

Master of Disguise

By Avery W. Creed

Paul's first mistake that night was dressing up as Jaslin de Salazaar, globe-trotting jewel thief and international sensation, for the costume party.

His second mistake was being so thorough in his disguise. No photographs had ever been leaked of the mysterious rogue, but basic descriptions had been provided to the press. The art of caricature, Paul knew, was based on exaggeration; taking the most defining characteristics of your subject and blowing them completely out of proportion. To this end he had borrowed some make-up from a buddy's girlfriend and hit every thrift or consignment store in town for flashy clothes and costume jewelry. His Google search history even contained video tutorials such as 'How to Properly Pad a Bra' (something he hoped his friends would never discover).

Paul had studiously followed the de Salazaar stories along with the rest of the world, and was confident that he could re-create a decent likeness of the elusive woman. Armed with foundation, mascara, and an array of fluffy brushes, he set to work.

An hour later, Paul stood in front of the full length bathroom mirror, pleased with his efforts. His face was immaculate, eyes sultry with eyeliner and lips pouty with gloss. His jawline was softer, his cheekbones more defined. The wig that he'd purchased was perfect, its raven-black tresses held back with two matching jade clips just above his ears, which themselves sported classy dangling silver earrings and a silver stud in the rim of the left one. (All clip ons, of course. He wasn't that dedicated.)

The clothing required more imagination. Since the only thing ever left at a crime scene had been a shred of glossy red cloth, Paul had selected for his disguise a long satin evening gown with a slit up the side. Four-inch high heels and a necklace of false pearls completed the outfit (de Salazaar seemed particularly fond of pilfering pearls). Paul blew his reflection a kiss, tremendously proud of himself. He looked just like a quintessential femme fatale. As long as the fake boobs didn't take any unscheduled detours around his chest on the way to the party, he'd be golden.

Paul checked his reflection over his shoulder one last time before grabbing his keys and a jeweled clutch and heading out the door. He was so caught up in the thrill of his disguise that he made his third mistake of the evening: taking the subway. The station was packed, as usual, but Paul was too preoccupied to notice the blatant stares and pointed fingers conspicuously directed at him. In fact, it wasn't until they were well underway that Paul noticed anything unusual. Several people in the jam-

packed car had their phones out and were filming him with expressions that varied from hysterical grins to dumbfounded awe. He shot them his best sultry over-the-shoulder wink, fluttering his luxurious fake lashes for the impromptu paparazzi. At the next stop most of them disembarked, phones clamped to their ears. Paul didn't give them a second thought, his mind once more occupied by the fantastic reception he would undoubtedly receive once he finally made it to the party.

When Paul stepped off the train a few stops later, he walked straight into a mass of police officers. Before he knew what was happening, he was being arrested and read his rights. Handcuffs were snapped around his wrists, and thus secured he was dragged up the stairs and out of the station to the street above. There Paul and his captors encountered a seething crowd of journalists and TV crews. The flash of cameras left spots in his vision, and the clamour of a hundred crowing voices beat on his poor confused brain. Other police officers herded the press back and Paul was dumped unceremoniously into the backseat of a police car, which peeled slowly away from the mob of reporters before speeding off down the street.

Sitting unbelted in the back of the cruiser, Paul's perfectly glossed mouth bounced open and shut with the staccato precision of a well-adjusted metronome. Not a sound escaped as the officers in the front seat jabbered into the radio and the cruiser swung violently around corners. As poor Paul was thrown about in the back seat, a disjointed part of him began to wonder whether he ought to let his buddy know he would be late for the party. Too bad, really, after all the effort he'd put into this costume. Maybe the police would let him send a picture from the station? Would they even let him take a picture at the station? Oh, of course they would; they'd be the ones taking it, and it'd be a mugshot.

Such thoughts occupied Paul until they reached the precinct. Still in a haze of shock and unconnected musings (was that lady cop at the desk checking him out? Wow, imagine their future together; "When mommy met daddy he was being dragged through the police station by his armpits..."), he was rushed into a solitary interrogation room, handcuffed to the chair, and left alone with the stern gray concrete walls and the token full-wall mirror. Blinking confusedly, Paul looked up and happened to catch sight of a smoking hot, if somewhat disheveled, woman staring at him from a seat at a table beyond the mirror.

His first thought was that the contractor must have accidentally installed the precinct's one-way mirror backwards. But no, it couldn't be. Paul looked closer; the woman copied his movements. It

was him! In the heat of his unexpected arrest, he'd forgotten that he was in costume. The truth broke over him like a cold water balloon; he'd been mistaken for the real Jaslin de Salazaar. In a whirl of realization he recalled the commuters on the subway with their phones trained on him like magnets. It all made sense now. A hysterical giggle bubbled up from the dense lump of anxiety in his belly, exploding in a shrill cackle that was quite unlike him. Carried away by the absurdity of the situation, Paul leaned back in his seat and shrieked with laughter, the chair balanced on its two back legs. He laughed with his arms hugging his belly until his stomach cramped and no more sound could make it out of his mouth, but still he convulsed from sheer mirth. Oh, this was just too precious!

When a click of a lock at the door announced the arrival of the Good Cop and the Bad Cop, Paul was still slumped in his chair, sniggering and wiping tears out of his eyes with the heel of his hand. The sight of the two officers' deadly serious faces nearly sent him back into spasms of glee. Bad Cop's angular jaw and bad goatee were reflected in the shorter Good Cop's polished bald head, whose furrowed shoe brush eyebrows only served as stark contrast to the shiny hairlessness of his crown. Paul pressed his hand to his mouth, biting his knuckles until the urge to giggle passed. As Good Cop settled himself into the chair across the table, Paul couldn't resist a jibe.

"Honestly, how stupid are you?"

Good Cops prodigious facial caterpillars arced up in surprise at the deep masculine tone of Paul's voice. He snuck a worried glance at Bad Cop, who looked decidedly uncomfortable himself and retreated to the far corner of the dank room. With no support forthcoming, Good Cop directed his attention back to the disturbing woman before him. As he took a deep, fortifying breath, Paul interrupted.

"Okay, okay, let me explain, officers..." With a minimal amount of snickers, Paul recounted the entire operation to the two bemused officers, from the borrowed make-up kit to the subway car to his surprise arrest. As he explained, Bad Cop's mouth began to twitch up at the side and his eyes crinkled with suppressed amusement. The opposite was occurring on Good Cop's face; his eyebrows returned to their preferred glowering position, his frown deepened and thick muscles stood out on his beefy neck. As Paul finished his (rather elaborate) account of the afternoon's events, Good Cop stood abruptly, the gunmetal gray chair shooting backwards and causing Bad Cop to flinch at the crash. Paul's final sentence trailed away as Good Cop rounded the table with furious strides and raised a meaty hand towards him, glaring enough to spark.

“Hey what’re you...” said Paul, his voice rising once more as the angry mitt reached for him. Handcuffed to the chair, Paul could do nothing but turn his head away and brace himself. He felt a violent tug at his scalp as the elaborate wig was ripped off, along with the pins that had affixed it to his own hair.

“Owwwwwww...” he whined at the stinging that spread over his cranium. Biting his lip, he looked up to see Good Cop contemplating the mass of lustrous dark hair (mixed with a good many torn off strands of Paul's own reddish-brown). Scowling, Good Cop tossed the wig to Bad Cop as he strode out of the room.

“Check the rest. We’ll keep him for the night,” he muttered as he left.

Bad Cop approached Paul with a sympathetic grimace.

“Hey, buddy. Sorry about that whole thing. You all right?”

“Uh-huh,” grunted Paul, scalp still burning.

“Good. So, do you have some ID or something we could look at?”

Paul nodded. “Yeah in my... clutch purse.”

Bad Cop chuckled. “Alright, we’ll check that out. For now, how about I show you to your four-star accommodations?” Again Paul only nodded. The all-consuming mirth and relief of minutes before had departed. Now all he wanted was to go home and get out of this stupid disguise.

As Paul was uncured and led out the door, Bad Cop cleared his throat. “One question,” he said. “How did you make the hooters so convincing?”

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Paul spent the night in an austere cell, sleeping fitfully on an old cot. In the morning he arose grumpy and sporting purple eye-bags the size of tea packets. When he asked the officer who brought him his breakfast if he was free to go yet, he was sorely disappointed. Apparently his sass the night before had incurred the wrath of Good Cop, who was insisting that he be kept for twenty-four hours. Evidently Good Cop was pretty far up the food chain in this particular ecosystem. Groaning, Paul sat with a dejected thump onto his cot, and his disappointment promptly doubled as he inspected the contents of his “breakfast”.

Nine hours later, Paul stepped out of the station still fully costumed and looking decidedly worse for wear. His dress was creased, his mascara was smeared, his hair was ragged, his feet were blistered and he was carrying both the wig and his shoes under his arm. Blearily he tottered towards the street, intent on hailing a taxi, when a newspaper stand caught his eye. He stumbled over and picked up a copy of the day's feature. Emblazoned in huge text across every front page, was the title "CONTROVERSY ARISES OVER ARREST OF CROSS-DRESSING JEWEL THIEF LOOK-ALIKE". Smiling out from beneath the stark black and white type was unmistakably a photograph of himself on the subway the night before, lips pursed for the camera.

As the full impact of the situation sank in, Paul became acutely aware of all the people on the street around him. He heard subtle snickers and saw fingers pointing from the corners of his eyes. It seemed as if every pedestrian on the street was staring. Judging.

Paul stood up, abruptly straightening his spine. Dropping the paper back onto the stand, he turned smartly around and marched back into the police station.

Screw this, he thought, I'm applying for the witness protection program.