

Main Attraction



Gabrielle Johnson



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MAIN ATTRACTION

Part One

by Gabrielle Johnson

“You used to have a very attractive girl working here, didn’t you?” the hard-hat, check-shirted worker persisted to Mrs Rennie who was on the till for once.

“My daughter, Bettina,” said the grumpy, frowning, older lady.

“Ah!” said the smiling guy, grabbing his coffee. “We’ll take the sandwiches to go, if you don’t mind.”

Mrs Rennie did mind. She knew what it meant when her customers went off with their goods. It meant that she’d probably never see them again.

“Gerald!” she snapped at me, though I was only a foot or so behind her. “Wrap up the sandwiches for these gentlemen!” She slammed the till shut and turned, disappearing into the ‘office’ she kept behind the counter.

“You knew her daughter?” asked the second, grimy worker, in a hard-hat like the first.

The older guy stared at me as I poured the coffees into takeaway containers and neatly rolled up the sandwiches and bagged them.

“You related to her?” the first guy asked me, indicating Mrs Rennie.

I shook my head as I handed the bag and coffees to the guys who’d stopped in.

“Well, Len,” that was to the second guy taking the coffees, “and Gerald,” that was a sneer at me, “I knew Bettina all right. I bet every man in Corcoran’s,” that was the construction yard just around the corner from Mrs Rennie’s ‘tea room’, “knew Bettina, as intimately,” he paused, rolling his eyes in lewd fashion, making me blush, “as I did.”

“So she was the main attraction we came in here to see,” said Len, leading the way out of the tearoom.

“Every store needs its attraction,” I could hear the first guy saying as the door swung slowly shut after the rare customers, even though it was ten after noon. “And Bettina had two of the main attractions why anyone would want to come in here.”

Len laughed loudly. Thankfully, the door closed on the two guys.

My mother used to come often to the *Timeout Café and Tearoom*, though she hadn’t been in since she’d said to ‘Rose’, Mrs Rennie, “Gerald could do that for you, Rose. He knows his way about a kitchen and parlor. He’s been my housemaid and cleaner since he’s been out of school. I’ve even made him his own apron for when he’s got chores.”

I know I’d blushed at that, wishing I could chug down the hot coffee more quickly than my mother.

Mum didn't have to tell Mrs Rennie that about me, I thought. I was just being my usual self, trying to fit in, to help, with all the kids Mum was raising in our old house. She was doing what she could, babysitting lots of neighborhood kids, some all day long, trying to make a living.

I'd tried to get a job anywhere, downtown, even at Corcoran's - "Why would we want to hire a little wimp like you?" - the taunt there came from someone in a hard hat, who'd looked like Len or his friend. I'd tried to show them my high school transcript - but the Home Economics course was listed first. That was all prospective employers seemed to read.

"No, we don't need a wife," I'd already been told at two yards that advertised for 'Help' but didn't need any, when I appeared, to apply for the job that would supposedly take anybody.

The least I could do for my mother was help out, particularly with my brothers. They were developing just like me, doing exactly what I did. Since I wasn't around so much any more, yes, I'd seen the three of them in pinafores, doing dishes, cleaning and vacuuming, just as I had done.

Not that Mum ever seemed to notice. She just took it for granted that, if I was there, I'd do whatever task she set me, and do it without complaint as I'd always done. I'd taught that to Danny and my other brothers and they were growing up just like me, quiet, nervous kids who wore pinafores at home, as my mother wanted me to.

My father, before he abandoned us when I was eight or nine, had taught me never to complain, to protest or to answer back. I thought I was going to die from one whipping I'd received. Only my mother,

clinging to his arm, eventually, had stopped the beating I was getting.

I'd thought that I'd owed her for that. But working for Mrs Rennie? This was above and beyond the call of duty as I told Martin, my only friend. I was his only friend as well. He was kicked out on the streets every day by his Ma and Pa. He was told to find a job and not come back till he'd found one. Of course, he went home each night and was kicked out again the following day. I know he actually envied me.

"If you leave that job," Marty told me, "recommend me for it! I can do almost all of it now!"

I'd started teaching Martin what I did every day in the tearoom. It wasn't too hard, but the cooking would get him fired, I knew. Still, it was getting to the point where I didn't think I could stay much longer at the *Timeout*. It was just a matter of economics. The tearoom didn't have enough customers every day to make a profit. I threw out delicious cakes and cookies every day that I'd made for ladies who weren't coming to the *Timeout* any more.

I doubted that Mrs Rennie wanted to keep me, either. Some days, there wasn't enough cash in the till to cover the pittance she paid me. I'd no idea how long she'd keep the place going without customers. Even my mother, a regular on what Marty and I called the gossip circuit, wasn't making the *Timeout* any more. The women who still came in for afternoon tea I didn't even know.

"Bettina," said Mrs Rennie, coming out of the office when the men had gone. "They were talking about her, weren't they?"

I nodded dumbly. I didn't know what to say that she wouldn't take as an insult. "I shouldn't have hired you, should I?" Mrs Rennie said suddenly. "You're

quiet, Gerald. I hardly know you're here. You have to talk to the customers a lot more, encourage them to come here and converse with you. That's what Bettina did. She could talk to anyone!"

Bettina talked too much, I'd heard my mother saying to one of the women picking up her kids at our house, one day. I'd let the door stay propped open with one of the kids' toys and heard the other woman saying how huge Bettina was. She was sure to have twins.

"Is she going to bring them here for you to look after?" the woman had asked my mother.

"No," said Mum snappishly. "Her new mother-in-law ..."

"Pity," said the woman, heading out with the basket of toys I'd gathered up for her. "You could have used the income, couldn't you? Gerald's not got a job yet, has he?"

It was the very next day that my mother had taken me with her for coffee and manipulated Mrs Rennie into taking me on. "He'll be really good in here," Mum had said to 'Rose', who called her 'Annie'. "He's quiet and shy. Your customers will appreciate that after Bettina."

"You don't have a girl friend, do you, Gerald?" Mrs Rennie asked me as she got ready to fire me.

I've never felt so bad in my life. Panic set in. How could I go home to my mother and tell her that I wasn't going to be bringing any money home? She'd said it was such a relief, no, she'd said it was a 'godsend', that I'd be helping her out by paying for my own room and board instead of sponging off her all the time.

"Please don't fire me," I begged, and, suddenly, felt the tears running down my cheeks. Oh, it was so hu-

miliating. One moment, I was thinking how much I hated the *Timeout* and, the next, was crying as if it was the most wonderful place in the world.

"I, I'll do anything if you'll let me stay on," I begged Mrs Rennie. "Anything!"

"Anything?" asked the disagreeable old woman I worked for. There was a strange smile curling her upper lip.

"Anything," I repeated, brushing, or trying to, the rivulets running down my face. "My M-Mum ..."

"Needs the money you bring home," said Mrs Rennie. "How many brothers do you have, three?"

I nodded. Marty claimed they were all clones of me. I knew they weren't. We were all different. But, out in front of others, I suppose, they were like me, taking their cues on how to behave from what I did. Certainly, my younger brother, the next eldest after me, Danny, was as shy as me, copying me, even to wearing an old apron of mine when he did chores for 'Mummy'.

"And you couldn't have a girl friend because that would cost money, wouldn't it?" asked Mrs Rennie. "You'd have to take her out, spend money on her, money you make here, out of me."

I shook my head numbly and tried to clear my face again. Girls just didn't look at me. Why should they when there were so many guys around, guys with a little money to spend on them? Besides, we guys outnumbered the girls by far, at high school.

"A pretty waitress would bring in some guys at noon, enough to let me break even on the day," said Mrs Rennie. "You, Gerald, bring me nobody."

There was a huge lump in my throat. There it was. That was it. I was finished at the *Timeout Café and Tea-*

room. Mrs Rennie stared at me as I stood there and waited for the final words to be said. Only she didn't say them. She just stared at me. I must have stood there for five minutes waiting for her to say, "Good-bye, Gerald," but she didn't.

"Remember you said that you'd do anything," Mrs Rennie said slowly, turning, going to the door and putting the 'Back in Five Minutes' notice in the door window before she locked it.

She shocked me as she walked towards me and took my hand in hers. I don't recall Mrs Rennie ever touching me before. We were usually so careful, each of us, behind the counter not to walk into one another. Her hand was unbelievably soft for an older, working woman.

I was stunned when Mrs Rennie opened the door to the upper apartment where she'd lived for so long. I think I was the first person, save for Bettina, of course, who'd ever been let into the rooms above the café and tearoom, a cozy living room and two bedrooms being revealed to me.

"This was Bettina's room," said Mrs Rennie, leading me into a pink and white decorated bedroom, clearly a girl's room, a bathroom connecting to another, Mrs Rennie's, I guessed. She immediately closed the door that led to her room and locked it. To prevent me looking at her stuff, I was sure, not that I would, of course.

"You like this room?" asked Mrs Rennie, indicating the pictures and posters of girls on the walls. She grimaced at the way the blonde was posed in the first poster she touched.

"It's very girlie," I said uncertainly, not knowing if that was what I should say.

"You did say you'd do anything to keep the job you have here," said Mrs Rennie. "Let's see if you meant it, or if you were just mouthing words to mollify me, as you do all the time to Annie. It's driving her crazy, you know. That's why she doesn't come in to see you working here. She's got nothing to say to you."

I shuddered at what she said. My mother must talk to her about me. I hated to think what they said about me. Mum thought I was useless, I knew. Mrs Rennie seemed to have developed the same opinion. Was I going to be asked to do housework for her, I wondered? Was that how I was going to earn a little money, as a cleaner?

Mrs Rennie was opening different drawers and throwing all kinds of girl's clothing, panties and frilly stuff, onto the pink quilted bed. I shivered as I wondered if I was going to have to do laundry. Doing a girl's laundry was always difficult as women's clothing was so different to a boy's. I was used to doing washing for all the boys and the babies at home. Mum expected me to do hers as well, and was irritated when I didn't do it right. Danny, my brother, was much better than me, she'd told me the last time she'd been in. She got annoyed when she had to re-teach me about colors running into one another, and what fabrics could go with what, despite what the labels said.

"No, I wasn't thinking of laundry," said a smiling Mrs Rennie, "but that's not a bad idea, Gerald, for afterwards. Sit in that chair in front of Bettina's mirror, will you?"

I sat. I looked at myself in the large mirror. The lights, along the outside, that Mrs Rennie turned on, made it shine very brightly, illuminating how unbelievably pale I was. The array of lights was like one of those in a theater that chorus girls used.



"You don't shave," said Mrs Rennie, breaking in on the nagging voice that told me, all the time, that I wasn't much of a man, was I?

"N-not very often," I murmured, blushing again. Sometimes, I tried to shave, but all that happened, in the main, was that I cut myself, then having to endure little cuts healing themselves for several days. The soft hair on my cheeks just wasn't very visible, nor easy to take off with a razor.

Mrs Rennie put a black, silky dress over my shoulder, making me jump in surprise. "Sit, sit," she said. "It's just what Bettina used to wear sometimes when she was a waitress for me."

I looked up at the face behind me. Her dark eyes regarded me steadily. "You did say that you'd do anything to stay on," Mrs Rennie said, sending shivers through me. "And I need a girl here as a waitress, maybe more than one."

My mouth dropped open in shock as I stared up at her, my eyes following her as she walked into the closet where Bettina's clothes were stored. They must be hers as they were dresses for a young woman. Mrs Rennie stepped out with a girl's wig on a plastic head and brought it over to where I sat, my heart starting to beat a thousand times a minute. The reason why she'd been looking at me so slyly filtered through my slow, teenaged boy's brain.

"You, you want me to dress up, like a girl!" I gasped at her.

"Not just dress like a girl," said Mrs Rennie. "I want you to be a girl, to be a waitress who brings boys in to ogle her, like Bettina." She smirked at my contorting face. "You did say, Geraldine, that you would do anything, didn't you?"

I tried to spring to my feet but her hands held me down. Wow, was she strong for an old woman!

"If you can be a girl," said Mrs Rennie, "you can stay." She frowned. "But we can't call you Geraldine, can we? That would be much too obvious, wouldn't it? If you won't try to make yourself be a girl, you can leave now, Cecilia, and we won't speak of this again. If you try and it doesn't work, which I am beginning to think will be the likeliest outcome of all, I'll fire you anyway. And I won't care what you tell your mother or anyone in town about me. They wouldn't believe you, anyway."

I stared up at her face in the mirror, shuddering at the way she was looking at me.

"You think I'm mad?" Mrs Rennie asked me softly. "I'm not. I've seen pretty boys like you ... well, those are fairy stories, really, aren't they? Some day, I might tell you ... or I might not. Now, when I tell you to, you will do the 'anything' that you said you'd do ... Take off your male clothing and put on, without any protestations, the articles of clothing that I wish you to.

"Then, we shall apply some makeup to your pretty face, so that no-one like Harriet Lewis," she was in every second day, always complaining about how fresh the muffins weren't, and how little milk was in her coffee, "or her friends, recognizes who you really are, Cecilia."

"My, my name is ..." I said in a breathless, choked voice that didn't sound like mine at all. I wanted to say 'Gerald' but the look on her face was severe.

"Cecilia," said Mrs Rennie firmly. "Let's see if I'm right, and that one thing you can do right, lovely Cecilia, is to be a pretty, little waitress in my café."

"I don't want ..." to be a pretty, little waitress, I began, half getting up. Her soft fingers worked on the buttons of my shirt and opened them quickly.

"Anything," snapped Mrs Rennie. "Let's see if 'anything' will work. We'll know in half an hour or less. Get undressed, Cecilia!"

She must have seen the way I jerked when she'd called me 'Geraldine'. Sometimes, my enemies at school taunted me with that name. Once, it had been when we had no girls in class and we'd been reading a play. I'd been told to read the part of Juliet by old, grumpy Mr Bartlett.

Sometimes, the teasing went on for weeks, particularly when the girls heard about it, and started calling me 'Geraldine' as well. If Mrs Rennie had called me 'Geraldine' all the time, I know I'd have taken off. And then, what happened to me, what I went through, in that café and tearoom, wouldn't have happened.

I didn't take my clothes off. It was Mrs Rennie who undressed me. But I didn't stop her, not even when I was sitting in front of the big mirror in just my underpants and Mrs Rennie was fitting a padded bra to my chest.

"We'll fill this up in a minute," the old woman said as she fastened the bra at my back and adjusted the straps over my shoulders. "But, first, let's do what any girl would do to begin with and put your make-up on you, Cecilia!"

"I don't want ..." I protested, gurgling as her strong hand, not as soft as it had been, took hold of my mouth and spun me about on the special chair Bettina must have used. It spun but stayed there, in front of the dressing table mirror.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" I gasped, time after time, as some kind of stinging astringent was applied to my face. A pale cream was applied to me, which stung me again.

"Don't be such a sissy, Cecilia," said Mrs Rennie. Oooh, I guessed why she'd given me the name she had. Yes, she'd shorten it some time, wouldn't she? I'd be Sissy, or Cissy, if she gave me a name tag with a 'C'. No, I wasn't going to stick around and play this humiliating game with her.

"It doesn't hurt that much," sniffed the old woman, her fingers running something over my eyelids. "Now, if I was shaping your eyebrows, like this," more 'Ows' poured out of me as she pulled at my eyebrow hairs. At first, I thought she was tugging on me with her fingers before I realized she was using tweezers on me.

"Don't do that!" I screamed, finding the strength to pull my head back away. She cackled at me. Yes, that's what I'd call what came out of her mouth.

"All right," Mrs Rennie said smugly. "Got what was needed, anyway. Didn't think you had it in you, girl, to object to anything I'm doing to you. Now, sit very still for the next part. And watch what I do as I want you to do this as soon as you can for yourself."

There was no way that I was ever going to put eye shadow and eye liner about my eyes. I wasn't going to learn now to use an eyebrow pencil on my eyebrows nor a different kind of pencil to outline my lips before I put on lipstick.

"Just simple and easy, Cecilia," said my tormentor. "Well, don't you look really cute, with your hair all mussed up like that. You must let it grow from now on. You'll be really surprised, Sissy, my girl, how much nicer it is to have your own styled hair rather than a heavy wig!"

There, she'd called me by that word. I was half up out of the chair, reaching for the horrible thing she'd put around me, the bra, when Mrs Rennie pushed me down heavily again. The wig she'd brought out was maneuvered over my head.

Mrs Rennie turned me so that I couldn't look at myself as she began to stick hairpins and barettes into my hair to keep the wig attached to me. She scolded me several times as I couldn't keep my head still, not when long strands of hair wafted over my shoulders or my ears. She was arranging it all in some kind of female style that meant that she put ribbons about clumps of hair.

"Yes, this will work!" said Mrs Rennie in delight, spinning me around so that I could see the girl in the mirror looking at me with such a fearful expression on her face.

"That's not me!" I shouted out as, at the same time, Mrs Rennie was saying, "It's you, Cecilia! It's you! Oh, what a pretty girl you are! The workmen are going to start coming back at lunchtime, you'll see, just to be served by you. Oh, I've so much to teach you on how to be a waitress!"

"I, I've changed my mind!" I said to the old woman, who ignored me completely.

"Just slip the black dress over you, my darling girl," she went on, "and see! Yes, you are going to do very nicely as my next waitress, the main attraction around here, when we've got you all padded up and trained, of course!"

I didn't want to be padded up and trained, of course. I didn't want to be 'the main attraction'! What I wanted was to take back what I'd said to Mrs Rennie. She wouldn't let me speak! She couldn't get over how young and girlish I looked. The wig divided easily into

two parts, with ribbon-formed bows, way above each of my ears. Long streams of blonde-streaked hair, just the way Bettina used to wear it, Rose Rennie said, hung over my ears. I had a blonde fringe across my forehead above my painted eyes.

Yes, it was a very girlish face, I'd have to admit. But, surely, people would still know it was me behind the mask, wouldn't they? When I smiled, as Mrs Rennie was telling me to do, I couldn't believe how differently I looked to my normal self. I guess I didn't smile very much. I didn't look like me, at all. I looked like, like 'Cecilia', as Mrs Rennie was being careful to call me.

I should have run for it. But, for some reason, money, a job, I guess, I didn't. I didn't know, either, that Mrs Rennie had so much more to do to me, beneath the light, airy dress that settled so weirdly about me. It enervated me, robbing me of all my energy, my male energy, I think.

I was still staring at myself as Mrs Rennie reached down the front of the dress and put some falsies in the breast parts of the bra. "Bettina used to wear them all the time," she said. "Right up to when she got pregnant. She never had much in front, despite what those crude guys said. You're probably about the same, Cecilia and Bettina, in the breast department. Let's do something with your girlie figure that we had to do for Bettina as well."

Bettina's mother, put a corset on me, lifting the dress that was about me, to position the corset so that she could close it. She had me slip off my pants and put on pink panties as she was doing that, torturing me with the way she tightened what she called a body shaper about my waist.

I had a lesson in how to put on stockings like a woman. I had all kinds of lessons. They never ended in

all the time I was there, working for Mrs Rennie. I learned how to attach stockings to the garter belt part of the corset, sliding the garter attachments under the panties she'd already had me put on.

I had to wear several slips beneath the dress to make it flair out. Mrs Rennie lifted the dress, again, caressing my thighs as she slipped more padding beneath the corset and into the panties to make my hips stand out "as a pretty girl's should."

"When you're up here," Mrs Rennie said firmly, "I want you always in high heels. You have to learn to walk in them. Men love to see a shapely girl in high heels serving them. Bettina used to say that her tips always went down, as she went down onto her flats, when her legs were sore. So, you, Cecilia, you have to build up the strength in your ankles, calves and legs. You'll be standing in high heels for a long time, once the word gets out, that I have a pretty waitress serving in the tearoom again."

"They'll know me!" I managed to say as I was allowed to stand and wobble, her arm supporting me as the high heels clutched my stockinged feet.

"Now, they would," conceded Mrs Rennie. "We have a lot of hard work to do, Cecilia, but you are going to enjoy it. All the boys I've trained always did, in time. And the tips that you girls get for serving men is something you're going to love. I never had a girl here who didn't double her wages, at least, by working for me through the lunch and supper hours. And that includes serving the afternoon ladies, as well, who are the worst tippers, as you probably know anyway."

All the time that she was talking, Mrs Rennie was making me walk, or sit, and smile; or she was stopping me to do things like putting earrings at my ears and a

necklace at my throat. Oh gods, she was so serious about what she was doing, what I was doing!

I could barely squeak out anything as I sauntered about a girl's bedroom, 'her' clothing swirling, sort of seductively, about me. Out of the high heels, Mrs Rennie had me twirling in my dress and that was so awful! She must have known I would feel so humiliated to have such feminine touches against me. Oh, and the stockings and garter belt! I was constantly reminded that I was dressed like a woman by the tugs along my legs as I moved, even to sit down.

Sitting down was another lesson. I didn't know that sitting was so different for a man from that of a woman sitting. I didn't know that I had to smooth skirts beneath me or to cross my legs every time.

Mrs Rennie was much like my mother. She was irritated with me when I didn't do what she said I must do. She had me re-practice, 'properly', everything that I knew how to do! One time, I think I had to sit and stand six times in a row before she was satisfied that I was doing both parts, sitting down and standing up, in a girlie way.

A phone call disturbed Mrs Rennie then for just a moment. "Rose here," she said into her cellphone as I thankfully sat, legs crossed, letting my smile fade as I glanced at the girl in the mirror. A shudder went through me as I looked at 'her' and could see her, no, me, as a girl. Oh, but it wasn't going to be like that, me being quiet and staring at people. No, once I spoke or tried to do anything, like walk in women's shoes, I was going to be 'outed' as a man in seconds.

"No, Harriet, I'm not going out of business," said Rose Rennie snappishly. "I put up the sign as I have a new girl here who I'm training for the tearoom." She

looked at me with a frown, turning it to a smile as she listened to whoever was on the phone.

"She's a country girl," said Mrs Rennie, looking at me. "Never worn decent clothes before, can't move in high heels without falling, doesn't know how to dip to keep men from looking at her panties, and can't speak like a young lady yet ... Yes, I have my work cut out for me but you know me ... Yes, I'll have her in shape in a month, I would think ... She's a pretty, little thing ... Cecilia ...

"Yes, I know what all the boys will call her. She hates to be called Sissy. But, she'll just have to put up with it for the tips she's going to make ... Yes, drop by for tea ... You can tell me what you think of her ... Yes, she's here, listening to me ... She has such pretty, big, blue eyes ... Yes, when she starts to blubber, she'll have every boy in town running to console her ... See you later!"

Mrs Rennie waved at me to stand. I did, trembling, the high heels wobbling as I got up. "I need a drink," Rose said. She'd told me to call her that as I wasn't a young man who would call her 'Mrs Rennie', any more. "Let's see how a girl goes downstairs in a dress and heels and keeps her smile going all the time. You can make me fresh coffee when we get downstairs and wear that frilly apron your mother sent. You never wear it, do you? I wonder why."

What boy would want to wear the aprons my mother had made for me, and Danny, as well? It had frills over the shoulders! I'd tipped one into the garbage once but Mrs Rennie had seen it. She'd had me clean and iron it perfectly as I did the white aprons, straight and functional, not decorative at all as was the one I had assigned to me.

"Not too bad," said Rose as she scooted across the main floor of the *Timeout Café and Tearoom* unlocking the door and taking away the sign that we'd be back in minutes.

"Someone could come in," I said hoarsely to her, panic surely there in my voice and manner. The dress floated around me and caressed my stockings, reminding me how I was dressed. Oh, gods, I could see myself, a girl, crossing the floor to the coffee machine, the sound of the high heels echoing across the café. Worse, I felt like a girl, the dress swishing against 'my' stockings.

"Swing your hips, smaller steps, one foot landing directly in front of the other," Rose said to me. "And smile, Cecilia, smile!"

I'd barely stretched the lipstick on my lips when the doorbell sounded and a tall man came walking into the tearoom. "You are open, aren't you?" he asked, sitting down at the front table. "I'm going to die if I don't get a coffee, real soon."

"Cecilia was just about to make some fresh," said Rose sweetly. "Go on, girl," she said to me. "Do what I've taught you."

Despite the terror running through my mind, I knew that Rose wasn't referring to making coffee. She meant for me to walk like a girl and to do my chores about the cafe as if I was a girl.

"Go on, girl!" repeated Rose with a smug smile of her own.

There was a lump in my throat as I tottered forward to the counter and coffee machines. I could feel the eyes on me. I was flushing, heat rising inside the female clothing clinging to me. At any moment, I expected to hear the man laugh and say something about the boy in a dress.

"How about something stronger?" Rose asked this man we hadn't see before. "I'm Rose, the owner. I should know you, shouldn't I?" Her face screwed up as she tried to recall something. "You're ...?"

"Gord Hiller," said the tall, dark-haired guy with a smile. "I was just in Corcoran's, representing my company, when I saw this place. You actually run a tea-room this close to the rauchiest yard in town?"

"The town isn't very big," said Rose. I shivered as I completed what I was doing. There was something about the tone of voice she was using. It was almost as if she was flirting with Gord Hiller, whoever that was, and she was fifty years older than him, for sure! Well, twenty-five, at least!

"And who is this?" Gord asked, with a smile. I could see his eyes on me because I looked into the long mirror that ran the length of the counter. I cleaned the fingerprints off it every day as Rose couldn't seem not to touch the mirror, in front of which I put various plates of the muffins, scones and pastries that I made during the day. I think that she ate more of them than the afternoon ladies for whom they were primarily intended. No, Martin wasn't going to be able to do that part of my job if he ever did take it over.

"Tell the gentleman who you are, girl," said a smirking Rose Rennie as panic flooded over me. My hands shook as reached for the mugs we used for coffee.

I gulped as I picked up the coffee pot and poured, very shakily, the thick, aromatic liquid into the two mugs on the counter.

"Come on, girl," said Rose, with yet another smile at me. I know she was overdoing that, deliberately to remind me to smile as if I was a girl. "Tell this charming man who you are."

The charming man was frowning as he picked up the coffee mug that Rose had slid in front of him. "Ce-Cecilia," I whispered, my hair, the real stuff under the wig that was weighing on my shoulders and neck, standing on end as I used a girl's name for myself.

"Cecilia?" asked the man who'd moved to sit at the counter where he could look at what I was doing. "Pretty name for a pretty girl," he said with a smile that showed off sparkling white teeth in his tanned face. "I'll bet you're called Sissy all the time!"

"She is!" chortled Rose. "Oh, don't be shy, darling Sissy! Put on the apron you brought from home to work in. It's so much prettier than those white ones we keep behind the counter."

Rose stepped around to where I was, chattering on about how I loved to cook, and passing some of the scones I'd made to the smiling guy, she calling me 'Sissy' all the time.

I knew that my face must be bright red as I let Rose put the frilly, flowered apron on me, pulling it so tight at my waist, as if to emphasize how thin I was. But I wasn't thin like I usually was. No, I had a padded chest and padded hips. The mirrors showed me that I looked very girlish. I felt very, very girlie inside me as I looked at the girl with long, blonde-streaked hair, her red ribbons almost the same color as her scarlet lips.

Oh, the makeup on my face! It must be covering up the blushing I was sure that I was doing. I couldn't look at Gord Hiller. I couldn't look in the mirrors any more to see the girl I'd become. All I could do was to begin, shakily and miserably, to make fresh cupcakes for Mrs Lewis when she got to the *Timeout Tearoom*.

"Hey, these are really good!" said Gord heartily, as he began to wolf down another scone. "And you make a really fine cup of coffee, Sissy, no, Cecilia. I won't for-

get that when I come in again. And I'm going to be coming in again as I really got the run-around at Corcoran's today. I'm supposed to see the old man himself tomorrow. Maybe, I'll be able to show him I can save a barrel of money for his operation here in town."

"How interesting!" said Rose. I could almost hear the batting of her eyelids at the attractive man sitting beside her at the counter. At least, I supposed that Gord Hiller was attractive, attractive to women, that is, as Mrs Rennie was acting almost like a teenager.

Oh, I got the message. That was the way that I, the new Cecilia, was supposed to act with a man who came into the tearoom. "I couldn't do that!" I thought with a shudder as I stole a look at the way that Rose was smiling at the guy. 'Gord' was looking at me, studying every move I was making, as I prepped the cupcakes from the mix I'd made earlier that morning.

"Sissy is so talented on that side of the counter," Rose began as there was another ring of the bell. Harriet Lewis stalked in, the way she normally entered the tearoom, leading several women to the window tables. I hadn't seen some of them, like Mrs Fletcher or Mrs Kenny, since the first days I'd begun to work at the *Timeout*.

"Well, and who is that?" Mrs Lewis asked in her stentorian voice as I wanted to cringe, get down, and hide behind the counter. I might have done it as well but for Gord shaking his coffee mug. I reached for the pot without thinking about it.

"Thanks, Cecilia," Gord said, pronouncing the girl's name very carefully. "I really do mean it when I say that this place is a real surprise to me, a very pleasant surprise. Great coffee, tasty food and a pretty wait-

ress to serve me – I’ll definitely be coming in here when I’m downtown!”

Smile, I tried to tell myself. I guess something of what I was thinking reached my lipsticked mouth.

“Where’s Gerald?” I could hear Mrs Lewis bellowing across the tables. Rose had stepped over towards the afternoon tea ladies. Belatedly, I began to put on the water and assemble the ingredients for the various teas that would be ordered, all in the right teapots.

“Hey, you do that really well,” said Gord as I set up the trays quickly, all with the right cups, the right milk jugs and sweeteners. No, all the ladies, save for Mrs Allen, who wasn’t in, wouldn’t use sugar in anything. I’d heard Rose saying that the cupcakes were made with Splenda, which they weren’t, and they ate them really happily.

“Gerald is working in the basement,” announced Mrs Rennie, stepping over to help me with the trays as she usually did. But this wasn’t usual. I had to wobble, in girls’ shoes, in girls’ clothes, in my pretty apron, across to the tables. I was shaking as I watched Rose dip, as she’d had me practice upstairs, she showing me again how I was to get down to the level of the table and serve the ladies, all three tables of them, without showing any of them the panties I was wearing.

“So I’ve hired a new girl, Sissy,” Rose said, drowning out Mrs Lewis’s complaints about the temperature of the water in the teapots.

“About time,” put in Harriet Lewis. “That boy could never do anything right. My, but these cupcakes are really tasty!”

And double-sugared to sweeten you up, I wished I’d said at that point.

My cheeks were flaming as I retreated from the chore of serving. Gord was smiling at me. "Your first day?" he asked. "And I was your first customer?" He laid a twenty dollar bill beside his cup along with the five that more than covered the price of his coffee. "Have to mark your first day with something special, don't we, pretty Cecilia?"

I still couldn't say anything. I knew my voice would give me away. I couldn't bear that, not with the tearoom full of women. Well, it felt full after the morning we'd had. I cringed at the thought of women laughing and saying terrible things about me, a boy in a dress.

Another twenty dollar bill appeared beside the first. "Now, if you'd only talked to me just a little, shy Cecilia," said Gord with another smile that made me shake all over. He really did seem to think I was a girl, I thought in relief.

"Th-thank you!" I whispered to him as he stood up. I began to fill the second row of teapots that I'd have to carry over, very soon.

"She speaks!" said Gord as if marveling at me. He waved as he stepped away from the counter and headed on out. Relief flooded over me as I watched him leave. Only when he looked back, smiled again and waved, did I realize what I was doing, staring after him. I shuddered but managed to keep the smile on my face a little towards him. Well, it was going to be the last time he saw me, wasn't it?

"What's this?" asked Rose as she came back from chatting to Harriet about the new 'girl' in the café and tearoom. "A hundred dollar tip?" She'd picked up what Gord had left on the table. There wasn't just one, there were others underneath. I'd been given a tip of a hundred dollars!

"Didn't I tell you I needed a pretty girl in this place?" asked Rose Rennie. "I'll hold onto your tips for you, Sissy, while you take the tea to the ladies. And set up a large plate of scones and cupcakes. They really love them, now they know they weren't made by Gerald. Everyone knows that a girl is a far better cook than any boy!"

"I should check in at home," I said blearily, my voice hoarse with all the lessons I'd had through several evenings up in Mrs Rennie's apartments. I hadn't gone home. No, I couldn't go back to being Gerald, I guessed, though Rose didn't exactly say that. She just kept reminding me that the 'anything' I'd said I'd do, did entail me having lessons in how to be a girl. I could go home when I'd mastered, what a word to use, how to walk and talk like a girl. Rose Rennie was not going to keep on doing those lessons with me, day after day.

"I've talked to your mother," said Rose, turning back the pink sheets on Bettina's bed. She pulled my legs to the side and assisted me to sit up in the nightie I'd had to sleep in, like the others I'd worn for so many nights in a row. "She was so happy to receive the money you sent her. She said it was quite all right if you stayed indefinitely and worked behind the scenes here at the *Timeout*."

"You, you didn't tell her about, about Cecilia!" I asked my jailer, as I sometimes thought of Rose Rennie.

"Sissy doesn't want me to do that, does she?" Rose asked me, a smile flickering over her thin, madeup lips. In a short time, after a bath, I'd have lipstick on me for the rest of the day, replenishing it whenever Rose told me I must.

“No,” I whispered to her. No, I didn’t want Rose to tell anyone, least of all my mother, that I was now a girl, a waitress and cook, at the *Timeout Café and Tea-room*. I couldn’t have borne all the scorn and sneers I know my mother would have given me.

I should never have used that word ‘anything’, should I? It was all my own fault that I was in such a predicament, my male clothing having disappeared, never to return, I gathered. At least, not until I proved to Rose that I could be a girl when she needed me to be.

Rose took the ribbon from my hair and led me into the bathroom where the femininely scented bath awaited me, Sissy. Oh, yes, I might as well take on the name, I thought with a shiver at myself, as that was what I was. I was a sissy.

All the boys at school had been right about me. I was a sissy. I could tremble all I wanted to, when I said that to myself, but it was true. I couldn’t help feeling like crying as my skirt or dress swept about me and made my stockinged legs feel so girlish. Yes, I was such a sissy. Rose must have recognized it in me, right away, which was why she was feminizing me so intensely.

“That man who left you the enormous tip,” said Rose as I slipped out of the nightie, my padded bra, and then my panties, and entered the lilac-scented water. I would smell of lilacs all day long as my perfume was stronger than the bathwater. “You have to make a special effort when he drops in again. You can blush all you like, he’ll expect that, but you have to be really girlie as well. That’s the lesson for tonight.”

But Gord Hiller didn’t come in though I was shaking with fear and anticipation every time I heard the sound of the entry bell. I knew that Rose would notice Gord. I’d be paraded in front of him, in my new mini-

skirt that showed off my legs so much. How was I to know I had a nice tush and girlish legs, that I should show off, according to Rose. Yes, she was pleased with me for my feminine attributes, my thin nose and clear, girlish skin. Now it was my legs that pleased her, and my tush. I had to make it sway. She showed me how and never let me forget how to do it as I worked as a girl for her.

The men from Corcoran's came in again and wanted me to serve them, no matter who else was in the tearoom. They'd come at noon every day as soon as they found out that I, the new girl, was going to be there, in the *Timeout*, for an age. Len told me that they loved lilacs. I must always wear that perfume just for them, a pretty girl like me.

Oh, how that man could make me blush with all the compliments he paid me. I could barely talk to him. All I could had to do was walk like a girl, swishing my little skirts for them, as I sashayed, blushing and smiling, between tables, and they paid me the most awful compliments, telling me what a pretty girl I was. Just mincing out with my serving tray seemed to be enough for them. They called me Sissy, which they thought was hilarious, that a girl like me should have such an insulting name.

"Listen, my darling Sissy," said Rose, still organizing me, making me dress and do all things as a girl would do. She fixed the girl's bathing hat over my hair so that it wouldn't get wet and lose the curl she'd put in it. Yes, I'd had to endure sitting under the girl's dryer while my hair became a mass of curls and waves, quite short, but something that Rose could pin wigs and falls of hair to. It made me feel, yes, made me feel that I was girlie, yes, and a sissy, too.

"That Gordon fellow," Rose said as she switched on the CD player at night, signaling that my lessons had

begun. Susan Boyle began to sing that she dreamed a dream. I had to sing with her, no matter what Rose was doing or saying. Then, when I replied to Rose, I had to sing, in whatever girl's voice I'd been trying out, the answer to her questions. It was weird but, later, when I talked to a customer, I could feel that my throat was open. My voice was high-pitched, well, higher pitched than it had been before. No-one whom I spoke to as gently as I could ever challenged me and told me I spoke like a man.

It all made me feel that Rose wasn't lying when she talked about other pretty boys like me whom she'd made into waitresses for her café and tearoom.

"That Gordon fellow," Rose went on, smiling as I did what I thought of as a falsetto rise as I sang to her, "hasn't been back, has he? I didn't realize who he was, the Hiller boy. He's been away, working in the capital, so much. Harriet Lewis was talking about him yesterday. He's booked himself into her place, away from his parents' estate, B and B for a week, next month. So he's going to be coming around here again, isn't he?"

"When he does come in, Sissy my girl, he's going to be really surprised to see you in your new skirts and tops, isn't he? Now, don't you be all like that, Sissy, and start blushing and shaking when you serve him. You just be a proper little girl the way that I've taught you. I bet he'll give you another big tip!"

"Oh, I hope he doesn't come in today!" I sang anxiously to the tune of *I Dreamed a Dream* (*in times gone by*).

"Harriet doesn't expect him till next month," said Rose smugly, as she patted me dry with her fluffy towel. In no time, I was gaffed and in a figure-shaping, ultra-feminine corset, my pink, frilly panties hiding what was really so tight between my legs. The

puff-sleeved blouse, covering the padded bra parts of the corset I had on, meant I had to put on the school-girlish, plaid skirt that the ladies all thought was so 'delightful' on me.

Where, oh where, was my mother, I thought in mortification. When she saw me, what Rose Rennie was doing to me, there was going to be such an embarrassing brouhaha in the café. I was going to be revealed to all the ladies for what I was, a boy in girl's clothing. And Mummy was going to be so mad with me for letting Rose take such advantage of me! But where was my mother? Rose spoke of her but I hadn't seen her, or my brothers in an age!

The men liked my schoolgirlie short skirt as much as the ladies did. It was so short, so embarrassing, and showed off all of my long legs and stockings. I hadn't known before that my legs were shapely like a girl's, but Rose said that was what men meant when they told me I had 'nice' legs. She seemed to understand that saying that would make me shiver all over. She smirked at me as I blushed, my long hair extensions shaking as I was inside when she said such things about me and how feminine I was. I didn't want to be feminine! I was a boy, for goodness sakes!

"Tomorrow, we'll put you in black stockings and black panties," Rose went on wickedly, teasing me. She knew I wouldn't answer her back. I'd had all of that 'sass' beaten out of me long ago. I could only shiver as I sat on the padded chair in front of the mirror and put on my makeup. Yes, I had to do it for myself. Only if I screwed up, did an exasperated Rose slap my buttocks and thighs and do it for me if we were in a hurry to open.

"Good," she said as I finished, staring at the girl's face that stared back at me, my eyes so vivid and, well, very, very girlie. I could say the same of my eyebrows

and lips, of course, but I didn't have time as I had to put on earrings and bracelets while Rose fixed hair to the back and sides of my head as well as pretty ribbons that concealed how the hair was attached to me.

"Swish your hair," Rose ordered me, and so I did. She added another barrette on either side of my head. "There, such a sweet girl you are, Sissy. I used to have so many fights with some of the girls like you that I had to dress in the mornings. It will all be so much better when your hair grows out and we can take you to the beauty shop and have it properly styled!"

"I'm not ...!" I squealed. Rose slapped my buttocks and frilly panties.

"No negatives, Sissy," she said to me firmly. "Now, you owe me a special forfeit that you'll do for me tonight. You do what your mother and I tell you, right? Yes, you are my good, little girl, aren't you? Now, put on the white stockings, Sissy, and your black Mary Janes. We might even open on time for once!"

I'd thought I'd wear socks at first, with the school-girl type of skirt, as Rose didn't give me stockings for once. But then, the little sox expanded and expanded up my legs, over my knees and halfway up my thighs, staying there, clinging to me as I became a very girlish waitress.

On the first day in my new outfit, I was lucky that it clouded over and so I served inside all day long. The men liked to sit outside and tease me loudly as if I really was a girl. They loved to make me nervous and blush at them and what they were saying about my tush and my boobies. And did I ever blush! Inside, there were ladies. Some of them protected me and scolded the men sitting outside about their comments on my feminine walk. I didn't need Rose to tell me I had to move as a girl.