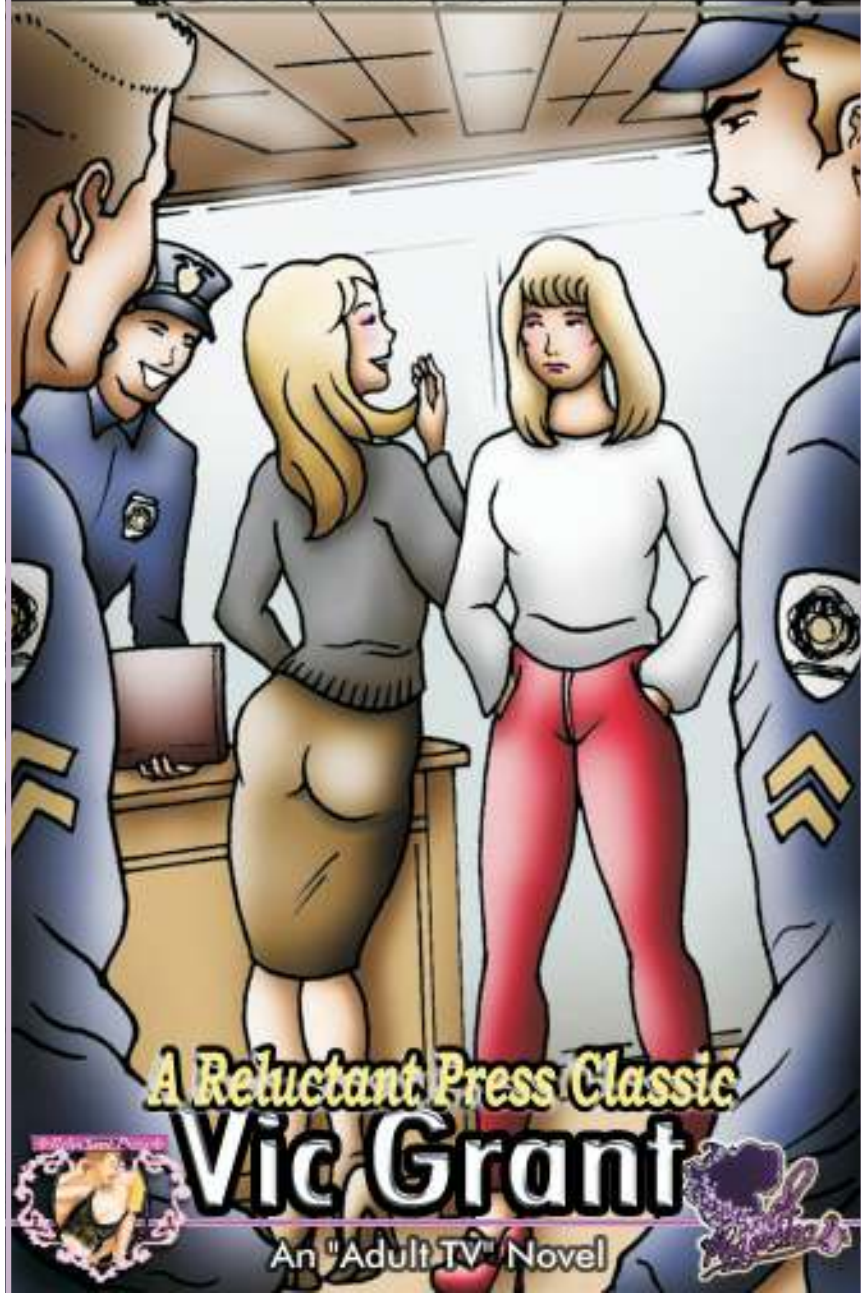


Boardwalk



A Reluctant Press Classic

Vic Grant

An "Adult TV" Novel



Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers

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Boardwalk

By Vic Grant

CHAPTER ONE: To Catch a Rapist

It was the first week in March, and I was driving Kim's Rabbit (I think they call them "Cabriolets" now, but to me they 're still Rabbits). She'd been doing some shopping and I was going down to pick her up for lunch. It was Sunday, the sun was shining, the top was down, and the radio was tuned to some station Kim listened to. My mind began to wander. When did it all begin? God, it had to be, what, a year and a half, two years maybe?

My name's Joe Stagnaro and I'm 37 years old. I went to school at UC Santa Cruz but dropped out in my junior year. After some screwing around, I joined SCPD as a beat cop. It took me six years to make my way to the rank of Inspector. They call it "plain clothes" work. Once, the clothes weren't so plain, but I'll get to that later.

This is mainly about a guy who worked in the Bureau of Inspectors with me, Rene Malotte.

We all called him “Frenchie” and that drove him nuts, which is probably why we did it. Cops like ragging on each other better than almost anything else. But don’t get me wrong. We may give each other a hard time but you won’t find a better friend than a fellow officer. Hell, your partner is ready to lay his life on the line for you, and a four-o-six (officer needs assistance) gets everybody’s attention real quick.

I always get a kick out of Hollywood’s concept of police work. You know, high-speed chases and lots of shooting. Everybody’s good looking, there’s never a dull moment, and, of course, the good guys win. In my department, any cop caught racing through town at 80 MPH, would be up on charges so fast his head would spin. In my fourteen years on the Santa Cruz PD, the few times I’ve had my piece out of its holster during an incident, I was scared as hell, I guarantee. Being a cop is a frustrating, dirty job and I love it.

Santa Cruz

Compared to the upscale, yuppie beach communities of Southern California, Santa Cruz is pretty slow-paced. We’ve got the only remaining ocean-front amusement park in the state, and there’s a carousel with one of those calliope things in the center. Families go there on Sunday afternoons for the rides and games and, when the fog is out, a lot of them picnic on the adjoining beach. There’s a pier about six-hundred yards north where people fish for sand dabs and perch. A big yellow cat everybody calls Garfield hangs out there and gets fat on bait and fish guts.

There isn’t a lot of serious crime in Santa Cruz; mostly four-fifteens (the catchall for disturbances) and what we call the “four horsemen of the apocalypse” - drugs, auto boosting, pandering, and petty theft.

The SCPD has about thirty-five uniformed officers working three shifts, fifteen or so in administration and dispatch, and five of us in the Bureau of Inspectors.

We all know one other pretty well and socialize a lot. There are Halloween, Christmas, Superbowl parties, and on the fourth of July, we throw a barbecue down at the beach. Those with families bring them along and there's plenty of beer and food. During the day there are games and at night, bumper-car rides, a beauty contest, and fireworks. It's a ball.

Mike Leahy is the Chief of Inspectors and a cop's cop. He served in the 101st Airborne in 'Nam and, like just about everyone I've ever met who's been in that hell hole, never talks much about it. After leaving the service, he joined the SCPD and worked his way up through the ranks. He's tough but fair and he'd walk on coals for his guys. In spite of his hard-headed approach to police work, he's progressive, and takes every opportunity to extend our knowledge of investigative techniques, sending us to seminars and exchange programs with other jurisdictions, as case load and budget permit.

An officer I replaced, Jim Roderick, was recruited by the San Francisco field office of the FBI. While many guys might be upset over the FBI stealing one of their best, Mike was proud as punch, which was absolutely typical of that big Irish man.

In the Spring of 1988, there were four inspectors working under Mike: myself, Pat Logan, Cliff James, and Rene Malotte.

Pat was the youngest in the group at 32. He was born and raised in San Francisco, and was on the SFPD for a couple of years before coming here. Pat's a joker; he can say just about anything and get away with it. He's married with two kids.

Cliff James had been around the longest. He joined the force in the the early seventies. He and Mike had been buddies in the army. Having been an MP I guess he just naturally gravitated to police work so, when Mike joined up with SCPD, Cliff wasn't far behind. He'd do anything for Mike. We all would.

Rene, a French-Canadian, was born in 1955 in some little village outside Montreal. Although his family moved from Canada when he was just a kid, he never lost all of his accent, and his family still speak French together. His sister Marie, just about his age give or take, is married and lives in Palo Alto. She works for one of the high-tech firms over there. His folks live over that way too.

Rene attended UCSC the same time I did, but he hung in and graduated with a degree in law enforcement. Although I didn't know him real well, I'd run into him occasionally at a party or in one of my classes. My impression had always been that he was a nice guy, but a little on the quiet side. He had friends but none you could really call close.

Some people seem to go through life easier than others. Rene was one of those lucky people who fit into the former category. I don't think he had an enemy in the world. After being promoted into Inspectors, he kept up with people he knew from when he'd worked patrol, making it a point to stop by and visit shop owners and others from the old days. On occasion, somebody would call to ask if he'd talk to a teenaged son or daughter who was on the wrong track. I never knew Rene to refuse such a request. He was that kind of guy.

In my line of work, you don't always see people at their best. Those involved in an incident - victims and witnesses as well as suspects - are often excited and not thinking straight. You walk on eggshells. If you don't handle things right, somebody can get hurt.

This is particularly true when you're fresh on a scene where something bad has just gone down. Cops are trained to stay cool under these conditions, and some do it better than others, but I've never seen anybody better at it than Rene. He had a real knack for talking people down, you know, making them relax. He could usually do whatever needed to be done just with words. In the five plus years I worked with him, I only saw him resort to physical force once.

An example of this innate ability of his occurred last summer. We'd just done an FI (field interrogation) when we heard Lucy Sanchez - one of our dispatchers - calling any unit in the vicinity to respond to a nine-eighteen at the boardwalk. There was a teenaged girl standing out on a ledge of the casino building, screaming and threatening to jump. We were just a block away when we heard the call and advised Lucy that we were en route.

Rene and I were the first on the scene. It wasn't hard to find the girl as there was a crowd gathered below where she was standing. I held the crowd back while Rene went up into the building. The girl was loony tunes - screaming at the top of her lungs and making no sense.

I saw Rene stick his head out of a window about fifteen feet from where she was standing. He said something to her and she turned and yelled at him to stay away. He kept talking to her, but I couldn't make out what he was saying.

You could see her starting to calm down as he spoke. Within ten minutes, she walked over to the window where he was and climbed in.

By that time, two patrol units were on the scene and Rene turned the girl over to one of them.

The Decoy Program

Like I said, things are pretty quiet in Santa Cruz. Nevertheless, we still get a few homicides, robberies, and rapes - stuff we call "Part-1 Crimes" (because they are reported by local law enforcement organizations in Part I of the FBI's Uniform Crime Report).

In the Spring of 1988, there was a series of rapes in the beach area. These were particularly bad because they involved physical injury in addition to rape. The M.O. was consistent. The victim was always an attractive girl or woman, walking alone at night in the vicinity of the boardwalk. This guy would come up from behind and whack her in the back, inevitably knocking her down. He'd then beat her up and rape her. He wore a stocking mask. Between that and the fact he operated in the dark, we never got a decent description.

By June, there had been three incidents involving this jerk. We'd posted black and whites, unmarked vehicles, and foot patrols in the area, but he was too smart to attack when anyone was around. Our local paper started to turn up the heat after the third incident, and the Mayor had a special meeting with the Chief of SCPD, Phil Edwards and my boss, Mike Leahy.

Mike came back from that meeting more upset than I'd ever seen him. He called Rene and I into his office and said that we were to make this number one priority, advising us he was setting up a decoy program in which we'd dress as women and hang out down by the boardwalk.

Rene stood 5'11" and, at the time, weighed about 175 lbs. I'm 5'10" and had a couple of pounds on him. We were going to be big ladies, but Pat's at least my size and Cliff is all of 6'4" and must weigh 250, so Rene and I were about the only game in town.



I don't know why they didn't use one or two of the female patrol officers. They would have been more convincing bait, that's for sure (at least at the outset). Mike insisted on carrying the ball. I don't know, maybe he just wanted his guys to crack it or maybe he felt we'd be better able to handle the situation if things got rough. In retrospect, it would have been better all the way around if they had used lady cops, but you never know how things are going to turn out.

To say Rene wasn't too hot for the idea would be putting it mildly. Now, most guys don't exactly relish the idea of putting on a dress, but this was just a part of the job and everybody knew it. Still, Rene got real uptight about the whole thing at first. To me, it was just another assignment. The fact that I was taking it in my stride calmed Rene down. That's how it is with partners.

I'll never forget the first time we came in dressed up.

Rene was wearing a black sweater and dark-colored skirt. I had on a white sweater with tight-fitting, red slacks. We both had on blonde wigs and had stuffed the largest bras we could find.

It must've been quite a sight, 'cause you should've heard the howls when we showed up dressed for action. Of course, we camped it up good, swinging our hips and generally being outrageous.

Rene was really enjoying himself. Usually he was pretty reserved but dressed up, he was a howl. I remember being relieved that he'd finally reconciled himself so well to the situation.

We worked the beach front in pre-established patterns. Rene would walk up the beach while I did the pier. We communicated on hand-held units when we were sure we were alone. We saw a few suspicious

types but we were never approached - for any reason. This went on for three or four weeks during which two more rapes occurred.

At this point, Mike added Pat to the detail. I guess he thought our problem was insufficient coverage. Pat didn't do any better than Rene and me.

You could say the decoy program was a flop, but that would be a gift. We were all pretty upset about the situation. We wanted to nail this guy so bad we could taste it. I don't think we'd have ever had a snowball's chance if it hadn't been for Yvonne Green.

Vonnie

I wasn't real clear as to how she got involved. Lucy Sanchez, (the dispatcher I mentioned earlier and a kick in the pants), said that Vonnie knew the Chief's wife.

In any case, it was a Tuesday in early August at the beginning of the night shift when Mike called us into the conference room.

The slide projector we use from time to time was set up on one end of the battered and burned oak table which dominated the center of the room.

We were dolled up and giving each other the usual crap when Mike came in and introduced Yvonne Green to each of us. She was in her mid to late 30s, dark hair pulled back in a bun, about 5'6", and 115 to 120 lbs. Good looking lady, but serious.

As usual, Mike didn't mince words. "Dr. Green is an expert in the area of gender ..." he looked at Yvonne Green with a helpless expression.

She came in right on cue: "gender dynamics". She said it as if everyone of course knew exactly what that

meant. It sounded like the name of a corporation to me.

Mike resumed. "Yeah, gender dynamics. Anyhow, I've asked Dr. Green to take charge of you monkeys and help us make this decoy program work. You're to do exactly what she tells you. I mean to the letter. Anybody got a problem with that?"

Now, if any of us had piped up at that point, his ass would've been grass, so of course we just sat and kept quiet.

After introducing us, the Chief turned to Vonnie and said, "They're all yours. If anybody gives you a hard time, let me know."

Vonnice smiled and replied, "I'm sure we're going to get along just fine, Mike. Thanks for everything."

At that point, Mike turned and walked out without saying another word.

Vonnice looked at each of us in turn, and we sat there waiting for her to do something. It was her show.

Finally, she opened up.

"You guys couldn't fool anybody. Look at you. Do you think the padding and those long wigs make you look like ladies?"

We all just sat there looking at one another. We knew we didn't look like chicks, but I guess we figured if it was dark enough ...

Before anyone could respond to her rhetorical question, she resumed.

"I want to show you some pictures. Rene, would you catch the lights?"

She switched on the slide projector and a picture came up on the screen which had been set up at the north end of the room.

It was a full-body shot of a nice-looking chick in her twenties. She was an elf - real cute. Slim build with not much on top and small hips. She wore her dark brown hair short, and had on jeans and a tee shirt, and very light makeup. She had a smile that melted hearts.

Vonnie left the slide on for about five seconds and then moved on to the next one.

Another full-body. This time, a lady in her thirties who had “mother” written all over her. She was pretty with shoulder-length, brown hair and an average build.

The chick in the third slide was bald as a billiard ball, and thin. Three gold studs in each ear plus one in the nose. She had a soft look about her, in spite of the bizarre get-up. We run into kids like that all the time, especially down at the boardwalk. They're often into drugs and will hook, steal, or whatever to get enough bread for a fix.

There were about twenty or so slides; all gals. Some good looking, others not so; three black, one oriental, the rest white, and the full spectrum of sizes and shapes.

None of us could figure out what her point was. When the last slide was shown, a cute kid in her late teens with a pony tail and freckles, wearing a man's white dress shirt tucked into a pair of khaki shorts, Vonnie again asked Rene to hit the lights. She addressed the group.

“Okay boys, what did we just see?”

At this point, we were all straining to keep a straight face.

Then Rene pipes up, “A series of slides showing females ranging in age from about 17 to 40.”

“Very good.” Vonnie smiled back, like a third-grade teacher. I could tell this was going to be a long night. She went on. “Is there any question in your minds that what we all saw were women?”

“No ma’am, none whatsoever.” I responded.

Rene grinned and Pat started coughing to cover a laugh.

“That’s nice,” she continued, “because numbers 1, 2, 5, and the last one, number 22, are guys.”

Whoops! Good going. Here we were, three veteran cops who’d seen it all and she’d conned us like we were kids. We just looked at her, dead-pan, trying not to show our embarrassment.

“Welcome to Gender Orientation 1A.” she announced. She had our attention, and began her pitch.

“Let’s start with some concepts. First of all, those are all ladies, but they aren’t all women. They’re all feminine, but not all female. Gender vs sex. Anybody here know the difference?”

Pat responded, “Yeah, gender is something used in language and sex is what makes the world go ‘round.” Rene and I laughed.

Vonnie smiled politely and shot back, “In your dreams! Gender is what we see. You guys saw ladies. You weren’t wrong, you just used the wrong word to describe them. You agreed they were all women, but they’re not. Sex is in the crotch; gender is everywhere

else. The two usually go together, but not always. Numbers 1, 2, 5, and 22 may be guys, but they are also among the most feminine persons in that set of slides. Let's take another look at number 1. Rene?" Rene switched off the light and the elf reappeared on the screen.

"The person you're looking at has short hair and the figure of a boy and you made her as a woman! Why?"

Absolute silence. We were all feeling more than a little confused. God, even now, knowing it was a guy, I couldn't get it into my head. It was the same for Pat and Rene. The worst part was, even looking at the damn picture, I couldn't say why I took her for a girl! I was even thinking in terms of "she" and "her". This was the pits!

Finally, Rene volunteered, "I think it's her smile; she smiles as a girl. Guys don't smile like that."

Vonnie had a sarcastic look on her face as she addressed us.

"Do you mean that here's a guy - not much of a figure, no dress, a touch of make up - and by just smiling he's more of a lady than the three of you put together with your outlandish loud skirts, 3-inch heels, and 44-Cs bulging with more stuffing than a Thanksgiving turkey?"

Pat shrugged.

We were in way over our heads, and didn't really understand all this stuff. We had our ideas of what separated guys from chicks, and she was demolishing them one by one.

Once again, she had Rene turn on the lights as she shut off the projector and the elf vanished from the room, if not from our minds. Vonnie spoke.

“If you don’t learn another thing from our little association, learn this: Being feminine has absolutely nothing to do with what you’re wearing, the length of your hair, or your bust line. It’s totally, one-hundred percent in your head. It’s just that simple and it’s just that complicated. If you want to make this decoy thing work, you’ve got to learn how to feel feminine - from the inside out. By the time I’m through with you, all of you will be able to pass anytime and any place. You’ll also discover a whole new side to life.”

Pat shivered visibly, but Vonnie paid no attention, continuing her pitch.

“This may be the most interesting, insightful, and frightening experience you will ever go through. If you don’t think you can handle it, just say so and you’re out.

“I’ve taken the liberty of making appointments for you with Martin Fineman, the Department physician. The slots are tomorrow at 10 AM, 3 PM, and 4 PM; you decide who goes when. You’ll have a simple physical including a blood test.

“We’ll meet for two hours every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evening at 7 PM. I guess you guys call it 1900 hours. Tomorrow night, I want to see you clean and dressed in jeans and T-shirts. Good night, ladies.”

Day One

Wednesday, I checked in day watch at 8:15 and did some paper work, the only thing about being a cop I don’t like.

I’d gotten the 10 AM appointment, so about 9:40 I left for Dr. Fineman’s office, which is only about 10 minutes away.

I was a little early, and the receptionist had me take a seat. I've got this theory that doctors make it a practice never to see a patient on time, just so you don't forget who's boss. Sure enough, I'd almost finished an article on how some British rock group trashed its way through half the luxury hotels on the French Riviera, when the receptionist cooed that the Doctor was ready to see me. It was 10:16.

The exam was the typical routine, sticking fingers and needles into various parts of my anatomy as I shivered in an examining room whose sterility was relieved only by three crayon pictures of circus clowns done by someone who didn't get paid for his work - one of the good doctor's kids, I surmised.

Dr. Fineman advised me that I was fine, which I already knew. He then told me to dress and meet him in his office, one door down.

When I came into his office, he motioned me to sit down in one of two worn, leather chairs which stood in front of an old fashioned oak desk. He then proceeded to ask me a lot of questions about how I liked my job, etc., etc., etc.

Generally, we take a physical once a year; everybody's got his own schedule. Mine shouldn't have been for another seven months. Why were they giving us all physicals now? One thing I learned when I was a rookie is not to ask questions and not to volunteer. I kept my questions to myself.

I got back to the office after a quick bite at the local Taco Bell.

Rene was at his desk. "How'd it go?" he asked.

"Didn't even hurt. You know, the usual stuff," I grunted. "Did you get any more details on that two-eleven at Fred's Liquors?" Rene and I were inves-

tigating an armed robbery that had gone down two nights before.

Rene waved a piece of paper. “Jack Simone found this auto parts receipt in the parking lot about where the suspect’s car had been. It’s probably nothing, but I guess we ought to check it out.”

“Whaddya think of Vonnie?” I asked.

“Seems to know her stuff.” he replied. “I’m still trying to accept that those are guys we saw.”

Pat looked up from his desk and imparted a typical bit of insight. “I know what you mean. How’d you like to take an elf like number-one home from a party and find out the hard way?”

Rene gave a shudder. “Scares the hell out of me,” he said with a look of sheer terror.

Pat laughed and went back to his work.

I don’t recall much about the rest of the day. Usual garbage. We probably went to the auto parts store to check on the invoice. In any case, Rene, Pat, and I just had time for some enchiladas before our 1900 meeting with Vonnie. It was kind of refreshing not to be in drag at that time of the evening for a change.

Per Vonnie’s request, we were all wearing jeans and T-shirts. Actually, Pat was wearing a baseball jersey. I guess it was his way of asserting his independence. We ambled into the conference room at about five minutes of. Vonnie was already there.

She began by asking us if we’d had time to think about the previous night’s discussion.

I’d thought about it, but I wasn’t about to tell her. I figured it was the same for the other two, and then Rene started spilling his guts about how it had

caught him unawares and how he'd lost some sleep trying to get it all straight in his mind.

She asked us what we'd learned and again, it was Rene who did the talking. I guess his enthusiasm got to Pat and me, and we started opening up too.

She asked us how we felt about being cops - what motivated us. She focused on the risk-taking aspect of the job. Why were we willing to lay down our lives? She also got into how cops are kind of isolated from the rest of society, and how we felt about that. Things loosened up. She didn't seem so preoccupied with the "gender" stuff, but instead spent more time on police work.

We broke to get some coffee and then reconvened. Once we'd all sat down again, she changed gears.

"What did you think of that cute little flowered print Lucy was wearing today?"

Total silence!

"No opinions?" she urged.

Again quiet prevailed. What did she expect? What did we care for some dress Lucy had on?

"All right," she continued, "did anyone even notice what Lucy was wearing?"

A chorus of No's resounded.

"Why not?" she asked.

I was getting tired of the game so I gave her an answer I thought so obvious that it didn't really need to be stated.

“Who remembers stuff like that?” I shot back, in a tone of voice that no doubt betrayed my growing irritation.

“You guys are trained observers. When there’s a crime, you’re often called into court to render testimony relative to details that most people couldn’t recall if their lives depended on it. And yet, when I ask you a simple question about the attire of one of your fellow employees - one who’s attractive, well-liked, and whom you practically trip over as you make your morning pilgrimage from the slum you call ‘the bull pen’ to the coffee machine and back again - you all of a sudden lose your keen powers of observation and come up empty as a beer keg after a fraternity party. Why?”

She was looking straight at me so I responded.

“Hell, no guy notices stuff like that. I mean, what difference does it make?”

“What difference does it make as to who won the Forty-Niners game last Sunday, if they even played? Whether it’s consequential isn’t the issue. You were getting warm when you said something about *No guy* noticing that sort of thing. What you meant to say was *No **real** guy*, right? I’ll bet you all noticed exactly what she was wearing, right down to the pattern and cut, and then proceeded to push it out of your conscious minds. Is your masculinity so fragile that it would be jeopardized by saying something nice to Lucy about her dress?”

“Hell yes!” I retorted to the appreciative and relieved laughter of the other two.

“Look,” she said with a look of genuine compassion, “the Chief told me about the decoy program, and how it’s been pretty much a fiasco. You’re good cops; the reason I’m here is to help you be more effec-

tive in your roles. That's what this is all about. Last night I told you that this would be interesting, insightful, and frightening. It'll also be maybe the toughest thing you've ever had to do. I expect total dedication. It's going to be hard work."

Then, she made some points about how we'd always seen things from just the male perspective. As guys, we didn't know how women really felt about things. She was good.

I don't know whether it was her personality or what, but the three of us lapped it up like a kitten does milk. She told us this would be a kind of "boot camp", and began with the first drill. She wanted all of us to go to a department store the next day and buy a half-dozen pairs of women's underpants. We were also to buy a copy of Vogue magazine at a drug store.

I don't know why, but the idea of having to buy the panties and magazine really got to me. I didn't mind hamming it up in front of the guys, but this was different. For one thing, we had to do it solo - nobody there to share the laughs. We were also confronting a stranger in a situation which would cause our masculinity to be questioned. If this was the first assignment, what would the rest be like? I was starting to not like this.

The two hours went real fast and Vonnie wound up saying that the next meeting, Friday, would be at her house.

I never got there.

The next day, Mike called me into his office and advised me that there was an opening in the special FBI course at Quantico Virginia. It was mine if I wanted it. Now, this is the stuff that a cop's dreams are made

of. There's only a handful of guys that get this opportunity. Of course I wanted it!

I was to clean up my paperwork and hand my files over to Vick Corso, a new guy who was going to fill in for me. I was scheduled to go back East in a couple of weeks. There was a lot of stuff, both job-related and personal, to do before then.

CHAPTER TWO: Going Away

I gotta admit that I was relieved at being pulled off the "swish patrol", as it had come to be called by our fellow officers. Although kinda fun at first, it was now starting to make me feel real uneasy. Rene and Pat were happy for me when I told them. I was sure that they would have given anything to be in my place but I was the logical choice, being single and all.

The program was actually several different courses, extending over a number of months. There were breaks during which I'd come back for a week or so before having to resume my studies. I'd be covering mainly specialty areas - NCIC access, forensics, fingerprint identification, cross jurisdictional inquiries, and so on. The next two and a half weeks flew by like magnum rounds in a vacuum. Before I knew it, it was my last day. The guys had put together a little surprise party for me.

Rene conned me into going to Armand's Grotto, a nice restaurant-bar on the pier, for a couple of drinks. When I got there, he led me into one of those private rooms where it seemed half the department had assembled. They were wearing dumb grins and funny hats. I gotta admit I was touched. We joked and drank mostly.

Pat started calling me "Holmes" and it stuck for the rest of the night. Guys would ask me if I planned to

take up the violin, stuff like that. What a bunch of jokers!

After the whole thing was over, Rene and I walked out to his car. I was feeling no pain, but Rene, knowing he'd be driving, stayed sober as a judge.

As he drove me back, I asked him how the "program" was going. He said that at first it had been real tough. When buying the panties, he'd told the sales girl they were for his wife. She'd cracked something about how she figured they weren't for him, but Rene said she gave him a funny look while she said it - made him wish he were somewhere else.

When they met next, Vonnie drew them out on how they felt about the experience. Rene said she told them that they were beginning to understand gender-based vulnerability. She was big on 25-cent words. She pushed the point, saying that women had feelings similar to that all the time. She also said that they would get used to such experiences. They had also become comfortable discussing fashion (both men's and women's), but more significantly, Rene felt, they were opening up about their feelings on just about everything from the program to events in their personal lives.

I was starting to feel guilty. Here I was being sent to the FBI training course while Rene and Pat were stuck in the Swish Patrol getting humiliated.

"Hey, Frenchie. Why don't you and Pat just go to Mike and explain the situation to him? I'm sure if he knew what you were going through, he'd let you guys off the hook," I suggested.

Then Rene gave me answer I wasn't expecting. "You know Joe, two weeks ago I would have agreed with you. I mean, I don't think I've ever been through anything so tough since I was a kid."

I wondered what had been so tough when he was a kid.

He went on.

“It’s funny, but I’m really learning a lot out of this. There’s this whole world we don’t even see. It’s like another dimension. I remember seeing *The Wizard of Oz* when I was small. It began in black and white. You didn’t really notice it much until Dorothy landed in Oz and suddenly everything was in color. This is similar to that. I’m finding out things about myself I didn’t even know existed. And there have been more things like the first assignment, such as having our hair and nails done.”

He showed me his fingernails at that point, holding them out straight like a chick. They were a little on the long side, and very shiny. I guess they’d been polished.

I objected that guys had their hair and nails done these days - no big deal (although I’d never be caught dead in a beauty parlor).

He said that this time, he’d felt more natural dealing with the incident (I guess he couldn’t very well say he was doing it for his wife), and that he actually enjoyed sitting there being fussed over and talking with the beautician. Then he said: “I’m taking estrogen.”

That’s where my eyebrows went up.

“Estrogen?” I asked. “That’s female hormones. Does Mike know about this?”

Rene replied, “It was optional. Vonnie assured me that the only effect it will have in the dosages I’m taking will be to heighten my sensitivity.”

I stared obviously at his chest.