

Blending In

Part Two





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BLENDING IN

Part Two

by Gabrielle Johnson

The Volkens came into the food court, arm-in-arm, smiling at each other, looking so much like a couple in love. Janice looked so pretty, in a flirty, very short, reddish dress, just like mine. She had just the faintest touch of lipstick on her mouth. She must have lost most of it on the way down in the elevator from the Galaxy.

“Carolyn?” Janice asked me in awe when I stood up after they’d looked around for a while. They looked very surprised when I waved to them like a little girl out on a big date in the city. Janice studied my pretty dress as well, raising her eyes at my rounded, fuller figure.

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"You told us not to dress up, Carolyn," Janice said, stroking her husband's arm gently as it snaked about her slim waist.

"What do you think?" I asked them, doing a girlish pirouette. "Is this all right for your office?"

"If anything," laughed Janice as Brian frowned at me. Uh oh, Janice had told him about me. I really had to hope and pray their bedroom wasn't bugged. Brian shook his head as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing when he looked at me.

"If anything, you'll be overdressed," continued Janice with a smile. "I promise not to be jealous. Brian likes to have pretty girls around. They make him work harder as he tries to impress them." Oh, I hoped that was true. I wouldn't mind a little office romance with Brian Volker, I thought, and then was appalled again at myself and the direction of my thoughts, these days.

"You mentioned you were being spied on," I said, lowering my voice and speaking seriously to the happy couple, who couldn't let go of each other even to buy food. "If that's the case, your phone is tapped. We'll have to be more circumspect than we've been so far."

Brian's arm tightened about Janice's shoulder. "What?" he began.

"You'll have to go to the police," I told the anxious Brian, going back to the girlish tone I'd decided would be Carolyn's. "It's the only way out, in the end. With the money involved, I bet your home and car are bugged. They don't rip you off, every day, do they? It's like a surge when they do. Instructions arrive in the bank with the transfers. I'll give you an address of a television store, Brian. You'll have to buy one but the guy is someone I know. He'll debug Janice's purse and your wallet, if they've gone that far."

Brian looked at me as if I'd sprung a second head. "How do you know what you do?" he asked me.

"I have a hacker friend," I said trying to be the cool, efficient Leanne for a moment. "I also phoned a policeman friend. From his answers, Rob Garzelli isn't dead. That's a tactic the people perpetrating this are using to scare you. They want you to continue working for them."

"I don't work for them," bristled Brian.

"Ready to tell me who 'they' are?" I asked him.

Brian stared at me while Janice looked at him in distress.

"What I can do as your cousin, Janice," I told her, "is find out who's monitoring you, monitoring your financial transactions and passing them on to the people Garzelli works for. I have a hacker boy friend who'll help on the hard parts."

Well, Don Moran had called me his girl friend when I'd helped on a project, in the past. Millie had given him the Girl Friend Experience he so desperately craved from any girl.

"When I get proof Garzelli is not dead, I'll also get information telling me who he's working for," I went on hurriedly, not wanting to dwell on what Moran would want as a fee for what he was doing. It wouldn't be just money for him. All the while, Brian stared at me as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Would you like to tell me more, Brian, or make my boy friend work for it?"

"What good would it do?" asked Brian, his mouth in a set line, as he stared at me, clearly not believing whatever Janice had told him about me, Leanne Morton. "We have to go to the police anyway, you say."

"We do," said Janice quietly. Brian turned a whiter color, the shade of his t-shirt.

"The press, the police, will pillory you," Brian said, his voice thick with emotion as he hugged Janice tightly. I'd had my doubts about his motives up to then but the way Brian Volker looked at the 'woman' he'd made his bride convinced me. He was in love and didn't want any hurt to come to Janice.

There were tears in his eyes as Brian hugged Janice, the pizza slices we'd bought quite forgotten. "What would you do if, if ..., anyway?" Brian Volker asked me.

"I'd talk to them," I said to the man who held his wife, another man, like me, in his arms so tenderly. I have to admit I was totally jealous of Janice Volker. I wanted my boy friend, I must recruit one, to hold me as Brian was holding her. Gee, was this why I'd dressed today as girlishly as I had, I thought, starting a new, silent conversation with myself, inside my head. I didn't get all dressed up like I was, did I, new breasts as well, because I really *was* going to start an office romance with Brian Volker?

Wow! Where did that come from? I was hardly able to breathe even in my flirty, swishing dress and treasure chest! Oh goodness, don't overdo thinking and feeling like a woman, I said to myself. But as Brian kissed Janice so tenderly, I felt another pang of jealousy surge through me. I had to look away. I looked right across the entranceway to the stores beyond. A woman moved quickly, furtively, out of my line of sight.

"I thought you said that Evelyn Kane had gone home," I said to the pair of them as they unclenched, smiling in total, absorbed, lovesick fashion at each other.

The Volkerts turned to me, uncomprehending. "She's along the shopping aisle," I said to them, certain of it. "Coincidence or she's following you?"

I didn't believe in coincidences but the Volkerts did. They wanted to get away, the reasons very obvious. I let them go. They almost ran back to the Galaxy. The beautiful, canopied bed was in for another extreme workout, I thought moodily. I strolled swishily along. Teenaged boys stared at 'Carolyn' as 'she' passed them. I saw several raise their eyes. Why shouldn't they? I looked pretty, I was sure. I stopped at a store window with some outrageous fashions. It was getting ready to close. I might as well head home as I hadn't seen hide or hair of Evelyn Kane again. Maybe it was just coincidence, seeing her.

"Going slumming," said a handsome, dark-haired guy with a charming smile. "Shouldn't you be in *Canyon's* or *Bette Miller's*?" They were both very fashionable boutiques.

As I said, I don't believe in coincidences. I smiled as prettily as I could at the charming guy, who just 'happened' to notice me. "I've a girl friend who loves flirting on Saturday nights when she finds a new boy friend," I said to him with a smile. "I was looking at that flirty dress for her but there isn't time to try it on and see what it will look like on her."

"You've got five minutes," said the handsome guy, his mouth all crinkly.

"Spoken like a man," I said to him, smiling and batting my eyelashes. "You can't do any serious shopping in five minutes!" I love saying and doing that. I felt a real tingle down my back as my hair swished. I turned away but he turned with me.

"Where are you headed?" asked the smiling guy.

"Oh, down there," I said, my gesture showing off my fingernails and lovely bracelet.

"Just where I was going myself," said this guy with charm flowing from him. He was a few inches taller than me in the heels I'd put on. He slowed his stride to walk with me, me wiggling my tush as pretty girls do when a man has his arm on hers.

"You often pick up girls in shopping malls?" I asked him. I don't know why but whenever I talked to a really gorgeous guy, and this guy was ultra-handsome, I felt my dress or my skirt all about me. I swished, hips and tush moving so femininely with every step I took in my high heels and tight skirt. I headed to a taxi rank, close to the Galaxy hotel.

"This will be my first pickup, I hope," laughed the tall guy. "My name's Anthony, by the way, Tony to my friends."

"Tony," I said, trying it out, mincing and feeling my dress swirling in the way I moved. I swayed more and more like a girl as my high heels clicked.

"And your name," asked Tony with that crinkly smile.

"Carolyn," I said, admiring this guy's smooth moves. Oh yes, I'd play along as Carolyn Crosby. It would be fun, wouldn't it, to make the opposition believe I was an empty-headed bimbo who'd used a family connection to get a job. What could they suspect me of doing, then?

"Carolyn," said Tony with another smile. "What's down this way for you? Meeting a boy friend in the hotel? Or a husband of one of your beautiful friends? Are you married? Oh, is your boy friend married to you?"

"What an interesting line of patter you have," I said, jarred by the way he suggested I might be seducing another woman's husband! Had he seen the looks I'd

given Brian Volker? "Actually, the taxi rank is here. As you'd expect, it's by the hotel."

"In that case, let me invite you into the Jupiter Bar," said Tony easily, taking my hand as if we really knew one another. "Just one drink before I ask you out this weekend."

An attack of nerves ran all through me. This wasn't what I'd planned for this Carolyn disguise. I'd better cool him down a little. "I'd love to go out with you, Tony," I told him, regret in my lilting voice. "But ..."

"The inevitable 'but' from every pretty girl I meet," said Tony, with his charming smile. If this wasn't Lincoln North shopping center, I'd have thought I was on a television show, where a guy has to prove he's a pickup artist to his friends.

"My boy friend won't like us going out together," I told Anthony Whoever in a rush. He wasn't fazed by that.

"I wasn't inviting him to come with us," Tony said gruffly as we turned down the passage to the Galaxy Hotel and ran into Oliver, the 'assistant manager', chatting up some red-haired girl, going in the opposite direction. I smiled brightly as I was sure Oliver would recognize me. He frowned and, though he looked at me, kept on going to his desk.

I was mortified to be ignored before realizing I'd been Leanne, a glamorous, red-haired Leanne, when Oliver had seen me last. "Geez," said Tony beside me. "You really know how to hurt a guy, Carrie baby."

I stopped, quivering, as I looked up at the grinning Anthony Whoever. He stepped ahead to open the doors to the Galaxy hallway. It was ingrained in me now to let men open doors for me. I found myself waiting for the service when I was Hamilton or Al, after being a girl for a long while.

"I'm sorry," I said nervously as Tony guided me, hand on my waist, through the people milling about, in the noisy Galaxy foyer.

"You tell me about your boy friend and that's why you can't go out with me," said Tony. "Then you flirt with that busboy we passed. You know how to put the hurt on a guy's ego, Carrie."

"Oh," I said, flummoxed. "Oh, I saw that guy when I was here for an interview earlier today." Yes, that was it. I'd cover my butt, pun intended, as I ruefully explained what Tony probably knew. "He showed me where I had to go. Of course, my hair was different. He didn't seem to recognize me, did he?"

"Shame on him," said Tony, still smiling. "Here's the Jupiter." The bar was crowded but a waitress smiled at us, finding us a place to sit. Oh, there came the 'pretty girl' feelings again as I noisily, girlishly, crossed my legs. Tony smiled and seemed to like what he saw, my dress more than halfway up my thighs.

What else could I order but white wine? Yes, I had to show the waitress my ID. I was surprised she didn't comment on how clean and new my driving license was, or how my photo looked just like me. Both were true.

"So you're twenty-one," said Tony easily as I put my ID back into the purse I carried.

"Twenty-four actually," I said brightly to him. No, I wasn't telling him my real age. He was in his late twenties, I expected. If he told me I was joking and must be older, the way I looked, I'd have clonked him. Leanne wouldn't have minded. But I was Carolyn, a way younger girl than Leanne.

"I thought you were eighteen," said Tony with a charming smile. "Most guys in here, looking at us, think I'm robbing the cradle, sitting here with you."

"Thank goodness you're not most guys," I said to him, blushing, pleased, re-adjusting the way I was sitting, re-crossing my legs. Oh, darn, I was showing more leg now, and my stocking tops. Oh darn, hee hee. Then, I wanted to bite my tongue as Tony gave me his crinkly smile. I was flirting with a man in a bar as if I really was a woman. I felt prickling all over me as I saw how he was looking at me.

"No, I'm not most guys," Tony agreed. "You had an interview for a job here?" he asked. "Don't tell me you're a cocktail waitress?"

I shivered at his choice of words. "You've found me out," I said lightly, wishing the drink would soon arrive. I wanted out of this situation, quickly.

"You're no cocktail waitress," said Tony, smiling into my face. His eyes were on me, studying every line of makeup.

"I am," I said, lifting my chin, hoping I wasn't exposing my Adam's apple to him. I wore chokers and high-necked blouses and sweaters to avoid notice. I didn't see an Adam's apple on me but I'd seen some, on Nicole Drury's 'girl' friends, whom she'd insisted I meet.

"In that classy, pretty dress?" asked Tony. "You're an executive assistant, no, wait, an administrative assistant, I'd bet. Am I right?"

Of course you are. You probably knew all along, I thought. "You're so clever," I said admiringly, tempted to bat my eyelashes at him. I resisted the urge.

Tony smiled at me, while chatting to the waitress, giving her a very good tip. Well, she deserved it for finding us the table in the crowded bar. My white wine was ice cold, making me shiver. I'd have preferred a beer, of course, but the wine was nice, a Liebfraumilch, Tony's selection from the wine list. It was quite sweet.

I said so, gushing as I supposed a girl like Carolyn would.

"Will you be working at this hotel?" asked Tony easily.

"Oh no," I said, smiling sweetly, playing the same game as him. "I only came here to be interviewed. But I did get the job! And I start tomorrow! What do you do, Anthony Whoever? Ooo, let me guess!"

It was on the tip of my tongue to say 'gangster', but Carolyn wouldn't be hip enough to say that. Leanne would have been, daring the man she was with to oppose her. Carolyn rattled her way, little girlish in fashion, through a list of all the predictable professional careers for men.

I found out that Anthony, really Antonio, but only his grandmother called him that, Benedetto wasn't a lawyer, a stock broker, a rock concert promoter, or a fashion model agent. "And I'm not a singer," Tony said pleasantly to me. "Tony Bennett changed from the same Italian name as mine but we didn't, even though none of us kids speak the language at all."

I just happened to be hit on by someone with a name that could put him into an organized crime family, I thought. "It's a lovely name," I said sweetly to him. "So romantic!" Tony smiled broadly as he knew I was leading him on. "So, what do you really do? You're not a security guard, are you?"

That produced rich, baritone laughter that had several girls nearby appraising the man I was with. "You've found me out," Tony mocked me. "Who else should a cocktail waitress date but a security guard."

He reached over, took my hand in his, stroking me. I did one of my obvious, girlish tricks. I moved his shirt sleeve back to reveal his watch and gasped, "Is



that the time? Oh, Tony, I'm sorry. I have to go. I didn't realize the time. I'm meeting, well, you know ..."

"The boy friend," said a crestfallen, sad-looking Tony, putting me on outrageously. He knew it was a con, I'm sure, but he went along with it, escorting me, his arm about my waist, to the front of the hotel where a doorman whistled up a cab for me. Tony gave him a huge tip for such a simple service and guided me to the cab, opening the door.

I got in, ladylike as I can be. Three guys watched me, admiring my stockinged legs, the doorman, the cabbie and Tony. Tony motioned me to roll the window down, as he gave the cabbie fifty to take me wherever I needed to go. Oh, he had to be a mobster, flashing that sort of money around, I thought, as I rolled my window down, ready to give him a false phone number if he insisted.

It wasn't a phone number that Tony wanted, however. He leaned into the cab. I should have leaned back but I made it so easy by leaning forward to hear what he wanted to say. Tony, another man, kissed me. His hand went around my neck. Ooo! He pressed my head to him in a zinger of a kiss. Wow, did Carolyn ever feel it right down into her pink-painted toes, and her panties!

I'd kissed a few guys since Old George had kissed me but this was the first time I really returned a guy's kiss. Ooo, his lips pressed so delightfully into mine. I was a girl, kissing her man. I didn't want to stop, opening my mouth for him. I was sorry when Tony broke it off. We were holding up other people who wanted cabs.

"Nice guy," said the cabbie cheerfully as we sped away. I dazedly gave him the address to Morton Barnes and Associates. It took me several blocks to re-

alize I didn't want to be dropped off outside the building where the detective agency was.

I had the cabbie take me to the Lakeshore Apartments. I had a key from there and could get in easily. I kept my car there. As soon as the cab was gone, I took the stairs down to the basement, the steepness threatening me. I had to go down so slowly in my high heels. I stopped for a moment to stroke my calf muscles, sheltered, as the door above opened. Two guys went up the stairs.

"The manager's office is on two," I heard Tony's voice say to someone. "We can start looking for her there."

I waited until they left the stairwell, my heart beating very rapidly. I took off my high heels and slipped eventually into the parking lot. One good thing about wearing a wig is that you can take it off and be someone else. I was Carolyn going in to the Lakeshore, but I was Leanne going out. I watched carefully, drove down a couple of long, empty roads but no-one followed me.

I ducked out on Leanne's apartment. Who knew who might be staking that out? I headed for Joe Peng's little flop on the edge of Chinatown, where I hid out when I didn't want to be followed where I went, or when I didn't want someone calling on me, especially when I was dressed as a female. A girl at that time of night, on her own, must be a hooker, the denizens of this area assumed. Regular people left a girl like me alone. I parked the car among the wrecks on Colby's lot.

I was whistled at a lot as I leaned to lock the car and put on the alarm. Yes, I had a nice tush, I agreed with one guy who called after me. Several other guys, yes, the not so regular people, called to me to come on over

and join them on their bottle. I shivered and headed down the street to Colby's place. He'd recognize my car and know I'd been the one to put bills in his mailbox. I'd leave it there for a few days, until I needed it. Then, I'd take it away again. A couple of times, Colby had asked who the lady was who was driving my car now.

"Didn't she leave money?" I asked him. She had. Colby was satisfied, his lot as good as any other for 'storing' my car. I didn't want to be recognized by my car or my driving. That would make it easy for this handsome guy, Tony, to track me down. I didn't want that, did I? Oh, but some girls would call him cute, wouldn't they? Girls like me, that's for sure.

A boozy guy called me from a stoop but I just waved to him. I wiggled my tush as I flowed femininely away from him.

"On a distress call now," I told the guy and his pal, smiling brightly at them. The pal was the one who asked if a girl like me was interested in a quick twenty bucks.

"Catch you later, on the way out!" I cooed to the boozy guys. I doubted that they'd have been able to get it up, anyway.

As usual, the lights were out, 'borrowed' from the stairway down to the basement suite in the old house that I now owned. It had a name, 'Joe Peng', on the door. Who he was, no-one seemed to know. My key worked, though, all I cared about. I locked up carefully, behind me, and went around, making sure all the drapes were in place before I turned on any lights.

I stood there on my high heels, in my tight skirt, and looked at a shapely Leanne/Carolyn in the mirror. No wonder the boozers had called to me. My hair was shiny, even in the dim light of the place I called my

'doss'. I didn't know why I was trembling so much after the evening. Was it the excitement of a chase, or was it the excitement of being really kissed by an attractive man? I stared at the woman in the bathroom mirror as I took makeup remover and began to get ready for bed.

Disappointment came over me when I recalled I didn't have a nightie in the doss. All I had were Alex's pyjamas. Well, girls wore pyjamas, I thought, especially girls like Carolyn. Did I have to maintain the fiction, I thought, that I was just a man, Alex, dressing up for a job he was doing, blending in? I carefully laid out all the female clothing I'd wear again the following day, as Carolyn,

To be frank, I didn't have to maintain the fiction that I was a man. When I was myself, tracking someone as George had shown me, I'd do just as well as he did. I was George and answered like an old man if I stayed in the role. When I tried out Leanne as a character, it only came together when I thought of myself as her and how she'd behave.

Yes, I was Leanne whenever I put on female clothing. George encouraged me to think the way that I confessed I was doing. He said he did the same. It was the only way to really blend in, he said. I doubted it but I did it now all the time, without thinking very much about what I was doing.

Now, I was Carolyn, I thought consciously for once, snuggling into bed, my hair braided into two, little pigtails. I'd put lotion on my face and entire body, making me smooth, someone Tony had thought was an eighteen-year-old girl.

Oh, how I wished I had my baby dolls to go to bed in. I loved to play with myself when I was in pretty, womanly nightwear. Men's pajamas are really

skunky, you know! Yes, I must think Carolyn thoughts, mustn't I? It was the only way I could be sure of blending in with 'other' women.

As Tiffany Scott, erotic dancer, at the *Erotic Songbird*, oops, the *Exotic Songbird* night club, I would have sat in the Don's lap and given him a lap dance as I'd seen Diana, Joanie, even Steffie, in her odd sort of way, doing for various men. Well, I'd sort of done it for Jack as well, hadn't I, I had to admit to myself. And I hadn't been discovered.

"Get on your knees," the Don said to me as soon as we were alone, the door to this back room, in the *Exotic Songbird* night club, closed behind us. A long sofa extended out from us. "On your knees, woman," he snarled at me as he sat down on the sofa. "Can't you see that I'm an old man?"

Yes, what my lover wanted from me was a blow job. I wanted to scream. I should kill him, shouldn't I, went through my head. I could do it, a half dozen ways, more if I used one of my high heels as a weapon. And what will you do then when you try to leave, idiot Tiffany, I asked myself again with a shudder.

Louie Lugano put his hand on me as I knelt down, pulling on the little skirt I was still wearing which hadn't protected me in any way from his or any man's hands. I had to kneel up and lean over him so that he could kiss me again. I put my arms up around his head and kissed him as if I was a woman, easing my body over his, his hands becoming so active around my tush.