

SATURDAY

Jesse Barrett awoke with a splitting headache.

Light filtered through the sheer curtains over the bedroom windows, allowing him to see the outlines of a strange room. Slowly, his mind recreated the events of the past evening: picking up Kristin at Hugo's Frog Bar on Rush Street, walking her back to her hotel, a drink in the living room of her suite...Kristin was a knockout, when she came on to him, he had followed her out of the bar like a puppy.

Turning, he expected to find her next to him in bed. No Kristin. He lifted his arm to look at his watch, but instead found himself staring at a girl's hand. Slowly, he turned it and took in the polished nails and smooth skin on his forearm. "What the hell?"

The strap of his nightgown fell off his left shoulder. Barrett sat up with a start and fumbled for the light switch on the nightstand. Throwing back the covers, he found himself dressed in a woman's nightgown, and his legs beneath the satin were smooth and hairless. Instinctively, he grabbed for his crotch, and felt momentary relief as he found his penis and testicles through the silky material. But his relief was short-lived as he got to his feet and walked into the bathroom. Staring back at him in the mirror was a girl with a pixie hairdo wearing a blue nightie.

"Oh...my...God," Barrett said to himself. Who had done this to him? Kristin! "That little bitch," he swore. But how? Why?

Trying to make sense of his situation, he slowly walked out of the bathroom and into the parlor of the suite. Immediately he saw the envelope which Lisa had left for him by the door. Reaching down to pick it up, he tore it open. "My dear Jesse, or shall I say Jessica," the note began, "how do you like the new you? Plucked just like a chicken! As your punishment for the way you treat women, you have turned into one! Just be thankful that we didn't take this all the way." Shuddering, Barrett read on. "You have one hope for getting out of this without totally humiliating yourself. You're gonna have to pass as a woman until you can return to your wretched life. Your new wardrobe awaits you. Good luck, sweetheart – you'll need it!"

The handwriting was Lisa's. "Fucking bitch!" he swore out loud. Lisa, who he had screwed with abandon after coaxing her to leave her fiancée, and then dumped unceremoniously when the sex got old. Lisa had done this somehow, used Kristin as bait to lure him into this trap, as revenge for the way he had treated her.

With growing panic, he searched the suite. Nothing in the living room or bedroom, no sign of his clothes or identification. Walking into the closet, he found only a dress and pair of woman's shoes. Back to the bedroom, where on closer inspection he saw a woman's stocking peeking out from under the bedclothes he had thrown back. Tearing off the covers, he found white lingerie and a pair of tan pantyhose. As the full enormity of his predicament hit him, Barrett began to retch. Lurching into the bathroom, he fell on his knees over the toilet as wave after wave of nausea swept over him.

Finally, he returned to his feet and walked weakly over to the full-length mirror on the bathroom door. Pulling the nightgown over his head and stepping out of his panties, he glumly looked at himself. His face had been made up, and all of his body hair was gone. Barrett's lean build gave him a coltish look, and as he shook his head in dismay, he had to brush back his new bangs from his face. The final touch was his eyebrows, which arched over his disbelieving eyes. It suddenly dawned on him that there was no way he could pass as a man, no matter what he wore. Until he was able to do something about his face, hair and nails, he was going to look like a girl.

With that realization, for the first time Barrett began to think clearly. Okay, so he was trapped, and the only way out was to play Lisa's game. To walk out of this nightmare, he would have to put on those clothes and make it back to his apartment. There, he could cut his hair and nails, do something about his ridiculous eyebrows, and regain his own life. There was no alternative, unless he wanted to walk down into the hotel lobby looking like a flaming queen with a hotel bathrobe wrapped around himself.

He looked at the alarm clock on the nightstand. Shit! Nine o'clock! He was supposed to meet Angel Chacra in El Paso that afternoon. He had to get back to his apartment, where he could let himself in with a spare key he kept hidden in the fire stairs. If he missed his flight to El Paso, Angel would come looking for him. If Angel saw him like this, found out a girl did this to him, he'd be laughed out of the cartel.

"Dammit, you can do this!" he said to himself. "You've been in a lot worse spots. Got to keep your cool, man." Suddenly energized, Barrett walked back into the bedroom and sized up his disguise. "You can wear this stuff," he assured himself, as the first wave of doubt crept in. A padded body-briefer, slip and stockings lay menacingly before him. "You can do this," he said to himself again.

Barrett pulled on the one-piece briefer, and struggled to get his arms under the straps. Ignoring the slip and stockings, he headed for the closet.

Jesse Barret's apartment overlooked Lake Michigan, facing north up Lake Shore Drive to the beaches on Oak Street and beyond. He lived on one of the upper floors of an exclusive high-rise, and on a morning like this one, the visibility across the lake through the floor-to-ceiling windows was unlimited. A few pieces of bachelor furniture, an elaborate stereo system, an ornate metal gun safe, and a big screen HDTV were scattered about the expensive space, and half a dozen custom-made surfboards of various lengths were piled up in one of the corners. Barrett had no illusions about his life expectancy, and he spent his blood money as fast as he made it.

Using Barrett's key to gain entry to his apartment, Kristin and Lisa were not interested in the view. Methodically, they began to remove every trace of his former self. It took them three trips, carting armloads of clothing down the elevator. Soon the back and trunk of Lisa's Honda Civic were crammed with Jesse Barrett's personal effects –

jeans, sweaters, shirts, sneakers, shoes, workout clothes, every stitch of clothing which they could find in his closet and dresser drawers.

Kristin would have liked to dig through the papers in his desk, but there wasn't time. The Rohypnol she put in his drink the night before would be wearing off any time now. After a last look around the apartment, Kristin placed a call on her cell phone. "The apartment's clear. We're going to go wait for him. See you back here if all goes well." Leaving the door to Barrett's apartment ajar, Kristin and Lisa returned to Lisa's car and headed back towards the hotel.

Lisa found a parking space on the sweeping driveway leading to the hotel porte-cochere, and they settled down to wait. The forecast was for a perfect September day, sunny and not too warm, with a light breeze off the lake. Kristin closed her eyes and tried to relax.

"When do you think he'll come down?" Lisa asked nervously.

"Maybe never." Kristin reckoned that this operation was a long shot, and the odds were high that in a few hours they would have to give it up and call it off.

"What choice does he have?" Lisa desperately wanted to see Barrett humiliated, and from the moment Kristin first suggested her kinky scheme to Lisa, it had become an obsession with her.

Kristin knew that she had taken a calculated risk in involving Lisa. If the project did get off the ground, she would have to cut her out of it, quickly.

"What do you suppose he's thinking about right now?" Lisa went on.

"Who I am and how to kill me with his bare hands."

"Wait till he reads my note. God, I'd give anything to see Jesse trying to get into his dress," Lisa said.

Kristin got out of the front seat and stretched out in the back of the Civic, making a pillow for herself out of one of Barrett's sweaters. She used another sweater to cover up her bare legs.

"I'm sure he'll manage. The question is whether he has the balls to walk out the door in it." Everything was riding on that.

Back in the closet, Barrett reached for a hanger and held the dress at arm's length, contemplating it like a deadly snake. It was a light blue shirtdress with little white flowers, gold buttons down the front, and a belt hanging from two loops. "You can do this," he repeated to himself. Stepping into the dress, he pulled up the shoulders and began to fumble with the buttons. They fastened left-to-right, which momentarily threw him, but soon the dress was buttoned to the top and he tightened the belt, again backwards from what he was used to. He wedged his feet into the dainty shoes and felt them pinch as he took his first tentative steps. Glumly, he reached for the purse hanging in the closet and looked inside. He found only a pack of tissues, a compact, lipstick and a hairbrush.

Walking tentatively back to the full-length mirror, he gasped as he looked at himself. Staring back at him was an attractive girl, in a knee-length dress which accentuated her trim waist and bustline. Her hips were slim, and her legs weren't bad. Barrett was thunderstruck by

the overall effect. He could walk into his own apartment building and nobody would believe it was him.

We'd better hope so, he said to himself. Looking around the suite for the last time, Barrett's courage began to evaporate, and he sank onto the bed. Lifting his eyes to the bedroom mirror, he saw a woeful girl with her dress splayed above her knees. Feeling nauseous again, he stood back up, brushed down his dress, swung his purse over his shoulder, and headed for the door. Hesitating momentarily as his hand reached for the doorknob, he swallowed hard and walked out into the hallway.

"There he is, there he is, there he is!" shouted Lisa. It had all depended on Barrett's getting this far. As they watched from Lisa's Honda, Barrett momentarily paused to get his bearings, then began walking in the direction of his apartment, ten blocks away in Streeterville. His strides in the dress were comical, although as he progressed, he seemed to instinctively shorten his steps. Kristin had to admit to herself that at least from this distance, Barrett was passing reasonably well as a girl.

Lisa started the engine and eased the car forward. Pulling over to the curb beside Barrett, she rolled down the window and shouted, "Want a ride, beautiful?"

With the shock of recognition, Barrett reached for the car door and jumped into the passenger seat, his relief overtaken by rage. "Why, you little bitch," he began, when suddenly Kristin reached forward from the back seat and placed the muzzle of her automatic at the base of his neck. "One more word and I'll blow your pretty brains out," she said with malice. Barrett froze.

Lisa stepped on the accelerator and sped towards Barrett's apartment. Barrett turned his head halfway and glared at Kristin. "You! When the cops find out about this, they'll nail your ass to the wall!"

"Sweetheart, you're in no position to call the cops, and you know it. Now shut up and do as you're told!"

Who is this woman? Barrett asked himself. Some kind of a narc. How much did she know about him?

Lisa pulled into the garage of Barrett's building. "OK, out of the car, and act like a lady!" Kristin commanded. With Lisa beside Barrett and Kristin just behind, they walked to the elevator and rode silently up to Barrett's floor. He looked on in fury as Lisa removed his keys from her purse and opened the door to his apartment.

Kristin closed the door, and Barrett was about to speak when a heavy-set man in his late fifties stood up and greeted them. "This must be Jessica," he said sarcastically. "Delighted to meet you." His suit jacket was off, and his white shirt bulged over the waistband of his baggy trousers. Thin gray hair topped his moonlike face, which was framed by steel rimmed aviator glasses. Barrett stared at the gun in his shoulder holster.

"Sit down, sit down," the man went on. In a daze, Barrett collapsed into his favorite chair, a burgundy suede recliner.

“Jessica, you really have to be more careful, now that you’re a girl,” Lisa said as she pulled Barrett’s dress down over his knees

With a sharp look at Lisa, Kristin said curtly, “I think it’s time you were leaving.” Lisa looked surprised and hurt, but she slowly walked to the door. Kristin had already told her that if things got this far, it would be best if she were not involved in what they had planned for Jesse Barrett. Turning, she blew Barrett a kiss and said, “Enjoy your new life. You had it coming to you.”

After the door closed, the heavy-set man pulled an oak barstool in front of Barrett and sat down. “Jesse, my name is Lloyd McIntyre. You’re in serious trouble. Kristin here is a Special Agent with the Drug Enforcement Administration, and I happen to be her supervisor. We’ve been watching you for some time, and there’s no point in denying that you are a contract killer for the Juarez drug cartel.” As Barrett opened his mouth to protest, the man cut him off. “Don’t waste our time with bullshit denials. You see, Kristin here has put together a case against you that pretty much guarantees that you’ll be spending the rest of your life in prison.”

Before Barrett could respond, Kristin joined in. “It was just luck that I learned about your breakup with Lisa last week. She was more than willing to cooperate with us, after the way you treated her.”

“But why this?” Barrett finally responded, pointing to his dress. “What kind of sick, twisted people are you?”

“Good question,” the man chuckled. “And I have to admit, when Kristin came up with the idea of turning you into a girl, I thought she was out of her mind. Never believed that we’d get you to go for it.”

“Go for it?” Barrett protested. “Hell, one minute I’m with a hot chick, and when I wake up, I look like a friggin’ homo!”

“That was the easy part,” Kristin interrupted. “And I have to admit, the idea came to me when Lisa poured out her heart to me over a drink last week. Told me that you were the worst thing that ever happened to her, and it would serve you right if the roles were reversed. That’s how I got the idea of feminizing you,” she said matter-of-factly. The words made Barrett shiver.

“What good could that possibly do you?”

“Oh come now, Jesse,” McIntyre smiled. “Turning one of the Juarez cartel’s most notorious assassins into a woman has all sorts of benefits. Think of how shocked your associates will be when they learn about this. And the newspapers will have a field day – ‘DRUG HITMAN QUEEN FOR A DAY!’ Of course, the news won’t help you much in prison...”

“You fucking bastards!” Barrett exploded. “Wait until my lawyer gets hold of you!”

“Jesse,” McIntyre responded calmly, “I don’t think you understand the extreme position you are in. We have you dead to rights on multiple counts of conspiracy to traffic in narcotics, and thanks to evidence on your movements provided by Miss Kozella, I think we can tie you into a couple of homicides. Your life, as you knew it, is over.”

“But there is a way out,” Kristin broke in, using the classic good cop, bad cop routine. “Although we didn’t know for sure until you walked out of the door of that hotel this morning.”

“You see,” McIntyre continued, “when Kristin came to me with the idea of getting you to dress as a woman, I didn’t think it could possibly fly. Finally she got me to agree to her experiment. If you hadn’t taken the bait and responded the way you did, we wouldn’t be talking now. You’d be in a holding cell, looking like a pansy and trying to fight off your cellmates.”

Numbly, Barrett reflected back on the morning. He told himself again that he had no choice in what he did.

“We had to know whether you could pull this off,” Kristin broke in. “Most guys would have never gone through with it. But let’s face it, your profession calls for a certain resourcefulness, and we know you’ve used disguises before. Besides, I could tell you had the right build and bone structure.”

“But why would you want me to do this?” He looked down at his manicured hands, folded in the lap of his dress. Sitting in front of these agents, dressed in women’s clothing, he felt completely vulnerable and exposed. His usual self-assurance had evaporated.

“We’re offering you a deal,” McIntyre replied. “On the one hand, you can go straight from here to that holding cell, and dressed as you are, I’d say that’s a pretty bad prospect. Or, you can cooperate with us and have a shot at avoiding jail altogether.”

Don Cielo was working up a sweat on his Stairmaster, watching a CNN report about an Ebola outbreak in the Congo. Wearing a blue silk warm-up suit, he was alone in an enormous gym equipped with nautilus equipment, free weights, and a rowing machine, along with a sauna and Jacuzzi. In his early forties, with a trim black mustache and thinning black hair, Don Cielo worked out at least an hour a day.

One of the servants, dressed in a white tunic, entered holding his cell phone. Don Cielo stepped off the machine and towed off before he spoke. “Yes?”

“This is Angel. Barrett did not turn up in El Paso.”

“Are you certain?”

“I was waiting at the airport for him.”

“Have you tried his mobile phone?”

“No answer there or at his apartment in Chicago.”

“Where are you now?”

“Still at the airport.” The terminal in El Paso was a forty minute drive from Don Cielo’s compound in Ciudad Juarez, capital of the Mexican state of Chihuahua.

“All right, go to Chicago and find out what has happened to him.”

Don Cielo walked over to one of the bullet-proof picture windows and looked out at the twisted spine of the Franklin Mountains. This was most unlike Jesse, especially since there was \$100,000 in hundred dollar bills waiting for him in Ciudad Juarez.

He strode briskly through the granite hallway into the bedroom wing. The 12,000 square foot house was cold and austere, decorated sparingly with Mexican artifacts and tapestries. An occasional wall was painted in bright yellow or blue, which did not relieve the forbidding feel

of the place. The main house, six vehicle garage, and pool were surrounded by a ten foot block and stucco wall, with a guardhouse to one side of a solid iron gate.

Don Cielo sat down at his computer monitor and checked for messages. Nothing from Barrett. Possibly this was just a mistake or meaningless accident, but Don Cielo doubted it. All his life he had trusted his instincts, and they told him otherwise.

Barrett stalked around his apartment in his bare feet. "Where's all my stuff?" he asked. McIntyre had left him alone with Kristin, who stood by the windows with her arms folded across her chest.

"You won't be needing your old clothes anymore. Besides, we have to make room for your new wardrobe."

"When do I get to take off this fucking dress?"

"At bedtime, when you put on your nightie. Until then, we've got a lot of ground to cover."

"This is bullshit."

"This is your life. If you're going to be any good to us, Jesse Barrett has to drop off the face of the earth. And before you get any ideas, we've taken the apartment across the hall, so don't try anything stupid."

"Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere like this."

She relented a bit. "Do you want something to eat?"

"No, thanks." Barrett was still feeling queasy from his bout with nausea in the hotel.

"Good. We're putting you on a crash diet anyway."

She led him into the bathroom, where a bewildering array of cosmetics, sponges and brushes were awaiting them. "Time for some practice."