high door that led to the rooms at the back of the house on this floor. I could see the bed from the opened door and that the curtains were still drawn, the interior lamp-lit. Angela yawned and came forward, stretching in her loose, brown silk peignoir. It was the sort to be seen through on lovely women. I was shaken at what I saw.

Angela's body showed clearly, the body of a woman. She wore only a dark-brown or black bikini brief beneath the shimmering folds of the peignoir. She had shapely, rounded legs, curvaceous hips and a tiny waist. She also had large, feminine, pear-shaped breasts, down to which reached a tumbled mane of thick, dark hair.

She had high heel slippers on and went for a purse I hadn't noticed before on another sofa.

She was taking out a lipstick and eyeliner pencil even as Gina spoke sharply to her. "Angela," she said crossly. "You should stay out of here when I've business to deal with."

Angela's almost non-existent eyebrows pulled together in a frown before she turned, purse under her arm and sashayed out, not a glance in my direction. I thought she was one of the most stunning women I'd ever seen. Then I remembered that she wasn't a woman at all. She was Gina's husband. Gina had said it.

Gina was eyeing me critically as my eyes came back to her after watching Angela leave. "Why did you leave your place today?" she asked. "Why did you go and visit a whore?"

I was immediately frightened for Annie. I knew I'd have to give the performance of my life to this woman, make her believe me. "I was cold," I said in my breathiest voice.

“Cold?” she asked, astonished. I heard a snicker of disbelief from Raquel in the doorway. I’d thought she had gone away.

“Trish has an oil heater in her place,” I said, hugging my coat about me as if I was still out in the cold. “We made breakfast and got some sleep.”

“Trish Walker,” said Gina quietly. “One of the independents. Why not to a cafe? Why so butch a look now, after how gorgeous you looked out there today with your lady friend?”

I thought over the story Annie and I had agreed on just on the off-chance that someone would check why I was there with her. It was mighty thin. We should have spent more time with it. How could I know that I’d be quizzed on it so soon?

“I, er, she thinks I’m a night clerk,” I blurted it out. I let my natural nervousness in telling a lie take over. “I’ve been with her before, well, you know, she knows but she doesn’t mind what else I might do. Just so long as I’m straight with her, you know. She likes to think she’s in control. She threw away my clothes and so I had to go shopping with her, in hers, of course.”

Gina’s violet eyes were hooded. “You make it with the ladies, too,” she said coolly. “Well, we will have to put a stop to that, won’t we? Check it out,” she finished in an aside. I heard Raquel, I guess it was her, go swishing and clicking away.

Gina got up and came over and sat beside me. She made me swallow just to look at how beautiful she was with her fine blonde hair cut Harlow-style. She raised her thin, pointed chin and studied me, taking my hand in hers.

Gina smiled in amusement. “Doesn’t your girl friend mind you having beautiful hands?” she asked. “So slim and manicured so nicely. Better than hers, I imagine.”

I nodded miserably. “She doesn’t like them,” I had to say, trusting that Annie would remember the story we had concocted.

Gina frowned. “You did make it with her today?” she asked.

“Yes,” I agreed, feeling so embarrassed to admit to making love to a woman.

“Did she make you breakfast before or after?” Gina asked, her eyes glinting. I thought it was amusement. I hoped for both Annie’s and my sake that was what it was.

“Before,” I said.

She raised her eyebrows. But before Gina Freeman could quiz me more, there was a tap on the door behind me.

“Stay there,” Gina ordered. She got up and walked over to the door. There was a muffled conversation. I didn’t think it could concern me. Raquel couldn’t have a report back about Annie and me in such a short time.

I began to count the money piled on the table. If those piles all had the same denominations all the way down, there must be well over a million on the table just in front of me.

“Three and a half,” Gina said, coming back briskly and sitting down with a grace that made me feel I must be a carthorse if I tried to imitate someone like her. I didn’t, of course. I imitated other queens who were, after all, other men imitating women. None had the grace of a real woman like Gina. “You were counting the money, weren’t you? Three and a half million in total to be distributed.”

“I get a cut of what I distribute?” I asked as quietly and seriously as I could.

Gina relaxed back in her chair, looking quite delectable as she smiled. She shook her head. "No, I've something entirely different in mind for you," she said. I felt a lurch in my stomach. "I think I've made up my mind to go on with my original plan for you. So, you do not go back to that cold, cold room of yours. Nor do I want you performing on the street.

"Oh, you'll tell me you're clean no doubt," she went on. while I just wanted to get out of this room, get away anywhere, feeling so sick. as I could guess what Gina was going to say. "But our doctors will check you out anyway. You'll be going over to Michelle Bennett, one of my associate's. She'll train you for what I want, for what I know all you queens want, Alice my sweetie, even if you make it with girls from time to time. Yes," she smiled wickedly at me, stretching out languorously, "you are quite pretty, Alice. I think it only right that we make a woman out of you."

### **\*\*\*\*\*IX. MICHELLE BENNETT\*\*\*\*\***

SueAnn Howell could not believe the attention showered upon her. The squeaking wheel definitely got the grease, she thought cynically, as she stretched out in the first class seat of the flight to Paris. She'd been told so many times by the senior policemen who dropped by what a wonderful job her husband was doing.

The Department just had to show its appreciation by sending her on a wonderful vacation while her husband was away. Sue Howell wasn't fooled a bit. She knew she was being bought off. She grimaced to herself as she thought of Charley as she had last seen him. She deserved this for putting up with that.

After all, what normal woman would want to have a husband who was prettier than her, she thought, recalling how he had looked as he completed

backcombing his hair. And he'd actually had the nerve to try to kiss her then!

Charley hadn't had much makeup on but he had smelled like one of the girls in the cosmetics department of a big store. She smiled to herself and stretched again. Her mother was asleep beside her. She wondered how Charley would react to knowing that she was the one who got the extended trip to France and that Sue was the one to be getting all his bonus money.

At least, by the time Sue got back, Charley should be a man again, she judged. She looked over at the older man silently watching her from the seat opposite. She looked good in the new clothes she had bought at Bloomingdales, in the three days in New York she'd wangled, before she and Mama left on their trip.

There was no way she was going to wait for Charley to regain his masculinity, Sue thought, wishing she had taken some photos to hold over his head whenever he became obstreperous over money in future. She smiled encouragingly at the older man, his moustache a clear sign of his masculinity. His eyes sparkled at her as she wondered what it would be like to kiss a man with a moustache.

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Raquel and two different guards accompanied me out of the back of the Adams Avenue house. We went through such a maze of alleys and courtyards I was quite lost, a rarity for me. I think we ended up in a house or old hotel that would have fronted on Redpath.

Again, I was surprised at the sturdy, fresh painted door and clean glass in the curtained windows. There was no chance to break for it as Raquel unlocked the door, leading us into a world of fluorescent lighting, thick, soft carpeted hallways and painted, clean

walls. We stopped at a white door. Raquel tapped on it, opened it and gestured at me to enter, looking most smugly at me.

“Come in,” called an attractive contralto voice. I went in, dreading what I was going to be made to endure, half expecting a torture chamber, I think. Raquel shut the door behind me, shutting out the goons. I could take her, I thought, and certainly the other woman in the room.

The woman sat in front of a dressing table, as if she was preparing for a part on stage in a play. She was strikingly attractive. Her hair was auburn-tinted, loosely styled to sweep about the nape of her neck. Her makeup brought out the soft brownness of her eyes. Her thin, bobbed nose wrinkled as she smiled warmly at me, laughing, I could see, at my assessment of her.

“Good,” she laughed in her so musical, girlish voice. I could never have spoken like that in a million years. “You checked me out. That is what girls do when they meet. You’ve brought me an excellent candidate this time, Raquel.”

My face blazed with embarrassment. I’d only done what my policewoman teacher had drilled into me. “Do not look away,” she’d scolded me. “You are not a demure schoolgirl. You are a drag queen. You are imitating a woman. Women always look each other over. We have eye contact. Men don’t. Don’t be a man!”

The auburn-haired girl stood and extended her hand to me. “Hi,” she said cheerfully. She was standing in stocking feet but she was a little taller than me, thin and shapely nevertheless in a dark, green dress that hugged every female contour.

“I’m Michelle Bennett,” she said, her eyes twinkling with humour “Gina says you’re to be my new student.” She seemed to expect a response from me

but I was numb. There seemed to be no other way out of this windowless room than the door we'd come in.

"Oh, don't be glum," Michelle laughed merrily, her hand extending out to touch my arm again. "It's going to be so much fun to make a new woman out of you, you'll see." She pressed my hands warmly. I was astonished at how she was trying to make me feel good about myself. "Isn't that so, Raquel? Would you like to put on your little maid's dress today, darling, and help us?"

Raquel looked daggers at Michelle, turned with as much grace as she could manage in her long dress and heavy hair, and opened the door. I could see one of the heavies sitting on a chair opposite our room. My heart sank.

"Fetishist," said Michelle in a whisper after Raquel had left and closed the door. "Didn't think I could get rid of her that easily. Have you met her partner, Desiree? Peas in a pod, those two. Come on," she tugged on my hand eagerly and directed me to the chair in front of the mirror. "Let me do your face and hair for you. You'll be a hundred times the girl than those two queenies could ever be when I've finished with you."

Michelle giggled again, looking a little surprised when I didn't join in with great enthusiasm at the idea of being made-up to look like a gorgeous woman. "Can I call you Alice?" she asked as she came behind me and looked over my head at my so ordinary, well not so ordinary, rather odd in fact, unmade-up, male face as it appeared in the mirror. "I was told that was your name."

Michelle Bennett seemed anxious to get off on a good footing with me. I could only nod dumbly as her hand lightly caressed my cheek, sending strange feelings through me. She could feel my beard, I was sure, though I'd shaved as closely as I could, before I'd left Annie's. Hot water was also hard to obtain in my room.

“You don’t have a stubble,” she said in delight, not realizing, I think, what the touch of her hand was doing to me.

I had thought I’d learned a few tricks about making up from Annie and the women who’d coached me before but they knew nothing compared to Michelle Bennett. She chose and applied makeup to me from dark shading and light foundations without giving me a chance to object. Beautiful, curved eyebrows appeared above my eyes. I soon had the familiar feel of lipstick on my mouth.

In my nose was the aroma of scented face powder, and some musky perfume that I realized only after a short time was coming from me where she’d applied it. She chattered all the time about my lovely skin and fine features; how it wouldn’t take long at all with a little electrolysis, for me not to have to worry about my beard. Did I use chemical depilatories on my body or did I wax? She was against shaving anywhere and would rather bleach than do anything like shaving which left such a stubble.

Michelle had chosen a different colour scheme for me, a darker lipstick and darker eyebrow pencil. Without asking, she put false eyelashes on me, while I shuddered within, as she gaily delighted in how glamorous I was going to look. My eyes, with purple shades of eye shadow and white at my narrowed brows, were fantastic, so attractive and feminine. I shivered when she stopped for a moment.

My awe and agitation at my new look made her laugh at me. Michelle swept on with brushes and powders, applying rouges and powders to all of my face. “You were probably being too harsh on yourself before,” she said, smiling in pleasure at her handiwork. I was disturbed by how feminine I now looked in the mirror. “I shall teach you how to be softer.

“But this,” Michelle grimaced as she held up some of my hair in her comb. “There’s really not much I can do until you let it grow in the right places. Oh, I can

see you know how to backcomb and get a frizzy, curly look. That's good enough for a drag queen street look, but we want you to be a real woman, don't we?"

She took my answer for granted and began to tuck all my hair into a tight cap. "A wig is best for you now," Michelle said, beaming at me over my odd look, so feminized were my features by makeup. I still couldn't smile at her. She stared a little at my somber expression.

"What job do they have in mind for you over at the Hilo?" Michelle asked as she opened a closet and revealed rows and rows of female hairpieces. My stomach was playing up again as she selected a light, ash-blonde wig with heavy bangs and thick hair.

"Probably you'll be a quick change artist," Michelle said, frowning at me and the beautiful wig in her lovely hands. "Johnny used to start all of his new girls out doing that but the Pink has gone now. I don't know if Gina will put you into a show at all."

"Who's Johnny?" I asked as she put the hair on me. I could feel myself shivering all over as the hair covered my neck and ears. Michelle began to comb and tease it to my head, pinning it here and there. I couldn't believe that the girl I saw her working on was me. I blushed that I could be so feminine, despite my manly shirt and clothing, but luckily she didn't notice.

"Johnny Bent?" she asked. "You wouldn't remember him. He was one of the kindest men who ever lived. He set me up here, knowing what it was that I wanted to do. He was like that. He'd only have had to talk to you for five minutes and he'd have had you pouring out your life story to him. He'd have helped you in whatever you wanted to do and you'd have done anything for him."

Michelle stopped and looked at what she had done to me in the mirror. Two lovely women looked back at her and one of them was me. I felt panic but tried not

to show it as the girl who was me smiled, as Michelle told me to, showing such beautiful teeth. That was not me. 'She' had only a small resemblance to the real me. I was certain the shock could be read in my darkly fringed eyes.

"Yes, it's you, Alice," Michelle gushed happily. "You really have a beautiful face and your hands don't give you away, either. But I think we can change your colour"

Michelle opened up a manicure kit on the dressing table and began to work on my hands. She talked as she shaped my nails again, pointing them a little more. She cleaned off the polish I wore and then re-did them in a shade that matched my lipstick.

Her working gave me a moment to think as I watched her. Had I known all the time that such a scene as this might occur as a result of taking this job for Polanski? It won't come to that, Polanski had said. You'll have pointed the way. But wearing a dress wouldn't be that bad, he'd asked me, would it? If it got a part of the mob cleaned up, you could do it once.

Yes, I knew that a time like this would come. I sat there quietly in my heavy wig and perfect makeup, having my nails done, a woman. I thought I could stomach it before but that had just been in theory. Now it was excruciating to sit there and be treated by a woman, as if I was a girl friend of hers.

We were getting ready to go out on a date, Michelle mentioned, laughing at the frightened expression on my feminized face. She wouldn't tell me that was true, as she worked on me. I thought it was. A tide of panic swept through me and threatened to engulf me at any moment as Michelle laughingly had me sit there while she removed my shoes and socks. I couldn't move my hands until my nails were dry.

Michelle undid my belt. Trembling, I had to stand to slip off my pants. She studied me with the air of an

expert. I could have taken off but knew I wouldn't get anywhere with the gorilla outside the door. Then it occurred to me that I really was stuck. I had no way to contact Polanski at the moment.

When was I ever going to get out of this place? I gulped. I was really undercover now, deep undercover. When and how would I ever be able to get back to the surface, I thought frantically. My boss could never have considered that going undercover as a transvestite would lead to this, I knew that.

"Well," said Michelle, frowning most prettily. "You're in very good shape, for a man. But for a woman," she looked up at me and smiled, "we have a lot of lovely work to do. First, we'll get you a waist-cinch, even though they're horrible at times. I know you won't enjoy it. But we have to slim you down some more, Alice, and shape you more like me."

Michelle went back to what I thought had been just another cupboard closet and opened it. It led to another room, a room filled with dresses and shelves with items of women's underclothing. There were long racks of shoes, too. All high heels, I could see with rising apprehension.

"We converted the room next door into a permanent walk-in closet," chuckled Michelle, taking my arm and urging me to my feet. "Isn't it gorgeous? Look, there's everything we need. There's just the right corset for you."

She ushered me in. I was surrounded by female fineness everywhere. It was like being in the women's department in *Wills* with Annie again. Michelle took this corset from a package and put it about my waist, lacing it tightly enough that my breath was instantly taken away. Then she pulled it even tighter.

"I can't breathe," I gasped, feeling as if I was being cut in half. Michelle eased it a little.

“We women do have to suffer a little for our art,” Michelle giggled. “But don’t worry. We’ll have you on a diet and exercising. The Doc will give you something that will change your measurements pretty quickly, too. Won’t it be great when we can go out on the town together? I love shopping for new outfits. I hope you do, too.”

She was so encouraging, sounding so much like Alice, who’d said almost the last two sentences word-for-word as Michelle did. I suppose a drag queen would have loved to be in my shoes, if they were high-heeled, of course. Michelle delightedly found me the proper bra and the proper inserts. She looked at me in puzzlement at my cool reception at having my second bra that day fitted to my chest. She became a little more reserved as she noted my subdued feelings. She even seemed embarrassed as she had me don a small pair of briefs made of surprisingly tough elastic.

I had a really tough time to get them on. As I struggled with them, Michelle came over and showed me how to position my private parts in the cavities there to make them fit, presenting no male bulges in the front of me. It was painful. I groaned, not knowing how the dancing girls of the chorus, whom Michelle suggested I’d be joining soon, could possibly put up with this, day in and day out.

I put on pantyhose, frilled, white silk panties padded in the hips and rear, and a knee-length slip to cover my women’s underclothing. I was trembling everywhere by this time at the strange womanly emotions overcoming me. I could feel Michelle’s concern for me. In the mirror, however, a pretty girl in her underwear looked at me. It was me looking at myself. I shuddered. I couldn’t do this. I shouldn’t be doing this, I thought in panic.

I could feel little but the tugging of the waist-cinch on me although I couldn’t see it. I was scared by how much the padding gave shape to me.

“That slip changes everything, doesn’t it?” said Michelle, coming to stand beside me, a dress over her arm. “I thought you should start off with a midi-length dress, with long sleeves and a high neck. We’ll do all your body hair later, even though you’re nothing like Raquel or Desiree, you know. Actually, you don’t need the camouflage, but I didn’t know that when Gina phoned.”

The dark green dress was slipped over my head, pressing the hair about my face. Michelle adjusted the dress quickly and buttoned it in back. It fitted me tightly. My dress fitted my figure perfectly, a woman’s figure, with breasts, thin waist and curved hips. I felt the light, feathery touch of the dress on my stockings and could not avoid a shudder. This wasn’t right. I should not feel like this. I should not look like this. I should not have a dress about me.

“Here are the shoes for that dress,” said Michelle, giving me open-toed, green, high heels, women’s shoes. “I know all you queens love high heels. These are high but they should be no problem. I bet you’ve walked in higher heels before.”

I stumbled as I tried to slip into them. Michelle’s face turned to consternation while I was appalled at the soft swaying and touches of the dress on my stockings.

“Small steps!” Michelle said. “Wait!” She went searching for her own, put them on and came mincing back to me. “Like this,” she added, moving about naturally and femininely. I tried to do the same, threatening to collapse with every step.

“Have you ever worn high heels before?” asked Michelle accusingly. I nodded my head that I had and felt the swirl of hair at my neck. “In fact, have you ever worn women’s clothes from the skin out before?”

My expression must have confirmed what Michelle had been thinking. “Today,” I whispered, “with, with

a lady friend of mine. She, she wanted me to go shopping with her, as, as her girl friend, which I did.”

Michelle’s eyes widened and she began to laugh, really laugh, at me, at a man in a dress with fake boobs, in panties and a dress. How could I have hoped to fool her, that I was a real drag queen? Her laughter was so prolonged that tears began to flow from her eyes. I felt as completely ridiculous as I have ever felt in my life.

“I’m sorry,” Michelle gulped at last. “I’m so terribly sorry. It’s just that I was thinking how ironic it would be if you weren’t a queen at all. Wouldn’t that be hilarious!” I had to agree with her but I’d have said shaming and humiliating rather than ‘hilarious.’

“I mean,” Michelle went on, continuing to chuckle. “If you’re going through all of this just to please Gina, because she likes men in dresses, well, it will backfire on you if that’s what you think. Anyway, we can work on how to walk like a female right away and make you presentable as a woman.”

She smiled at me as I wobbled. “Earrings and a necklace,” she said. “You need some women’s finery, and bracelets. The feel of them will remind you that you’re a woman now. We’ll work on your voice; it will change. No one you knew before will know you when I’ve finished with you.”

Michelle clipped on long dangling earrings to my ears. I felt them each time I moved. Bracelets jangled and I shivered at the cold metal about my neck.

“Now we have to see Gina,” said Michelle, as she made me stroll with her arm-in-arm, making me walk with short steps. I put one high heel in front of the other and rolled my hips as she showed me to do. My dress swirled airily about me, making me feel so odd, so different, so submissive, somehow. I hurt everywhere but the long mirror showed only these two women walking together. I wanted to shut my eyes and not see ‘her,’ the woman that was me.

Michelle opened the outer door. The two guards stood up. The looks they gave me were ones of astonishment, and, I think, which was so frightening, admiration.

“It’s your lovely legs,” Michelle whispered in my ear as my heels made a staccato like hers, clicking femininely along the hallway. “We are quite a pair of glamour girls, aren’t we?”

I couldn’t laugh at her humour but I think I should have if I’d really was a queen. So I tried to smile while all the time my mind was screaming that I couldn’t do this, walk before others who knew that I wasn’t a girl, just a queen, in a dress, like a woman.

“Oh, you look so gorgeous when you smile,” enthused Michelle. “You can get any man you want if you smile at him like that.”

The guards followed us down a narrow passage, up some stairs to a door that led to a well-decorated receptionist area. Michelle’s hand steadied me, particularly on steps, and guided me to the door marked ‘Office’ without mishap. At Michelle’s knock, I recognized Gina’s call of “Come in”.

Gina looked up at me expectantly and began to smile expansively. I felt angry and wished I could hit her, handcuff her, make her pay for the humiliation I was suffering. “That’s very good, Michelle,” Gina said. She signalled to the guards to wait outside and close the door.

Michelle showed me how to sit in a ladylike way in a chair and I tried to sit like her, my legs crossing and making me feel so femmy as I had before. Gina smiled at us both. “Problem areas?” Gina asked.

Michelle frowned. “Time,” she said. “We’ve a lot of areas to work on if you want Alice to go out in the real world as a woman. I’d guess that was your plan. She should be with me for several months. It’s going to take a some, maybe a lot, of figure-training. She’s really hurting in the corset I had her wear.”

“Well,” said Gina, thinking hard. “You can have for a month, at least. Let the Doc know that he can use whatever shortcuts are necessary to have her ready for then. Keep the guards. I don’t want her disappearing on us. The job I have her lined up for is a very special payoff. You’ll have to work quickly to have her ready.”

Gina looked at me and smiled. I felt my stomach lurch. I was a special payoff to someone who liked queens, or was it girls, like me? I had to find a way out of this mess I was in. “She is very cute, isn’t she, with her hair like that? We should have her grow her own hair and have it styled like that for when she comes back. Oh, and about the name Alice. Forget that, Michelle. In future, our girl is Denise Gordon, a real woman. Make her get used to it. The Doc has his records set up already under that name.”

I felt numb as I tried to get up with half the grace Michelle had used. A real woman? I didn’t want to be a real woman. I could object to that, couldn’t I? Gina leered at me as I smoothed my dress trying not to let her see that I was wearing female underclothes. But she knew anyway. I felt the dress sway, smelled my own perfume and felt the brush of my heavy earrings on my neck.

Oh no, I thought angrily. I am not going to be a woman. I don’t want to be a woman! I swayed in my high heels, and my dress, my dress swirled lightly about me and the new guards again looked at me as men look at women, I realized. I would find a way out soon, I vowed, and have the greatest pleasure in busting both of them in the chops, once for every leer they were giving me now.

I thought those sessions were tough. Doc Medway’s were worse.

\*\*\*\*\* *End of Part One* \*\*\*\*\*