

**A KIND
OF
JUSTICE**

Also by Renee James

Transition to Murder

For Review Purposes Only
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A KIND OF JUSTICE

A NOVEL

RENEE JAMES

 **Oceanview Publishing**
Longboat Key, Florida

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*Dedicated to Katie Thomas,
friend, mentor, role model*

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1

THURSDAY, JUNE 12, 2008

PEOPLE MILL AND mingle and bathe in Chicago's moment of late-spring perfection, a last touch of Eden before the heat of summer sets in, a sun-drenched, breezy, shirtsleeves and sandals day. Pedestrians walk with a bounce. Motorists have their windows open. People caught indoors look out and curse their captivity.

But for Wilkins, sipping coffee at an idyllic sidewalk café, it's just business. For Wilkins, sunlight is only the appearance of happiness and the flower-scented air is only a sugarcoating for the stench that lies just under the sweetness. Murderers and rapists and psychopaths and thieves walk the streets on days like this, just the same as when the snow's flying or the summer sun is turning exposed skin into melanomas.

He's on business, but not official business. Yet. More a get-reacquainted visit. He wants to learn everything he can about the queer in the shop across the street. See who goes in. Get a sense of the area. Get a sense of the quote woman unquote who got away with two violent crimes and made a fool out of him in the process.

He finally has the time to make things right. That's the one good thing that came from the divorce. No more restrictions on his time. There's only an empty apartment to go home to, a dark empty place that feels like a mortuary and smells like dust. He hates the place.

Dreads it like he dreads dentists and doctors. He loathes it like he loathes crooked politicians and soft judges. The only good thing about the fairy queen is, she gives him a reason to keep out of the apartment.

He had forgotten about her until the divorce left him standing there with a suitcase full of shattered dreams, wondering what to do with himself. It was when he reviewed his open case files, looking for cold-case projects for his spare time, that he saw what the investigators missed in the Strand investigation, the ones who came after he'd been pushed off the case. They never connected the other crime to the Strand murder, the strange case of a small-time thug getting savagely mugged but not robbed.

A motion at the edge of his peripheral vision takes Wilkins' attention back to the street. A youngish man, midtwenties, dressed wrong, moving too fast on the sidewalk. Way too fast. He pushes people aside to pass them. He is almost running. His face is so tense Wilkins can see the sinew of his jaw muscles. He's wearing filthy jeans with holes in them. Not designer trash, the real thing. Junkie clothes. His t-shirt has dirt smudges and hangs askew. He's crazy thin. Like a speed freak.

Wilkins drains the rest of his coffee and leaves as the junkie bursts into the beauty salon across the street. Something interesting is going to happen.

* * *

Marilee is chatting about her first grandchild, a doe-eyed waif who is nearly as cute as Marilee thinks she is. I'm doing a curling iron set on her hair and enjoying the social hour. It's like a vacation, a leisurely service filled with easy conversation, time with someone I love. My friend. My surrogate mother.

I'm coming off a brutal week. Ten-hour days in the shop to tend to my clients' needs, then four days at a hair show, doing breakfasts with sponsors every morning, platform shows all day, and the mandatory party circuit every night. Eighteen-hour days.

It's not fun anymore.

And I have other things on my plate now. I've been managing this salon for several months while Roger tends to his partner who is in chemo for pancreatic cancer. He wants to retire and have me buy the place from him. I've done the due diligence, talked to the bankers, hired an attorney, but I'm dragging my feet. This is no little ma-and-pa business. It's a big, upscale hair salon in the high-rent River North neighborhood. It carries a price tag that makes my heart pound. I try not to think about it, the debt, the risk, the pressure. Dealing with the flighty personalities of our hairdressing staff. Handling bitchy clients. Getting sued.

And I worry about not having time for my niece. The child I have been talking to since she was an embryo in her mother's womb. The child whose face often appears in my mind before I fall asleep each night and whose happy smile and infectious belly laughs bring a gladness to my world beyond anything I can imagine.

"What made you finally decide to give up platform work?" Marilee asks. She's a shrink and my mother confessor. I've been talking to her about it for a while.

I tell her about an exhibitor party last week. "It was late. I was beat. I started seeing things that were terribly depressing. The drunks. The false gaiety. Then a couple of models staggered out of the bathroom with cocaine eyes, and I just got this overwhelming sadness about what's ahead for them. A wasted life. A bad death. All of a sudden it wasn't glamorous anymore. These were not beautiful people, the partying was desperate, and I was so tired I could sleep on the sidewalk."

I lock eyes with Marilee in the mirror. "You know, I had to ask

myself, what do I love about this? And the answer is, doing hair. Which I can do here.”

Marilee begins to say something when a terrible crashing sound fills the salon. A wiry, crazed-looking man has flung open the entry door and crashed into a display case, sending bottles and cans of hair products flying through the reception area. The receptionist is frozen in terror, standing with hands to mouth, eyes the size of pancakes.

The man stands at the threshold of the work area, his eyes wide and lit up like demonic coals. His soiled jeans and t-shirt suggest street person, but street people don't terrorize beauty salons. His face is twisted in pain and hate. He looks like death.

“Where's my bitch!” he shrieks. “Where's my fucking bitch!”

All movement in the salon stops dead. A wave of horror fills the room, sucking the oxygen out of the place. Hairdressers and clients alike gape. I can't move any part of my body and I can't get my mind to comprehend what's happening. Who is this person? What is he doing in a beauty salon?

“Trudy! Get your cunt ass out here! Now!”

His voice thunders through the room, powered by a high-pitched desperation. Murderous desperation.

Trudy is a junior stylist. She's only been here for a few months. She comes out of the break room. A hair dryer clicks off, then another and another. The last sound. Silence and stillness grip the salon as though we are all frozen in ice.

“Joey, go away!” Trudy's voice is taut. It sounds far away. Her face is a road map of fear and mourning, a picture of someone caught in a terrible vision they can't get out of.

The power of movement comes back to me in small bits.

His face is a portrait of some distant human emotion boiling in a pot of bile. He is seeing her through the veil of his own demons, a hideous lens of chaos that crazes his eyes and shreds his features with silent claws that turn his skin into deathly folds and creases.

What do you say to someone burning with a rage that is not of this world?

“Sir, this is a beauty salon.”

Brilliant.

I step toward him, putting my body between him and Trudy. Stupid. I’m a transsexual hairdresser and even though I’m six feet tall, I’m less intimidating than a poodle. My hands are shaking and my heart is fluttering. My mouth is so dry I can barely make words.

He looks at me, confused. Like he can’t believe what he’s seeing. I get that a lot, even from people who aren’t on some kind of chemically induced trip.

“Who the fuck are you?” His tone is caustic, taunting. A warning. I’m a bug about to be crushed.

“I’m the manager of this salon. I’d like you to leave at once.” My tongue is sticking to the roof of my mouth as I speak. It sounds like I have a speech impediment. I want to say more but I can’t.

It doesn’t matter. This man is listening to a different voice. Maybe lots of them. His lips curl back in a vicious sneer. His muscles flex. He is outraged that I would speak to him at all, let alone order him from the room.

I call to the receptionist. “Samantha, please call the police.” She already has the phone to her ear and is speaking in a furious whisper into the receiver. To the man I say, “The police will be here in a few moments. Please, let’s take this outside so you can avoid trouble.” It’s not the Gettysburg Address, but I manage to say it without squeaking, without my tongue getting stuck to the glue that coats my mouth.

“I want my bitch, you ugly freak!” he says. His face is as red as a stoplight.

He yanks a pistol from behind his back and starts toward Trudy, raising the gun as he goes. I step into his path. My curling iron cord pops out of the power socket as I reach the end of its length. Another male figure appears behind him, just entering the salon. Something

about the new person looks familiar, but I don't have time to think about it. The maniac swings his pistol in a backhanded motion toward my face. It's an arrogant gesture, meant to break my jaw and knock me senseless. He doesn't need to waste a bullet on a sniveling queer like me.

I would have agreed with him about that, but he didn't ask and my reflexes take over. I bob under the arc of his hand the way a boxer dips under the wild hooks of an amateurish opponent. Before he can recover to swing again, I stab him in the solar plexus with my curling iron.

It's hard enough to take his breath away and as hot as a branding iron. He wants to scream but can't because he can't breathe. As he tries to suck air, I gouge my left thumb deep into his eye socket. Years of self-defense training in action.

The madman drops like he was shot and writhes on the floor gasping for air with lungs that are frozen shut, both hands held to his eye socket. For a moment I worry that he'll die, then he takes a short breath. A new problem. He'll recover in a moment, and we'll start all over again.

I kick his pistol in the general direction of the receptionist and bind his hands behind his back with the cord of the curling iron, then tie a salon cape over his face. The cape thing is bizarre, but it works with some wild animals, maybe with him.

We don't find out. The police arrive before he recovers enough to resist. Two uniforms tend to the maniac, another asks me what happened. As I answer, I see the mystery man just over the shoulder of the cop. A thick, powerful black man who is staring at me with palpable malice. He looks vaguely familiar.

I give my statement and the cop moves to Trudy, then other witnesses. Other cops take the maniac away. Trudy is in shock, gray-faced, blank-eyed. She moved out on him a week ago, sick of the drugs, the beatings, the low-life friends. Stayed with one of the other stylists and

kept a low profile. Joey is dangerous. Slugs, slaps, punches. Scorns. Mr. Wonderful. His brutish personality is blended with the intellect of a carrot. It took him a week to figure out he could find her at her place of work.

It amazes me how often a beautiful girl like Trudy gets involved with a dooper or pusher or gangster or one of the other breeds of low-life men. My friend Cecelia says it's a low-self-esteem thing. They only respect men who don't respect them. A lot of them get into drugs themselves, or booze, or dehumanizing sex. It kills me. I'd give anything to have been put in Trudy's body. I'd pay any price and I'd do anything to keep body and mind whole. And here she has it all and pisses it away on a scumbag like Joey.

Slowly the salon evolves back to doing hair. I instruct the staff to comp all the clients in the salon during the scene and I personally apologize to each of them. Some of them look at me like I'm some kind of hero. John Wayne in a miniskirt. It's kind of funny, but the humor hides a more somber truth: I'm one transwoman who doesn't play the victim anymore.

The police finish their interviews. The last one to leave pauses to talk to the mysterious black man who is still in the reception area, sitting now, still staring at me. Even from a distance I can see the anger on his face. Not quite the mask of hatred Joey brought in, but the same genre.

He looks familiar, but I can't place him. He can't be a customer. What little hair he has is cut almost flush with his scalp. Whoever he is, whatever his issues, I decide to confront them head-on. I approach him and ask, "Can I help you, sir?"

He stares at me as though I have insulted his wife. He stands, his face inches in front of my face, scowling, breathing through his mouth. His breath reeks. He holds a badge in one hand, beside his face. That and his hate-filled eyes, his wide nose, his powerful shoulders bring

back the memory. The badge reads “Detective Allan Wilkins.” I remember him as Detective Hard Case. He wanted to implicate me in two violent crimes in the transgender community when I was transitioning. He hated me because I was a man with tits, a freak, a simpering queer who wouldn’t acquiesce to his bullying tactics.

“Great work.”

He’s talking about my takedown of the crazy man. But he’s not really admiring it. He speaks in a voice only I can hear, but he manages to convey hatred and anger with great efficiency.

“You know how to handle yourself,” he says. “You act like a big fairy who wouldn’t hurt a fly. But you showed who you are just now. You’re a violent pervert and you get off on hurting men. You did that poor sap in the alley and you did John Strand, too. You thumbed him in the eye, just like you did this asshole, and then you slit his throat. I’m on your trail, Cinderella, and I will get you this time.”

The poor sap in the alley had raped me. He and a buddy. A bloody beating followed by a first-class rape. Wilkins was one of the cops who figured I had it coming. Fingering me for the mugging the rapist got months later speaks eloquently about where transgender women sit in his legal priorities.

“Get out of this salon right now. Don’t ever come back, or I’ll report you to the DA’s office again.” I say it in a furious whisper, my eyes boring right back into his. Getting lip from a transsexual drives him stark raving mad, but I couldn’t care less. He’s not fazed by my little reminder that the last time he tried bullying me, he got censured by the LGBT advocate in the DA’s office. No matter, that was my promise to him, not a defense mechanism. I’m not on this earth to take crap from bigots.

“I just responded to a call with my brothers in blue,” he says, flashing a mirthless grin. “That’s my job.”

“I insist you leave immediately.” I say it loud enough for the

receptionist to hear me. She has been watching since I approached him.

Wilkins' lips widen into a menacing leer. He nods. Leaves. I'm supposed to be scared and intimidated. I am, but I have news for Wilkins. I've gotten rid of him before and I can do it again.

The first morning of the rest of my life. An omen.

THURSDAY, JUNE 12

THIS WORKDAY ENDS in a unique way. A cluster of hairdressers linger to talk after we close, not like us at all. In our shop, when your last customer leaves, you do a station cleanup and get out the door. Tonight, everyone wants to talk about the wild event of the morning. And the aftermath. They vent their emotions, recall where they were when it happened, what clients or other stylists said or did. They replay my heroism, especially Samantha, our receptionist. “You may not be a man anymore, but you sure know where to hit one, Bobbi,” she says.

I’m transsexual and my friends’ lighthearted repartee and joking about it in the shop keeps the edge off. Many of these people went through my transition with me. It was a difficult time for all of us. They had to get used to me in a dress and makeup, and not looking quite right, a woman in male proportions. I had to get used to me, too. It was hard. I’d like to think we’re all better people for having gone through it. I know for sure we’re closer.

Sam’s remark brings murmured assent. The girls may be taking some comfort from having an oversized transwoman in the place. I’d rather be five-five and 120 pounds, but this morning, it was nice to be six feet tall, 160 pounds, with enough leverage and heft to drop a piece of bad news in his tracks.

My mind notes the fact that Sugar Ray Robinson was six feet tall and 160. Dad's favorite fighter. But Dad wouldn't see much similarity between his son-turned-daughter and the great Sugar Ray. Even before he got to my white skin, he'd blanch at my plump breasts and my almost-feminine butt. And Dad would puke.

My father was homophobic when I thought I was gay. He would have been transphobic, too, but he died before I got to this part of my life. Whatever. I've come to realize that, with or without a dick, I'm a better person than he ever was.

As I modestly proclaim mine a lucky punch, Roger unlocks the front door and enters. He is the owner of the shop and one of the finest human beings I've ever known. He stuck by me in my transition, even when customers and stylists alike were making his life miserable. And he wants me to own this shop with the kind of passion a patriarch might have for keeping the business in the family.

Roger walks directly to me. He is a smallish, slim man whose walk and mannerisms are more effeminate than mine, even though I work at it and he doesn't. His movements are fast, like there is a fire burning behind him. His face is stressed. He stands on his tiptoes and throws his arms around me and we hug like siblings who haven't seen each other for years.

"Are you okay now?" he asks as we break the clinch. He is almost shaking with pent-up anxiety. He doesn't wait for an answer but moves among the others, asking the same question, hugging each one, apologizing that his salon was the scene of such a violent event. He can be a very tough boss and a hard-nosed businessman, but deep down inside he's as mushy and sentimental as any of us.

As the staff starts trickling out into the night, Roger and I retreat to his tiny office. When I'm in here with him, the ghosts of my transition always lurk on the edges of my consciousness. This is where Roger didn't fire me for coming in as a woman, out of the blue—yesterday

a man, today the worst sort of queer—a transsexual woman. This is where he told me to quit apologizing for who I was and just get to making women beautiful. And this is where he introduced me to the SuperGlam people and recommended me for their hair show staff, the start of my platform career, which led to me becoming what Roger calls a rock-star hairdresser.

Even though there is no one left in the shop, Roger closes the office door before sitting at his desk. I'm in a hard plastic chair facing him, with just enough room to cross my legs.

Roger clears his throat, looks at me, drops his gaze, clears his throat, looks at me. On the third cycle he bursts into tears like a broken-hearted child. This is not hair salon histrionics. This is pure grief. I rise and come around the desk and throw my arms around him. He stands and we hug, me stooping so our bodies match up.

He sobs for a long time, until his torrential grief subsides to a throbbing ache. I know what that's like and I wouldn't wish it on anyone.

"He's not going to make it, Bobbi," Roger says as I sit down again. He's referring to his cancer-stricken partner, Robert. They have been a dedicated, loving couple for decades. They had dreamed of someday getting legally married, but Illinois is still wrestling with the twin bigotries of homophobia and religious hatred. How they manage to face each day upbeat and cheerful in the face of such injustice is beyond me, but they do. At least, until now.

"They're saying three months, maybe less. I asked him what he wanted to do with the rest of his life . . ." Roger tries to smile but sobs. He is in such pain I want to give him my tears to cry.

"He wants to finish his days watching the sun rise and set in Florida."

Roger and Robert have both done very well in business and bought a beautiful home in Key West. I haven't been there, but several of the hairdressers have and they rave about it.

"I need you to buy the business right now, Bobbi. No more dawdling.

I need to get Robert to Florida, and you need to own this salon. Believe me, Bobbi, you will make it even better and owning this place will help fulfill you. You're made for it. These people look up to you . . ." Roger pauses a beat as I raise my eyebrows in surprise. I'm an unlikely icon for leadership in the beauty business. "No, they do. They admire you, Bobbi. You're smart and fair and you are one of the greatest hairdressers in the city. They'll stay if you take over. You'll all do well."

"I'm worried about the economy, Roger." I am. The financial crash ushered in a recession. We've always been able to handle them, but this one is ominous. Economists keep forecasting a recovery, but it keeps getting worse, like a wound you can't stop from bleeding.

"You're getting a fabulous price on this business," says Roger. "Believe me, I could get more from other sources. I want you to have it. If things get really bad, we can redo my part of the deal." Roger owns a high percentage of the business. The bank's share isn't much more than a line of credit, which is why I can make this purchase without putting up much in the way of cash or assets.

I nod but don't say anything. He's not done yet.

"I need you to do this fast, Bobbi. I have another offer, and I'll have to take it if you aren't ready to move."

I shouldn't be so intimidated about taking on hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt. I worked in the corporate world as a marketing type, so I've been involved in mergers and acquisitions, some on a grand scale, but none involving my money.

Words don't come to me. I want to tell Roger that I'm thinking about it, but it scares me. He's heard it before.

"Bobbi, I've wanted you to have this salon ever since I saw you standing out in front of buildings freezing your ass off in the dead of winter handing out leaflets for your services. I've never ever met anyone who wanted to be a hairdresser so much and who was such a good person. I love you. Robert loves you. Do this!"

Roger's timing is impeccable. The adrenaline rush from taking down that junkie has wakened my inner warrior, and Roger's words have caressed my heart.

"I love you both, too, Roger." I want to say how heartbroken I am. For both of them. But the words seem too trite to say out loud and so I stare at him and let my tears come. Roger regards me with the greatest sadness, powered by his loss and also by my grief.

"Okay, Roger," I say finally. "I'll have my attorney contact yours."

So ends months of procrastination, me trying to reason the whole thing out, not able to rationalize making the move, plunging ahead now on an emotional whim. I'm not going to think about it anymore. No second-guessing, no buyer's remorse. I said yes and now I'll see it through. I'm scared, but the truth is, Roger is right. I can make this work, maybe better than anyone else. And if I fail, I'll be brave and I'll start over.

Roger and I hug again, a long embrace baptized with tears. When we finally leave the shop, we blow kisses to each other on the sidewalk and go into the night in different directions.

* * *

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 18

"Of course I will," says Cecelia. She glances at me, a wry smile playing at her lips, as if my question was silly. She has just agreed to come to the closing on the salon with me.

We are puffing and sweating along the Chicago lakefront, engaged in our weekly Wednesday power walk together. Cecelia is a retired investment banker. She was at the top of that pyramid back in the day, back when she was an alpha male. Now she's a leader in the Chicago transgender community and my best friend. She's big and loud and defiantly transsexual, unwilling to countenance bullshit from anyone

about it. We met when I was first beginning to explore my hidden transgender reality. My first impression of her was unkind. I thought she was a loudmouthed jerk.

But when I began my tortured transition, I discovered a different dimension to Cecelia, a deeply compassionate side that she keeps mostly hidden. She shared that part of herself with me during my transition, when I was hit by a tidal wave of societal waste that stripped away my self-esteem and left me alone in the world. She gave me hope and courage and a role model for the parts of transitioning I was worst at. She got things from me, too. I gave her a different friendship than she had with others. I needed her but didn't take her crap and she liked having an equal. And we both found in the other someone who had similar intellect and came from the white-collar business world. She has counseled me through this whole acquisition scenario, especially holding my hand as I fussed about all the debt and responsibility.

"Here's the funny thing," she says, nudging me playfully with one elbow. "When it's all done and you're walking around with a debt bigger than the sky, after you learn to live with the fear of failure, you start to feel powerful. Special. How many people are successful enough to carry that kind of debt?"

I can't picture the power trip she describes. All I can see is the sheer horror of coming up short, losing everything, seeing my colleagues have to scramble for new jobs. Destroying Roger's retirement.

The conversation ends as we pick up the pace to an aerobic level and focus on the burn. Twenty minutes later, we shift to a cool-down pace. As my pulse and breathing return to normal, I look Cecelia in the eye and blurt out a question that's been on my mind for five years.

"Cecelia, where were you the night Strand was murdered?"

She stops cold and stares at me. Her eyes are blue, her brows rounded in surprise. Shock maybe. This is something we don't talk about.

"I was with you until eleven or so."

As if I could forget. The worst, longest night of my life started with a beat-down Bobbi group therapy session with three of my best friends and my transition psychologist. Afterward, my friends insisted I have a drink with them. I have never so desperately wanted to be alone as I did then. I had a rendezvous with Strand planned for that night and I was so wracked with tension about it I could barely make conversation.

“Where did you go after that?” I shouldn’t ask, but I can’t stop wondering. My nightmare is, she admits to being the one who slashed John Strand’s throat and later the police try to coerce that information from me by offering me a deal I can’t refuse. Give up my best friend, or give up the rest of my life. You’d like to think you’d never do that, but who knows until you face the reality of it?

“Where did *you* go after that, Bobbi?” Cecelia’s voice is sharp. We stare at each other in silence for several long beats. She isn’t asking a question. She’s making a statement.

“I heard that detective is back on the case,” she says. “If he asks me, I’ll tell him I went home after I left you. But, Bobbi, none of us wants to know where the others were that night. We all went home after we left the bar. What if someone told you they killed Strand? What would you do with that information? If you talk about it with anyone, you could ruin that person’s reputation. If you tell the police, you could get that person arrested. If you just eat it, what’s the point? Nothing good can come of it.”

My thoughts exactly. Sometimes I just forget myself and blurt things out. Like when I asked Strand if he murdered my friend Mandy. A stupid thing to do. It told him point-blank what I was up to. Of course, it also produced my first glimpse of the malice that boiled just below his amiable facade. Up to that moment he had been seductively charming, but as the question rolled from my lips, a shadow passed over his face, and I could see the demons of hell in his eyes. Just for a

moment. I wish now I had given more credence to my instincts that night and just walked away from the whole thing—Strand, the murder investigation, everything. Strand would still be alive and terrorizing people, but I would have avoided a horrific conflict, and I'd still be able to sleep like the innocent today.

“Do you understand what I'm saying, Bobbi?” Cecelia knows I zone out sometimes. She wants to make sure I'm in the here and now for this message.

“Yes, Cecelia.” I nod my head in the affirmative. But my question dangles unanswered in my consciousness like an itch you can't scratch. Might I someday be locked away in a place worse than death for something she did? Would I be able to live with that?

* * *

FRIDAY, JUNE 20

Don Richards stands and smiles as Betsy shows me into his home office. He is a decent guy. He's good to Betsy, almost everything I would want in a man for the woman I have loved both as a husband and a sister. He's not quite tender, but he's considerate. And kind. And reliable. He will always be there for her, and for my niece, little Robbie.

He had already won my respect when he and Betsy married, but he cemented it when Betsy miscarried the first child they conceived. Betsy was devastated, not only from the loss but also from feelings of guilt that she must have done something wrong. Don felt the loss, too, I could see it in him, but he put his pain in the background and invested himself in nursing Betsy's shattered soul back to health. To me, that's courage, love, and decency—most of the good things I can say about anyone.

The other thing about Don is that he has allowed Betsy and me to

continue our relationship. We who were once man and wife became sister and sister. Betsy was the prime mover in our reunification. We had drifted apart after the divorce, mainly because I was ashamed of who I was. I felt that I'd betrayed her, not being the man she thought she had married. She reconnected with me when I started my transition and insisted we do things together. We shopped, had coffee, I did her hair, she and Don had me over for dinner.

Don went along with all that, even when most men wouldn't, even when it probably gave him the creeps, seeing his wife's ex-husband as a transsexual woman. Because of all that, I can forgive him for being a Republican. And for having to pretend that he likes me instead of actually liking me.

Don is a pleasant-looking man. Neat, well kept, a hint of middle-age spread. More scholarly than athletic. Serious. I can't imagine him telling a joke. The computer screen behind him is filled with spreadsheet data, glowing like a beacon in a dark room where the only other light is a curved-arm desk lamp with its beam focused on a neat stack of papers and a neat stack of files on the desk.

The desk is cleaner than an operating room. More organized than a Japanese factory.

We shake hands. He manages not to recoil at my dainty fingertip offering. He's not comfortable with me being a woman. He tries to hide it, but I recognize it in him just as clearly as I feel ill at ease in such an unnaturally tidy room.

We sit down, the desk between us, and he straightens the papers in front of him. He has been doing due diligence for me on the salon's books. He passes me the written report and starts on the verbal. "Roger's books are in order, his annual audits are thorough, and the business looks to be in good shape," says Don. "Cash flow is excellent, receivables are small, bills get paid on time. The net profit isn't going to make anyone sell their Google stock, but it's solid and consistent,

and from what I've been able to glean, has a good margin for a retail beauty salon."

He continues on for another ten minutes with only a few pauses. The bottom line: the business is in great shape and probably worth more than I'm paying for it. Don doesn't see any obvious places to expand sales, though he hastily adds that he doesn't know the salon business at all.

I'm not feeling all that knowledgeable myself.

"You like to have an idea when you buy a business like this about how you can grow it or cut costs to pay for it," says Don. He painstakingly takes me through the byzantine logic of how company selling prices are based on multiples of gross profit, and how bigger companies command higher multiples than small ones.

For me, the multiple I pay will be an estimate for how many years it will take to pay off the business. I can reduce that number by increasing profits, either through organic growth or higher margins on existing business, or both.

I comprehend the concept but find the weight of it oppressive. The closer we get to the closing, the more I just want to do hair. In fact, as Don goes on, my mind is filled with the image of a beautiful up-do, my hands can remember how the hair looked and felt when I worked it. Its color is deeply dimensional, a mesh of tones and shades that invite the eye inside its density, like a cavern of beautiful colors that streak and blend and lead you ever deeper into the mystery below.

Don asks if I have questions.

"Is this a good investment for me?" I ask.

He grimaces. "That's better answered by Cecelia. What I can tell you is, it's a well-run business and its paper value seems to be higher than what he's asking. If there are hidden debts or problems we don't know about, that could change everything. But from what you've said about Roger, those things aren't likely."

We adjourn to the kitchen. Robbie rushes to greet us. She is a merry cherub, three years old and taking full pleasure in a world that sees her as sweet and cute and denies her nothing. I help Betsy carry dishes to the dining table, trying to quell my inner panic. My acquisition of Salon L'Elégance is down to one last step: a sober session with the lawyers, at the end of which I will take on a debt that is worth many times more than my life.

* * *

FRIDAY, JUNE 27

Being a transsexual woman is like living in a four-season climate: your environment is constantly changing. The difference is, for the transwoman—for oversized ones like me, anyway—the changes come fast and furious and not in any natural order.

I'm bathing in a springtime moment as we leave the law offices of Roger's attorney. I have just closed on the purchase of Salon L'Elégance. It's Roger, Cecelia, me, and my attorney, but it might as well just be me. I am the nominal owner of one of Chicago's most prestigious salons. I'm swimming in a bottomless sea of debt and I have just taken on an inhuman degree of responsibility, but as Cecelia predicted, part of me is giddy with the realization of how far I've come in the world.

When we step out onto the street, my springtime moment gives way to a winter storm.

As we take the LaSalle Street Bridge over the Chicago River, I see Wilkins on the other side of the street. He's leaning against the bridge structure, staring at us. I can see the sneer on his face from here and I feel the menace of his thick body.

I point him out to my attorney and convey to him in a private voice

a brief history of my run-ins with Wilkins, including the restraining order the city put on him five years ago.

“Can I bring charges against him for this?” I ask quietly. “I’d like to get him off my back.”

“I doubt it.” The lawyer says it regretfully. “I doubt the order is still good, but even if it is, he has a right to be in a public place. Truthfully, I doubt they’d arrest him unless he physically assaulted you. There are just too many hard-core criminals and too little jail space.”

“So I just have to suck on it?” I ask. Probably not a good analogy for a transwoman to use. Especially not one as perpetually unfulfilled sexually as me.

The attorney nods.

But I’m not in a mood to be bullied by a rogue cop or take a contract attorney’s word for what my rights are. My mind drifts back to the last time I was being followed by someone who was a threat to me. That ended in a flash of violence that left a nasty thug permanently retired from the intimidation business. Wilkins isn’t a thug, but he’s a hateful bigot and a threat to my freedom. We’ll see what the DA’s LGBT advocate has to say about his lurking return to my life.

MONDAY, JULY 7

I BREEZE INTO the cozy café in Logan Square like I own the place. It's a queer-friendly neighborhood, but I still draw a few glances. Fewer if I pay no attention.

That's easy to do tonight. It has been a brutally long day that followed a short, stress-filled night of little sleep. I'm tired. I'm ravenously hungry. I want a glass of wine so bad I could burst. But more than any of these things, my pulse is pounding in anticipation of meeting the man who invited me to dinner tonight.

Officer Phil's call came in the middle of the usual salon mayhem, like a perfect rainbow arching from my most delicious fantasy into the reality of today.

Phil used to be a beat cop in Boystown and an envoy to the Chicago queer community. He picked me out as a contact in the transgender world. His goal was to reach every segment of the gay, lesbian, and trans communities with the message that the Chicago Police Department cared about them and could be trusted. He did his job very well, though I never bought the proposition that the huge Chicago PD had much institutional interest in the welfare of transgenders. Phil did, though. On top of which, he was a very sexy man. He was the talk of the gay male community and just as alluring to transwomen, at least the ones who were attracted to men.

Since he got promoted to a cushy job downtown in community relations a while ago, I haven't seen him much except for his monthly haircut. Then today, like a bolt out of the blue, he calls me at the salon. Can I make dinner tonight? Catch up on things?

Do bears love honey?

Officer Phil is seated at a small table, a quiet spot perfectly chosen. A bottle of wine graces the tabletop, two glasses of red at the ready. Even at a distance he still makes my heart beat a little faster.

He stands as I approach and steps forward to kiss my cheek and exchange hugs. He is tall, an inch taller than I am in two-inch heels. He's dressed casually, khaki slacks, polo shirt, loafers. His hair is fashionably short, perfectly groomed. A speck or two of pepper gray is visible, and there are a few faint lines on his handsome face. He's in his forties now, and the signs of age make him even more attractive.

"Bobbi, just look at you!" he says. "You are absolutely stunning!"

"I get that a lot," I say, "but it's not usually a compliment."

"Stop that," he replies.

My heart flutters for a moment. He holds my chair and slides it beneath me with the casual precision of a gentleman. I am overwhelmed by the way he makes me feel like a lady. Girls like me don't get treatment like this very often, so I allow myself to luxuriate in it for a moment.

We drink a toast to each other and go through the usual conversation foreplay. I ask if he's got a serious love interest yet. No. He asks me if I do. No. This is a topic I won't allow in my salon services, partly because it's good business, and partly because we transsexual women get bombarded with really inappropriate questions. Have you tried out the new plumbing? Did it work? How does it compare to being the one with the penis? Are you into anything kinky? The questions come easier to inebriates in bars, another reason I don't frequent them. Officer Phil would never indulge in such stuff, but others do,

men and women, so I have a hard and fast rule—we don't talk about sex or politics in my chair.

"How is the hairstyling business?" he asks.

I tell him about buying the salon, giving up platform work, sweating the loan payments. I ask him about working at headquarters with the suits, dealing with the public. He's fine with the brass, loves working with civic groups, small businesses. He misses Boystown. He misses me. I blush and hold my breath for a moment, then he adds, "And Cecelia and all the girls at TransRising." I come back to earth with a jolt. This is juvenile of me, but the only fantasy I have about men is that Phil will someday find me the woman he can't live without.

We make small talk about who's doing what in the LGBT community, what it's like at the top of the CPD food chain. We order, make another toast to old times, sip the wine, a nice Washington State Cabernet. Phil leans forward, his elbows on the table, his face just a foot or two from mine.

"Bobbi, I need to say something to you. I'm way out of line, but I want to say it anyway, on the basis that I'm a friend and that's why I'm saying it. Okay?"

For a moment there, I thought he was going to proposition me, then he started with the friend stuff. I shrug.

"Bobbi, you made a bad mistake trying to get Detective Wilkins taken off the Strand case again."

I groan out loud. Five years ago, Wilkins tried to intimidate me during his investigation of the Strand murder. I called the LGBT advocate in the district attorney's office and complained about his bigotry—the bastard called us "tranny queers" and "butt fuckers" among other horrible expressions. She got him pulled off the case. I filed another complaint this week, but she couldn't help me this time. What happened in the salon didn't qualify as police harassment.

"Wilkins had been working the case on his own time, but since your complaint, he's gotten clearance to make it a full-blown investigation.

He convinced his captain that you filed it because he's going to prove you killed Strand."

My adolescent fantasies involving Phil evaporate. My heart beats against my ribs with the force of an iron fist. There is a pounding noise in my ears. "It's personal with him," I say. "Pure hate."

"It's more serious than that, Bobbi." Phil has a worried look on his face. "He thinks he can prove you set up that guy who got mugged in the alley where you were raped. He thinks that guy was connected to Strand. And he thinks he can link you directly to the Strand murder."

"Link?" I echo. "How?"

"Wilkins saw you finish that nutcase in your salon with an eye gouge. He has photos of the guy's eye and it looks a lot like Strand's eye injury. The coroner said his injury came from an eye gouge that was probably used to disable him.

"Wilkins also says there were synthetic hair fibers found at the scene, consistent with a short-hair wig, maybe a male toupee. That gives him a theory about how the crime could have been committed by a woman posing as a man. That's just a wild theory right now, but he thinks you could have passed as a man back then. And you were strong enough to overpower an adult male. He says he's going to tie you to the crime scene."

Like most transsexual women, it takes a lot to scare me. Phil's ominous message qualifies.

Wilkins is a mean and ugly brute who hates me even more than he hates all transsexuals because I stood up to his bullying the first time around. Lots of us complained, but I started it. This must have been festering in his nasty soul for years. I can see him manufacturing whatever evidence he needs to nail me, though he can destroy me without even bringing charges. Just leaking to the newspapers that I'm a suspect in a murder can send my salon's A-list clientele scattering to shops of better repute.

"How do you know this?" I ask when I regain control of my brain and tongue.

“He called me for background on you, Bobbi. He has the case file out. He’s coming after you.”

“He’s going to plant evidence, isn’t he?” I’m so filled with dread I can hardly say the words.

“No,” says Phil. “Wilkins won’t go that far. He’s a tough guy, and he’ll intimidate people to get them to confess, but he doesn’t cross the legal lines. Don’t feel too good about that, though. He’s relentless and he hates you and he’ll work like the earth on fire to make a case against you.”

“I don’t get it, Phil. I learned the eye gouge in a self-defense class. I’m sure hundreds of people in this city did, too. Maybe thousands. Lots of people know that technique. The only thing that puts me on his suspect list is that I’m queer.” My tone has gone from fear to anger. I hiss out the word “queer” loud enough to draw attention from the table next to us.

Phil waits until the other diners return to their own conversation, then leans forward again. “Don’t you ever use that word to describe yourself to me again, Bobbi.” He says it sternly. “You are a beautiful woman and you have done great things with your life.”

That stops me cold. For a second I think I see something in Phil’s eyes, a romantic connection, maybe. But no, a closer look and what I see is a very nice man who said something nice to someone having a bad day. It’s better this way. If he confessed his love for me right now, the waitstaff would have to mop the remains of my overwhelmed senses from the floor.

Our food comes. We make idle chatter with the waiter, a pleasant male who can’t hide his attraction to Phil. Why should he be different?

When he leaves, Phil leans forward again, as do I. “Bobbi, I shouldn’t have told you any of this. I’m asking you to keep it between us. I could get in trouble.”

“Why *did* you tell me?” I ask.

“Because I care about you. And because I don’t know what all is in the evidence book. Maybe they have blood samples or DNA or something. They have no legal reason to treat you as a suspect, no reason to get samples of your blood or DNA. Don’t give them one, okay? And don’t antagonize Wilkins anymore. Maybe he’d be a little more interested in other suspects if it wasn’t so personal with you.” He stares at me with an intensity I never thought he had. I always saw him as a sort of California surfer who blundered into police work in Chicago, thought it was a promising wave, and decided to ride it to the next coast in life.

“Okay,” I answer. Inside, I’m still mulling the “I care about you” statement. My rational mind knows he cares about me like Marilee or Cecelia care about me, but I had a momentary thrill at the thought he cared about me the way a man cares about a woman. It was a brief thrill, measured in nanoseconds.

The rest of the meal is much lighter. Phil is a great conversationalist. He gets me talking about doing platform work at hair shows, models I’ve worked with, a celebrity actress who had me do her hair while they were shooting on location in Chicago. Another who was in town for a brief stay. He tells me about how the new police chief got his job, why the old one left, what happened behind the scenes in the investigation of a night club fire that killed dozens of people and involved all the key elements of a great Chicago drama—politically connected principals, racial tension, and a tragic event. I try several times to get him to talk about his personal life. I want to know if he’s taken, and if he’s gay or straight. Phil was very artful in keeping his personal life out of the conversation when he covered Boystown, and he still is.

After two hours of comfortable conversation, our meal ends. Phil settles the check, tends to my chair as I rise, and kisses me softly on the cheek. We hug the way friends hug, or maybe just a little tighter.

I can feel my breasts press against his chest and our abdomens meet flush against each other. I will play back this sensation many times in the nights to come.

We say our farewells at the door and go our separate ways, Phil completely oblivious to how eagerly I would have entered into carnal relations with him. I sigh. It's for the better. Men like him have their pick of women and even if he lost his mind and had a tryst with me, it would be over quickly. And I have enough on my plate without a broken heart.

* * *

TUESDAY, JULY 9

Like lines you can't forget from a movie you hate, this is all too familiar to me. Being vulnerable to a predator whom the law can't touch. At least, not until it's too late for me.

I'm soaking in my beloved oval spa and thinking. From a distant room the rich tones of Mozart vibrate into my steamy escape.

Usually my contemplations in this spa are romantic, sometimes erotically so. I think of people I know or have seen who are physically attractive and imagine what it would be like to be intimate with them. My fantasies include both men and women. I'm glad I'm this way. It's like being an independent voter. I go for the person, not the genital party.

But my thoughts are light-years away from love and sex now. Now, the movie in my mind is playing a dark film set in alleys and bars, in shady places where light beams of social order and humanity can't penetrate.

I'm reliving my time in a jungle where a man murdered a trans-woman, maybe more than one, and got away with it. He liked to beat

them up, too. Money and power put him above the law. Even the law of the jungle.

When the beast came after me, the other creatures in the jungle looked away. I was a pitiful prey. Trying to transition. Scared of the world. In my mind I was a woman, but when I saw myself through other people's eyes, I saw a man with tits and a dick. A freak craving acceptance and understanding.

The unfairness of it all came crashing in on me. I had started my transition days after a beautiful young transwoman had been brutally murdered. There wasn't a soul in the police department or the media who gave a damn. It wasn't Wilkins' case, but he wouldn't have cared anyway. We were vermin to him.

On the other hand, when a rich white guy like John Strand got himself murdered, all of a sudden cops like Wilkins were all over it. And Wilkins finally decided the dead transwoman was important—but only because she was a friend of mine and her murder a motive for me to take revenge on Strand. The injustice of it still raises my blood pressure.

I try to think of pleasanter things, but the weight of a crushing debt and the ominous shadow of Detective Wilkins keep drowning the sunbeams and lullabies I try to conjure. Most of all, I keep coming back to Phil's haunting message, that my complaint to the DA has enabled this ogre to stalk me night and day, until he gets what he wants. The irony. Five years ago I was being stalked by a murderer, now a cop is doing the same thing with the same intent. Wilkins doesn't want to kill me, but he wants to lock me up for the rest of my life, so what's the difference? I'm the meat in a big hate sandwich.

This will be a long, lonely night fraught with fleeting moments of sleep tormented by dark dreams, ending in wakeful restlessness. The night will usher in a morning filled with first aid to make my face look fresh and stylish for the salon. It's okay. I've been here before. So many times I couldn't count them all.

* * *

TUESDAY, JULY 9

Wilkins moves quickly from one to the next. He assumes they're all prostitutes. Some of them look like men and cruise for gay customers. Some are in various stages of trans female, looking for anything they can get. They disgust him. He has trouble establishing eye contact because looking at their faces makes him sick.

"Can you help me, here?" he says to each girl. "I'm a cop. I'm looking for anyone who knew this man." He flashes a photo of John Strand.

One after another, they look at him with a startled glance, then shake their heads no.

After a few refusals, he figures it out, and starts adding that he's not vice, he's not here to bust anyone or get anyone in trouble.

An hour later he gets lucky. A tall, thin African-American trans-woman nods her head yes. "He's that dude who got himself killed a while back," she says.

"You knew him?" Wilkins asks.

"I knew of him. I knew a girl he beat half to death."

"Can you put me in touch with her?"

The hooker shrugs. "Buy me dinner and I'll ask her if she wants to talk to you."

Wilkins starts to walk away. She's just trying to hustle him for a meal. Then again, he thinks, there was a shred of sincerity in her voice.

"Okay," he says. He passes her a twenty-dollar bill and his card. "Tell her to call me anytime. I just want to talk."

The girl nods.

"One other thing," he says. "You know this lady?" He shows her a photo of Logan.

The girl nods her head yes. “She has a fancy beauty salon. A friend of mine works there.”

“What’s she like?”

“Nice, I think.”

Wilkins tries a few more questions. She doesn’t have answers but maybe she’d pass his card on to someone who knew more. It is something, and it beats sitting in that shithole apartment of his.

* * *

WEDNESDAY, JULY 10

Cecelia rings my bell at nine a.m. dressed in a designer suit that has been tailored to flatter her flamboyant oversized body with the conservative elegance of a woman of means. She is looking chipper and energetic. The best-dressed six-four woman in Chicago, ready for another day of blitzing bigots and overpowering the unwilling.

Wednesday is one of my late-arrival days at the salon, and Cecelia often stops by for coffee. “Good God, Bobbi, you look like death warmed over,” she exclaims as I open the door.

“Good morning to you, too.” I turn and let her close the door.

“Aha! Did my anal-retentive sister worry her way through the night?” Cecelia says it in a teasing way as she throws her bag on the kitchen table and starts to work on the coffee. I have filled her in on the Detective Wilkins situation, along with all the other frustrations in my life. I sigh and sit in front of my makeup table again to finish applying a hemorrhoid cream to the bags under my eyes. The thought of putting something made for my ass on my face isn’t a pleasant one, especially for someone who spent part of their life as a gay man, but it works. And it works better than cucumbers or anything else I’ve tried.

Cecelia sits next to me as the coffee drips.

“You worry too much, Bobbi,” she pronounces. “But I’ve said that to you so many times you probably think that’s part of my name. Cecelia Uworrytoomuch.” She giggles at her own humor. I force a smile.

“My worries are a lot like when I was a woman with a penis—it’s just not something you can get rid of right away.”

Cecelia pats my hand. “Well, at least you don’t have that old thing to worry about anymore.”

She fetches the coffee in two steaming mugs, then pulls a notepad and pen from her purse and scribbles something on the pad, tearing off the sheet with great fanfare and putting it in front of me.

“What’s this?” I ask, squinting at the wild cursive on the paper.

“It’s the phone number for Jose Vasquez.”

I groan.

“The man is an artist, Bobbi! Like you with hair. And he can get your mind off worldly matters.”

We’ve had this conversation before. Only Cecelia would keep pitching it. Jose is an escort. A male prostitute. I haven’t met him, but Cecelia has shown me pictures. She has also regaled me with eyewitness accounts of his sexual prowess that are so glowing and vivid I have sometimes felt myself flush with arousal.

Jose is a dark-haired, copper-skinned leading man with movie-star looks. Like Omar Sharif in *Dr. Zhivago*, but a trifle more dangerous looking. To hear Cecelia tell it, the only thing more remarkable than the thickness and length of his male member is his ability to become aroused, whenever, wherever, and as often as necessary.

Cecelia sees him once a month. He’s on her calendar, like her hairdresser and her psychologist. It’s like getting stagnant water out of the pipes after you’ve been gone for a long time, she says. Then she describes her wild orgasms, which, given her size and energy, must make the amorous Jose feel like he’s riding a volcano.

I can't bring myself to hire a sex partner. Yet. It's not a moral issue, it's just something I can't settle for, though truthfully, I've fantasized about it a number of times, about being bedded by Jose and having one of Cecelia's wild orgasms.

The thought of Jose Vasquez stays in my mind all day. My endless fretting over a nasty cop and financial stress is shoved aside by a day-long sexual fantasy. I am so horribly repressed it's pitiful.

Late in the afternoon I have a ten-minute break and call Jose's number.

"Hi, I'm Bobbi Logan," I say when he answers. "Cecelia gave me your number."

"Wonderful!" Jose interrupts my canned intro. "She's my most wonderful client and she said she had a friend who might call."

I exhale a little. "So, how does this work?" I ask.

* * *

THURSDAY, JULY 11

The host at Café Matin leads me through tables of late-night diners and drinkers, and Jose Vasquez rises gallantly as we near him.

He smiles a warm welcoming smile. It doesn't matter that he's done this hundreds of times with hundreds of women. He makes you feel like you light up his life, like he's so glad to see you.

He takes the hand I offer and pulls me to him, kissing me softly on the cheek, an appropriate gesture in public made just a touch racy by following with a hug during which he exhales softly in my ear. He plays horny women the way great musicians coax heavenly sounds from violins and saxophones.

We have met here because I wanted to squeeze in a quick dinner after a long workday, but I'm so nervous I've lost my appetite. I'm

feeling pathetic. A slut who can't get laid. If I was a real girl I wouldn't be doing this.

He senses my anxiety. It must happen a lot, even with genetic women. He initiates a conversation, recounting Cecelia's stories about what a fabulous hairdresser I am. By the time we get to the celebrities I've done, I'm aware of how prepared he was for this meeting, how easy he is to talk to, and how warm I feel when I look into his gentle brown eyes.

We finish hors d'oeuvres and Jose picks up his wine glass and proposes a toast to me. Then he asks what he can do to make my day perfect. I blush crimson. The perfect wine, his perfect gentlemanliness, the warmth of the place, the first time I've relaxed in ages . . . it all comes together in a flash. I make myself find ladylike words to respond, something to the effect I'd like to make love. But inside my transsexual mind, my thoughts are not nearly so ladylike. I'm thinking I'd like him to fuck my brains out. It will be my little secret, though I'm sure he's heard the expression before, from Cecelia if no one else.

* * *

FRIDAY, JULY 12

"Well?" Cecelia's voice belies the smile she is wearing on the other end of the telephone line. "How was it?"

I don't have words in my vocabulary to describe how it was. All of my anxieties and fears and pent-up sexual fantasies were deliriously and deliciously exorcised from my body and soul over the course of an hour with Jose.

"It was just like you said," I reply.

"Oh no you don't!" Cecelia says. "I want a blow by blow. So to speak. Every golden minute."

I am drained and glowing and half asleep and still aroused. I'm still trying to believe that was me feeling those things, responding so recklessly. And I'm still feeling everything. It makes me smile and relax so deeply I feel like a puddle of warmth.

"Oh, Cecelia," I groan. "When I was a man I had no idea what a man could be. Good Lord, what a ride." Cecelia says she's glad I finally found God, chastises me for waiting so long. I tell her she was right about Jose and that I love her and I'll see her tomorrow. For once, she lets me go on the first try.