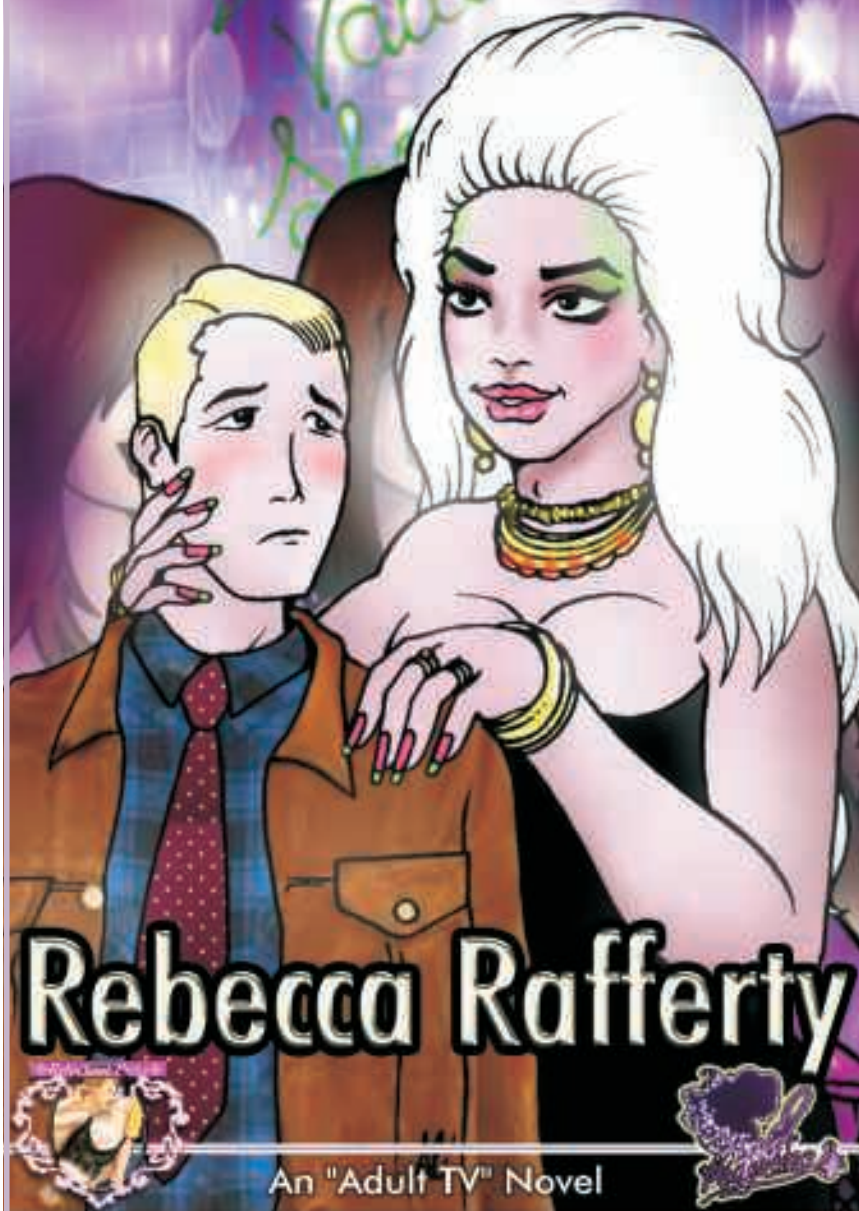


Until Something Better Comes Along



Rebecca Rafferty



An "Adult TV" Novel



Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers

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UNTIL SOMETHING BETTER COMES ALONG

by **Rebecca Rafferty**

Sometimes, when I'm lying in a boyfriend's arms, I wonder if it started out for all drag queens the way that it did for my brother and me. Were they all mostly out-of-work actors like me and Bobbi—or Roberta, as he also called himself now? It was, after all, purely by accident that we ended up as the 'girls' that we now are—wasn't it?

I. THE ONLY SUCKERS LEFT IN TOWN

“Okay, brains.” The sarcasm was heavy in ‘Bobby Clark’s’ voice. “So what do we do now? Like, for eating, let’s say.”

I couldn't blame my brother, the only other occupant of the empty, yet still cramped, theater dressing room. I didn't give him one of my usual ebullient replies. All I could do was stare at the pale face of my younger, darker-haired brother.

Each of us had chosen a stage name. I was Douglas Reynolds, though most people called me Duggie. Our family name was Kusniowski, which isn't an easy one to anglicize. It wasn't anything like Antonio Benedetto, so easily made into Tony Bennett. Having first names like Zenon, mine, and Zbigniew, his, didn't suggest anything other than Zen and Ziggy—which neither of us wanted.

So, we looked up names in the phone book and took first names from one guy and English names from others. We had the same agent, of course, but we never booked ourselves out as a duo. Even so, we were repeatedly employed to play the part of brothers, or, at least to be in the same dramatic projects.

We made several movies with us as the Morgan brothers. *Running Through the Line*, a kids' sports movie about football, is still pretty popular—our biggest 'hit', so to speak—with 'Doug Reynolds' often being listed as one of the 'stars' of that movie. In a lot of movies made after that, we were employed as fourth or fifth kid in crowd scenes, where a 'classroom' or a 'gang' of kids was needed. I think I'd worked in fifteen movies or more, and Zbigniew—sorry, 'Bobby Clark'—had worked in a dozen, until we just got too old. No one wanted teenaged boy actors who were, let's face it, a little undersized and skinny.

Still, acting was in our blood, or so we thought, Bobby and me. Dad boozed away any money we

might have earned as child actors, but booking agents knew us; we were in fairly constant employment as actors. We could still play ‘juvenile’ parts, on stage. So we did, sometimes not even together, in the same plays or even the same towns. Yes, with a little stage makeup, we could be thirteen, sixteen, eighteen, and not our real ages of twenty-two and twenty-one.

We’d toured three different ‘comedies’ together, over the last year, however—doing multiple parts, honing our craft, as Dad used to say before he died. The last play, *Madame and Her Family*, in which we’d been part of the gang of boy criminals (think of *Oliver Twist* and a female Fagan), had just folded. We were left broke, penniless, and on the road in Middle America.

“I must have a twenty somewhere,” I said slowly as Bobby watched me search through the tight pockets of my Little Boy jeans.

Bobby snorted. Standing, he was just as tall as me. I could see that he was thinking he should never have listened to me. We should never have tried to work together. We hadn’t been doing badly, when we were apart, for juvenile roles in other plays, with other companies. But, now that the last of our television commercials having stopped airing a year ago, we had to face up to it. We weren’t actually being sought after for that kind of work any more.

The last thing I’d done was an ad for an acne treatment. Bobby had done one for a rival company. Our smooth, unlined faces, along with our fine features, were miraculously ‘cleared’ when the treatments were applied. But our ads were dropped when acne

products had suddenly come into vogue, with famous screen actresses doing ads all over the place. As Bobby said, we boy actors got squeezed out of working with zits.

Bobby was the first to get work in a touring company. After a month or two, I joined him. It wasn't great pay, but we each had a fund of stories about when we were in the movies. That helped to keep us employed. Broadway or California? It seemed like every job in either of those places was being given out to actors from universities and Acting 'Studios'. Well, we didn't have the money for that. We were working actors, I used to say to Bobby. We could do anything, from a little crooning, a little soft-shoe or hoofing, to the straight guy or the bad kid—so there'd always be parts for us in some touring company.

I knew, in reality, I was whistling past the graveyard. Both Bobby and I were stuck in the same rut, competing for the same crumbs.

For a while, the Gillingham Players had seemed all right. An old, respected, long-established theater company, it was like what English actors told us about when they talked of 'Repertory Theater'. Besides, the Players had been home to many actors and actresses who had 'made it' in theater and movies. We even got our own credits in some of the programs—separate credits, of course.

Bobby was mad with me—but how could I have known that the Gillingham Players was a company on its last legs, so badly in debt that it was bound to totter and die (as in fact it did) once it had crossed the Mississippi?

I tossed the bankruptcy notice back on the long dressing table. “Perhaps I can borrow from ...” I said as I went next door to the girls’ room. It was as empty and lifeless as the theater had been the night before, at our last performance.

“I already checked,” said Bobby bitterly. “They must have known last night. We’re the only suckers still around. And we’re stuck here!”

I shivered. It was suddenly very spooky to be alone in a darkened, deserted theater. “Let’s get out of here,” I said. “I’ll think better over a beer.”

The twenty was cracked over a second round at the local tavern we’d adopted within an hour of arriving at the Majestic Theater.

“You know,” said Bobby, as morose as me, “before we leave this godforsaken place, we ought, on one night at least, to sample the nightlife.”

“Nightlife?” I asked, both amused and astounded.

“Yeah,” said Bobby with a grin. “Didn’t you see the taverns along Railway Street? They all have cabarets. They’re not just watering holes like this one. We should take a walk down there once and see what’s more interesting than *Madame and Her Family*, starring, straight from Hollywood, Bobby Clark.”

“And also starring the incredible acting talents of Douglas Reynolds,” I laughed back at my brother.

The nasal twang of the country singers drove us from the first 'cabaret' at the Union Bar. "Still, it was so crowded," said Bobby, looking back forlornly as I led him away. "I like steel guitars, too."

It was the same for three blocks. We might have missed the Star Club if Bobby hadn't been getting a little miffed about all my disparaging remarks about the town, about its 'nightlife' and about country music.

The lone star flashed at the base of what looked like an old warehouse. Curious, Bobby stopped and began reading aloud a torn poster on the wall, beside the steps that led down to the Star Club.

"The Donna Vallee Show," read Bobby, grabbing my arm and leading me down the steps. There were more posters around the corner. The lower part of a blonde woman, in a black evening dress, was missing from the faded poster. She seemed to be old, thirty-five or forty at least. Written in bold type beside the photo were the words, 'Song, Dance and ...'

"Now this is a challenge," said Bobby with a laugh. "No sound of steel guitars, and we have to find out what the 'and' is!"

The attendant at the door frowned at my jeans and at both of our open-necked shirts. "You need a tie to go into the Star Club," he stated to both of us, blocking off the quiet, dark interior from our view. Just the faint tones of a mellow piano, lightly played, reached our ears.

“It will cost you five each to buy one,” said the attendant, pointing to the rack on the counter of the check room, a slight, contemptuous smile on his face. He obviously took us for country rednecks or rubes.

I pulled a face and would have left. Ten bucks from our dwindling supply of bills? But Bobby was smiling at me.

“Aw, go ahead,” Bobby said, reaching for a black woollen tie, meant for a funeral. “Pay the man and come give your ears a rest.” Bobby pushed past the burly attendant as he knotted the tie.

The bills disappeared in the big guy’s pocket. None of the ties really suited my blue check shirt and corduroy jacket. In the end, I just took the last one on the rack and so went in with a maroon tie, festooned with hideous, yellow circles that even made the attendant grimace.

“See, I have a tie!” I pointed out to him, following Bobby into the darkened club.

II. THE STAR CLUB

Oh yeah, I didn’t mention that ‘Roberta Andrews’ had substituted for a very sick actress as Anne in ‘Green Gables; the musical’, did I? And ‘she’ was a smash hit! Laura Wilson recovered in a day to play her part again while the other girls took the week in bed. To my mind, ‘Roberta’ not only sang in Anne’s soprano better, but she imitated Laura’s frivolous girlishness very well. I loved looking at the pictures of ‘her’, my brother, in ‘her’ red-haired wig. I couldn’t tease ‘her’ about her lovely voice not having broken,

but I did tell her many times how lovely ‘she’ looked, until she punched me the day before we switched to ‘The Honor of the South’, and two-thirds of the girls with us left the show.

Bobby had gone to the end of the bar and was seated on the last bar stool. Two beers were opened and set up in front of him by the bartender. I had to grimace at the price quoted for the drinks. I also had to pay, as Bobby had long emptied his pockets of ‘change’. It was going to be a short visit to the Star Club at the prices being inflicted on us.

Bob smiled as the piano player, a slim blonde girl, suddenly turned up the volume in her playing and changed to an introductory fanfare. “Ladies and gentlemen,” she said in a gravelly sort of voice into the microphone attached to her piano. “Cabaret time at the Star Club presents to you, from Chicago and New Orleans, The Donna Vallee Show!”

That’s when I heard ‘Vallee’ pronounced as ‘Vallay’ for the first time. There was a smattering of applause from the audience, at whom we got a better look as our eyes adjusted to the gloom. Surprisingly, all of the tables seemed to be occupied by couples, the men usually having arms around their girlfriends, wives, or whatever.

A spotlight came on, shining on dark green curtains at the back of a little stage. A blonde woman stepped through an opening in the curtains as the pianist gave her an imitation of a drum roll. The platinum blonde hair fell to the woman’s white shoulders,

as she shifted from her female posing and revealed her black, strapless evening gown.

It was the woman from the poster. Her makeup was very heavy and she might have been any age, but I immediately placed her in her forties or fifties. She took up a microphone from its stand and moved easily about the stage, giving a gentle rendition of *I Left My Heart in San Francisco*, doing a credible imitation of Tony Bennett in the second chorus. It was very impressive, actually – for a woman.

The applause that broke out when she'd finished was out of all proportion to her ability. Bobby raised an eyebrow to me in surprise. Either of us could do, and had done, that song with greater verve than Donna Vallee.

“Thank you very much,” Donna said simply when she'd finished. The piano picked up with a chorus of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* and the crowd applauded even before the Judy Garland impression, which was quite well done. That led to a pitiful Barbra Streisand and an acceptable Carol Channing. Well, that one was easy as both Bobby and I could do that voice easily. We often did her, Carol Channing's raspy sort of voice, in jokes that we told, when it needed a sexy woman's voice to make the punch line work.

Again, the applause belied the talent and effort taken up by the song and impressions. “The ‘and’ must have been ‘and impressions,’” I said lightly, turning my back to the stage for a drink.

Suddenly, I felt Bobby grip my arm tightly. I almost spilled the bottle of beer that had cost us an arm and a leg.

“Not impressions,” Bobby hissed at me. “Impersonations, Zenon my boy, female impersonations.”

I whirled around, astounded at what my bother had said, and looked for the blonde on the stage. She had moved down to the audience and was exchanging sexy repartee with several men and women at the tables closest to the stage. She sat on a big man’s knee, put his arm about her waist, and kissed the top of his bald head, leaving a scarlet imprint there, which seemed to please the guy, while everyone else in the audience was reduced to hysterical laughter.

It was there in the lilt of the voice. It could have been—it *was*—a gay man talking.

“That’s a man,” breathed my brother.

“I think so,” I said to him with a frown. “That poster didn’t tell the whole truth!”

“It was torn!” protested Bobby.

I watched in a sort of admiration as the actress—I guessed I could call Donna Vallee that—vamped and had fun with ‘her’ audience. Knowing that she was a man put quite a different aspect on her double-meaning jokes, with both men and women. I should say, rather, with men and those dressed in female clothing—because when she spoke to several women and got them to answer, male voices came through the mike, even though the same highly made-up and prettily dressed women were hugged by



their male companions as they responded to Donna Vallee's patter.

Donna released herself from a big, red-faced trucker, and started in on *Cabaret*, a natural if not close version to that of Liza Minelli. I could appreciate more the impersonation as I saw the Adam's apple bobble in her throat. Completing that song, she skipped through the audience to the bar beside me, the spotlight tracking her, to where the bartender had a glass of water ready for her.

Bobby and I could then see how heavily made up Donna Vallee was. She wore a lot of pancake, even on her shoulders and neck—but, because of her feminine gestures, she wasn't clearly male and ridiculous. By the way her skin looked, and the filled-in wrinkles at her eyes, I thought now that she must be fifty for certain, maybe even sixty.

I thought she would pass us by, but my hideous tie attracted Donna's look of horror. She stopped, leaned towards me, and vamped me over her bare shoulder.

"Hi, big boy," she said, rolling her eyes in her good Mae West impression. "You gonna come up and see me sometime?"

There were snickers all about us. I had to smile. I'd been brought up on vaudeville, burlesque, and this kind of visit into the audience. The aim, some old hooper had said to me, was to intimidate the person approached so that the rehearsed, professional response would sound so classy. Or sassy. Yes, I think he'd said 'sassy' to me.