



Reluctant Press presents:

Double Play

Monica James



AN 'ADULT TV' E-BOOK

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Double Play

By Monica James

Mind is the master power that molds and makes
And man is mind as forever more he takes
The tool of thought
And shaping what he wills,
Brings forth a thousand joys
Or a thousand ills.
He thinks in secret
And it comes to pass
Environment is but his looking glass.

— J. Allen

I - MALGRÉ SIDEWALK CAFE

“Hi, do you mind? It’s really busy here and I’m supposed to meet a friend. Your table is the only one with extra chairs.”

Stella/Stefan looked up at the vivacious girl and nodded ‘yes.’

“Sure, sit down. If you want a coffee in this bistro, hope your friend is late. Service is somewhere between slow and nonexistent.”

The slender girl ran her fingers through her leonine crimson hair in a nervous gesture. After sitting in a chair that provided a view of the street, she reached across to greet Stefan. “Hello, call me Tony. Actually, my name is Antoinette but everyone calls me Tony.”

Stefan smiled. “Tony spelled backwards is ‘Y not?’ Does that describe you?”

Tony took a long look at Stella/Stefan Picard. She noted the straight brown hair that framed his face, kept hippie style with a black ribbon at the back of his neck. The ice-blue eyes sparkled with interest, warmth and an easy sensuality. It was a quiet evening on a cross-street in the New Orleans French Quarter.

That was when the contrast struck her. She spoke up with an impudent tone and direct question. "You're a girl, aren't you?"

"Yes, you are observant. My name is Stella but I go by Stefan. Now, that that's settled; we both have alternate names."

"And alternate lifestyles, it would seem," Tony said as she kept staring at the handsome 'guy' sitting across from her.

Stefan set his newspaper aside and spoke softly to the pretty Tony/Antoinette. "You shouldn't be shocked to meet a transvestite in this permissive corner of the globe."

"You are really good. When I first saw you, I was certain you were a guy. I hesitated to say anything but I wanted to be visible from the street for my friend." She looked around and smiled when she saw the waiter headed for them. "Uh, may I buy you a coffee? It's to pay rent for my share of the table." Her grin was mischievous.

"Café au lait, if that's OK," Stefan said with a sly wink. "I want to pay proper homage to the French Quarter."

Tony grinned. She nodded to the waiter and ordered a serving of beignets. "The French Quarter is Spanish architecture inhabited by Italians."

Stefan was thoughtful. "Seems fitting, don't you agree? Voltaire made the comment that the Holy Roman Empire was not holy, not Roman and not an empire."

Tony was enthused. "Your point is that Voltaire might have been slightly mistaken. Thus, the French Quarter is peopled with all kinds of straights, gays, lesbians and, oh yes, transvestites. I do want you to be represented."

"I hope your friend is delayed. I'm enjoying talking with you about this, that and nothing-at-all. Does he usually stand you up?"

"Oh, rarely but the traffic might cause the usual delay. My friend is a girl, not a guy but, in present company, who is keeping track?"

They both laughed.

Stefan grinned and smiled as the waiter served a steaming mug of coffee and an order of beignets dusted with confectioner's sugar. "Ah, so sinful it has to be good. Does your friend have a name?"

Tony glanced toward the corner. She watched the cars racing to the stop sign at the end of the block. The street lamps winked on in the early evening. The humid night air left a faint halo around each light.

"Her name is Noriko. Noriko Samisen, Japanese American."

"Great, maybe we can add her to the mix."

Tony tried with practiced delicacy to take a bite of the pastry without getting a cloud of sugar all over.

Stefan laughed to see the attractive girl raise her little finger to brush the sugar off her nose.

Tony stifled a sneeze. Her cell phone buzzed and she glanced at the text message. "Just a few minutes. Oh, this has been fun with you here."

Stefan opened his cell phone. "Let me note your number."

She rattled off her contact data and stood up to wave at the yellow VW Jetta that approached. After leaving some money on the table, she was gone.

Stefan frowned as the street had become suddenly empty without her. He shrugged and reached for the pastries she had left for him. 'Well,' he thought, 'being a guy in a mixed-up world isn't all that bad. Now, if I can just elude the storm troopers from the enemy camp, all will be well. My, but that girl is attractive.' He drummed his fingers on the table and left a tip for the waiter. "I think I'll get a cat," he whispered as he sauntered along beneath the porch overhangs on St. Louis Street.

#

Stefan arrived at his patio apartment which he termed his 'den of iniquity' to see his neighbors that occupied the two other apartments had returned for the day, as evidenced by their bicycles parked outside.

He glanced with routine interest at his mailbox which was fashioned in a hole in the brick wall facing



the street. There was a crumpled piece of paper. He started to throw it away but stopped when he saw his name scribbled in pencil on one flap. Curious, he opened it.

"My name is Jayce," the note said. "I would have introduced myself at the Malgré Cafe but I saw you with a pretty girl. I have to see you. Urgent." He noted the cell phone number.

Stefan wandered into his kitchen and uncorked a split of Cabernet. His mind kept up a curious nagging about a mystery note from a mystery person named 'Jayce.' He poured the wine and looked at the note again.

Jayce knew his name, his address, what he looked like and where he would likely be after dinner at the Malgré Cafe. Stefan decided there was more than one reason to investigate, one of which was survival.

He was pensive as he walked up Royal Street. His cell phone contact with Jayce had been brief, as if there was someone else with him at that time. He considered that he was not well enough known to have his services in demand. He fervently hoped nobody knew about his ability to carve out a comfortable living by fencing 'hot' jewelry. Most of his contacts, as he continued his analysis, were with one operative who had a small office in the rear of a tourist shop fronted with antiques on Decatur Street. That, he concluded, would be the one person who knew him well enough. He was secure in the belief his brief contacts with the operative were in confidence.

Stefan scanned the several sidewalk tables for one with only one person. He took a vacant table and ordered a draft beer and pickled egg. He hoped that would settle his nervous stomach.

'Well!' he thought looking at the outlandish character standing just off the sidewalk and searching. Jayce, he noted, was about six feet and at least six inches. His skirt hugged fishnet stockings just below the knees. The filmy blouse looked to Stefan more like a peignoir; it was caught just below the breasts, Empire style, cinched tight with a belt. Its buckle matched the boot buckles. After a second look, to get an overall picture in his mind, Stefan saw that the boot heels added six or eight inches to his height. 'There can only be one word to describe this marvelous transvestite; bizarre.' He stood up, approached Jayce and led him to his table. Jayce said nothing until he had settled in one of the wrought iron captain style chairs and flounced his skirt.

"I'll take a beer," he said softly. Stefan caught the inflection right away. Jayce spoke with a soft, friendly tone which was not a southern drawl or local brogue. His sparse smile was affable enough but he briefly flashed a wry face for no apparent reason. Stefan couldn't avoid a chill when he looked into the hostile eyes of this very strange inhabitant of the French Quarter.

Stefan tapped his beer glass and pointed at Jayce so the waiter would bring his guest a cool drink to go with the humid night air.

"How do you know me so well?" Stefan asked in his most friendly manner.

Jayce looked at the waiter and nodded when the frosted beer glass was set in front of him.

"Please explain," Stefan said. He was instantly alive and alert. "How did you come to learn my name and all?"

"We have a mutual business friend," Jayce began slowly as if measuring each word. "You know who he is. A friend of mine, we have several cross-dressers that crash at my pad on St. Ann Street, wanted me to sell some jewelry he said he inherited from an aunt. When he couldn't remember the aunt's name, I assumed the jewels were hot. Our mutual operative returned a handsome price after taking his commission. I also took a chunk for myself so the poor fellow had very little left with which to restock his liquor cabinet."

Stefan held his breath in fear of what was next. "And, be honest with me, answer my question," he pressed. "This trivia with some friend of yours is hardly a solid connection between us."

Jayce sat back and sipped the cold beer. His eyes bore into Stefan like an X-ray. "You're a girl, aren't you?"

"Does that help? Yes. The reason you didn't get it earlier is that I have the benefit of a laryngoplasty procedure. A few years of trim and, Voila!, you get what you see. Don't look so perplexed; it's just a saying."

The slightest hint of a smile curled Jayce's lips. "I like the feel of women's clothes, especially the lingerie, against me. One day I plan to have a transsexual procedure to set me free of this awful masculine body. That brings us to the reason for this meeting." He squinted at Stefan.

"I'm quite satisfied the way I am. However, the procedure you are talking about is very expensive. May I suggest that money is the reason we are here sipping beer on a quiet New Orleans street?"

Jayce continued. "Precisely. After my recent adventure with the hot jewels of someone's inheritance, I uncovered an outlet I think you will find interesting. I'm proposing a partnership. You provide the jewels you get from whatever sources and I will get you top dollar."

Stefan remained silent. He had the feeling of *déjà vu* because this was exactly the approach he used when forging an agreement with some unsavory underworld characters endowed with too much jewelry from several heists around the free world. He had to make a quick decision. "It appears you've made an error," he said in a quiet tone. "I've no interest in buying and selling someone's castoff jewels or whatever. If I had the sources you infer, it might benefit us both but I do not."

Jayce frowned. "You take me for a fool. Perhaps I had that coming. I've been too direct and am aware you have no reason to add credibility to our meeting. I foresaw just such a development so I brought this to give you as a token of my sincerity." He carefully withdrew a match box wrapped in black cloth from his purse. He handed it to Stefan.

Stefan was intrigued. He opened the package and was astonished to find a large diamond sparkling in the subdued light. He looked up at Jayce to see a stoic expression. "Zircon?" he asked.

"Cubic zirconium," Jayce repeated. "I see you've done your homework as have I. Is this a labor of love?"

Stefan smiled. "Better described as market research. A passing interest."

Jayce took a large swallow from his beer. "May I suggest, sir, we retire to my place so you can view this in the proper light with state-of-the-art lenses? May I call you sir? You are a very attractive boy for being a girl." That time, his brief smile flashed even white teeth.

Stefan nodded. He left some money on the table and stood up. 'There is something foreboding about this guy,' Stefan thought as they walked along Royal Street. 'He is either under terrible stress or is, as I first surmised, the very embodiment of something sinister, evil. Yet, there is a mystic quality that is perhaps untapped in some weird way.' He admitted to himself, at that juncture, that Jayce had an element of fascination in his person, his lifestyle and his personal mission.

They sauntered along the street portraying an ironic couple for perceptive passersby. One guy dressed like a girl; one girl dressed in guy-garb. They continued on their walk, paying no attention to the stares, laughter and jeers. It was as fun-filled as a Mardi Gras parade in miniature.

#

Once in the St. Ann Street crash pad, Jayce looked seriously at Stefan. "It is all an act, you know," he said as if Stefan might have been offended. "Like many apparitions in life, the real, the imagined or the fantasy, they see what they want to see. Thus, they do not see what we are hiding. You understand this, n'est pas?"

Stefan sat primly on a wide armchair near the doorway. "It occurs to me that those of us that work to grasp what is right are really only spending energy defining what is wrong. I think the word is conundrum. Where is this workshop you mentioned?"

Jayce closed all the blinds and pulled the drapes. He placed a 'Do Not Disturb' sign from a local hotel on the outside doorknob. He threw the strong bolt that assured them of privacy. Next he stepped into an alcove that he used for a dressing station. He threw off his wig and put a sailor's cap on his head. That was when he hung up his girl-garb and put on a set of coveralls with oversize patch pockets. He motioned for Stefan to follow him.

'There has to be an inner sanctum' Stefan thought as he fought off a chill he identified as caution or blatant fear. He allowed Jayce to lead him down a long hallway. There were several rooms along the way; a kitchen and dining area, bedrooms and a luxuriously appointed bath with walk-in shower and Jacuzzi hot tub.

"This place is larger than it looks from the street," Stefan said.

"True. What interested me when I took it was that it continues through the brick wall dividing this address from the one facing the next street. On that side, our present facilities look like an abandoned gardener's shed complete with pots and a rack of tools. Neat, huh?"

Stefan nodded. "What you are telling me is that you need a place to hide. Is there an exit through the gardener's shed in case of emergency?"

"You catch on quick for a girl," Jayce said to Stefan. Before opening a door toward the end of the corridor, he turned to face Stefan. He moved one hand along Stefan's arm and inside the suede jacket. His fingers found the breasts he assumed were regular equipment. "Very nice; I've been curious about them ever since the Malgré Cafe. You keep them hidden."

Stefan tried to avoid a growing impatience. "I dress the part; easy for you to understand. Did you bring me all this way to seduce me? You are wasting your time. I'm not interested in your sperm count; not in the least."

"How refreshing," he answered and let the heavy door swing open. Stefan gasped at the surprise that awaited him. A complete workshop with lapidary machines, chemistry lab tables and a cabinet of test tubes, petri dishes and some chemicals in dark brown jars filled the large room. Against the far wall, Stefan counted a dozen tall storage shelves and racks, all cluttered with supplies of some kind.

Jayce stood in the doorway with a smug look on his face. "The jewelry evaluation shop is this way." He led Stefan into an enclosure vaguely reminiscent of an old-time darkroom. The footstool was on casters. Stefan sat down and opened the small box. He put the gem on the holder and tightened the set screw.

With the lens in place and having released the universal mount, Stefan could see the icy lattice texture of the gem. He saw a few minor flaws which he attributed to origin rather than the gemologist. He switched on the scanner light and studied the screen which showed optical dispersion. "It's marvelous," he whispered in awe to be looking into the depths of such beauty. "You should have no difficulty finding a home for it."

Jayce frowned. "You forget, sir; I gave the gem to you as a gift. Consider it an act of faith on my part."

Stefan switched off the light and turned around on the small stool to face Jayce. "It seems to me, if a vote of confidence was needed, just showing me this place should cover it. If the authorities were aware, you know we would both be in the lockup."

"Which brings me to the question that's been nagging me. I ran your name through my files and came up with a curious entry. You have served hard time. Was it for selling stolen goods?"

"No, if you must know, I was caught with the artful gem collection on my person which I lifted from a wealthy family while working there as a waitress during a birthday celebration. Part-time assignments like that give girls like me an opportunity to smoke out some valuables. Also, it helps to know what to steal. Any more questions?"

"Yes, do you believe in honor among thieves?"

Stefan grinned. "When you pave the way with gems like this, I do." He turned and faced the sober and serious Jayce. "What exactly do you have in mind?"

Jayce pursed his lips in thought then turned toward the door. "Come on, my friend, let's take a walk. I can't get over the fear that, just maybe, these walls have ears."

Stefan followed Jayce out and they walked to Jackson Square. When they found a bench away from direct light, Jayce motioned Stefan to sit down.

"OK, this is what is happening, the scene as we often say. I think you will see how you might fit into the scam." Jayce looked around to be certain they were not in earshot before he continued.

"We have several operatives who have access to bank fraud records. Others are janitor types who can copy police files. Identity theft is becoming the white collar crime of the modern age. Once a new identity is established, the thief turns to us for additional documents, information and heirloom jewelry. This item is where you fit in. You have the knowledge to evaluate the hot jewels that flow into the hands of the workers who fashion necklaces, broaches, bracelets, rings and so on. These become of value to the person assuming the new identity by wearing conspicuous pieces."

Stefan took a deep breath to process what Jayce was saying. Finally, he asked, "So what?"

Jayce displayed one of his rare smiles. "We have to have a dollar base to work with in order to keep control. Also, we farm out certain pieces that need engraving, altering and so on, all to add credibility."

"So, where do I fit in?"

"We have what stockbrokers call a 'market order.' We have to be certain our products have a genuine look. By the time the thief turns to us to supplement his or her new identity, they have scammed enough cash to make it all profitable. The advantage, may I call you sir?, is that you have little or no risk. You come and go according to the work to be done but you don't have to shop your wares as you are now doing. Neat, aye?"

"I didn't see any of your workers when you gave me the tour of the shop today? Where do they hide?"

Jayce grinned again. "Like our mutual friend on Decatur Street, we package and deliver. A detail of what needs to be done and the gems or precious metals to do it are provided. Hell knows no fury like a hungry jeweler."

"Who delivers?"

"Fugitives from the Age of Innocence. The two pretty girls you met earlier at the Malgré Café are perfect. Antoinette, the one they call Tony, was sent to meet you. The scene was made to look casual when Noriko picked up Tony at the curb. We have a very close-knit group, as you have seen."

"All right," Stefan said after a long pause. "I like it. When do we start?"

Jayce chuckled. "Soon, I hope. We need to finish this interview because there are some missing pieces of information about you I would like to know. Call me nosey if you like; I need to have a background, which in our business is often difficult to compile."

"I can imagine. Uh, that girl, Tony, is she available? I really like her looks. Vivacious girls appeal to my sense of adventure."

"So, you like girls. That's a start. Tell me about the prison life you had to endure."

Stefan relaxed and slid forward on the bench. "Being a girl in an all-girls prison, or anywhere for that matter, requires making adjustments. I was very lucky to have an attractive cell mate who lost little time in seducing me. For a while, at first, I was a vulnerable gal feeling like I was fifteen years old. Oh, I'd had some first hand introduction to sex but I didn't really get the message until I spent a few days and interesting nights in the County Lockup. I attract the predators like ants on a honey jar."

Jayce smiled. "I can see you have the right equipment for it. Yet, you have cross-dressing down to a fine art. It's more than just a gender change to hide behind, I suspect. Tell me about that."

"It's an issue you should be aware of before you turn me loose to demonstrate my various skills. Instead of surrendering my loot in order to get a reduced jail sentence, I stashed it. There were two reasons, neither of them easy. I felt I worked too hard to get that collection and wasn't about to hand it over to some authority to take to his girlfriend. Secondly, I was approached by a secret operative, mob-related I've always thought, who wanted to employ me in laundering a large haul of jewelry. The agreement was to deduct my commission and expenses; the balance of the sale went to them."

"So, now I get the picture. You have a large stash of your own to draw on for living expenses, plus you have the other contributions. That means there are two groups looking for you—the law and the mob. Not a promising situation."

"You can see I took the path of least resistance, so to speak."

Jayce was pensive a moment. "We have an expansion plan which is why we are so in need of your expertise. A legitimate front seems to be the best course of action. Our new company will be called "Heirlooms, Incorporated" and the promo slogan is "Create a Family Name." He looked briefly at Stefan before continuing. "Get this scenario. The love-smitten swain is courting the charming Southern belle. When she finally agrees to marry him, he springs out the heirloom jewelry, silver service, whatever, to show her he has a family name but did not want that to influence her decision."

"Dynamite! I like it," Stefan declared. "And we provide the entire family identity to calm the little lady down. Neat!"

Jayce looked bright for a moment. A rare demeanor for him. "Now, there is more. If we discover the young gent has access to a family bankroll, we can discreetly suggest he part with a large chunk of it if he wants to keep his new family identity secret from the beautiful bride."

"Ah, blackmail; thy heart has no space for the light of day."

"You would have come to the same conclusion."

"Perhaps but it is nice you have confidence in me." Stefan paused. "All right, I'm in. Not only am I confident I can contribute, but the lure of illicit adventure excites me. When do I get introduced to the Tony/Antoinette girl?"

"You have a one-track mind," Jayce laughed. "Relax; I'll arrange for you to go to dinner or something. I guessed she is the 'something' you are interested in. You will have to work that out for yourself; I'm not in that business."

They both laughed.

II - Murder in the Rue Decatur

Stefan enjoyed an early supper at Tujaques. When he stepped through the narrow doorway onto the sidewalk, he was shocked to see an ambulance, several NOPD police cruisers and a crowd gathered about the antique shop in the next block.

He strolled toward the controlled bedlam, all the while looking around, in windows and at sidewalk displays, as would befit a tourist in the early evening. His worst fears were realized when he confirmed the police were in the store where his friend had the small office.

There was so much confusion he was easily able to walk in. He headed for the rear of the store. A police detective stopped him.

"Ah, sir," the cop said, "one moment." Stefan stopped and faced the man. He was short, stocky and swarthy.

"Yes, sir?" Stefan asked politely.

"Why are you here? Do you know the people who work here?"

"Not all of them. I've seen them often enough when I come to visit my uncle in the back. We get together for chess a few times a week. Is something wrong?" That was when the emergency medics wheeled out the gurney. His faithful friend was no more. It was a shock.

"I'm sorry. Violent death is always a difficult loss. I'd like to ask you a few questions if I may."

Stefan glanced into the small office. The rimless glasses were on the floor, crushed into bits. He turned away but the policeman was still talking to him.

"Yes, sir," he answered. "I'll help in any way I can. Maybe he surprised some thieves and paid for his loyalty."

"Perhaps. We are dusting for prints now. Your uncle had a photo of a girl in his hand when he died. Do you know this girl?" He showed Stefan the picture and watched Stefan carefully for a reaction.

"Um, no sir. I think not. It is unusual for, uh, the deceased to be involved with a girl. Even one so pretty. He is, oh was, not a lecher. Rather, your investigation will show he was an intellectual man."

The cop looked around, impatient. "This is a picture of a fugitive we've been trying to locate. Her name is Stella Picard. At this juncture, I think if we can talk to this Picard person, we'll gain some insight into the murder."

Stefan gulped, nervous. "If I think of anything or anyone, I'll certainly come forward. Right now I'm in shock. I have some telephone calls to make, as you can understand."

The cop pressed a card into Stefan's hand and turned to speak to someone else. Stefan walked slowly to the entrance, then down the street to the abandoned bank building at the corner.

"Jayce, this is Stefan. Your operative at the antique shop was just murdered. I'm in shock. The cops are looking for Stella Picard because our friend had a photo of her in his hand when he died. It was not a random murder. His glasses were smashed so that it looked like they might have been torn off his face, thrown to the floor and stepped on. The thugs are looking for me and there is no way of telling what they were able to learn."

Jayce was abrupt. "That's a loss, for sure. What do you want to do?"

"I need to take a few days to think this all out very carefully. A trip to the coast would help. Since we are partners, I want to collect my valuables. Do you have a high security place I can use to hide them? Anything about the size of a shoe box would be about right."

"Meet me at our favorite bench in the Square," Jayce said. "I'll help you if you wish. We can talk over what this all means. Between the two of us, maybe we can make some sense of it."

Later, Jayce found Stefan sitting on the bench. Stefan was so tense he looked like he expected a huge snake to attack him.

"It's certain the policeman didn't recognize me," Stefan said when Jayce sat down. "I wouldn't be here if he had."

"My thought is that you should get out of the pad you've rented. It is likely an address was given out before our friend died. After all, he never considered it a breach of loyalty to get that info about you for me to use. I suspect he just decided there were limits and boundaries he did not want to cross. Are you comfortable with that?"

"I see a high risk. There is little at my apartment I need. We can walk along and see if a surveillance team is posted there. If we try to go in, it will get us both killed."

Jayce frowned. "Yes, after they get the stash, of course." She was pensive. "This isn't the only incident that has given me pause to consider. I'm thinking of moving our entire operation to a safer venue. I know you don't mind making like a nomad. Any location come to mind?"

Stefan shuddered. "No but I surely agree," he answered. "You called your place a 'crash pad' when we first met. Can you hide me there until we figure out what to do?"

They strolled out of the small park past the Pontalba buildings and down the street toward the crime scene. All was quiet. Stefan led the way to a heavy door opening onto a long walkway leading to a small patio at the back of the antique store. The store was closed and yellow warning strips were across the doorway. A tiny room made of cobblestones against the left patio wall was snuggled in shrubbery. There was one narrow window.

"It's in here," Stefan said. He unlocked the outside door. Once inside, he closed it. "Super security."

Jayce looked around the room which was dimly lit by a single light bulb. "I don't see any hiding place. Someone knows what they are doing."

"One of my many talents," Stefan answered. "I brought you with me because it takes two to make this work. The valuables are in a galvanized tin box. We can haul it in a shopping bag with local advertising on it. It's not unusual to see a couple out on the town purchasing souvenirs."

Jayce was momentarily startled. "Two people?" he asked. "That means there is someone else who knows how to get in here. Explain, please."

Stefan moved a retaining screw from one of the window supports. He slid the decorator panel until it recessed in the wall. It was on a smaller support used as a runner. "This is the part that takes an extra hand," he said, turning to Jayce. "You hold this end and press with all your weight so I can reach inside and get the latch."

Jayce did as instructed. With a twist of his hand, Stefan revealed a dusty cavity hidden in the wall. He pulled out the box and carefully re-secured the recess. "Voila!" he said and set the box on the small table. He took a shopping bag with advertisements printed on it from the wide drawer in the table.

Just as easily as they had come, they were back along the walkway and onto the street. Stefan was cautious but saw no threat.

"You can answer my question now," Jayce said impatiently. "I agree your stash is brilliant but who held the support so you could fashion the inner parts?"

Stefan was sad. "Our friend, recently deceased. It's what I had in mind when I said I'd take a few days to think this over. Too many questions, not enough answers." They turned on a single alley-like street and headed for Jayce's place. "In a weird way, this is cause for celebration. Come on, I'll buy you a beer. You earned it." Stefan turned into a corner bar.

The discussion was continued after they settled onto a table in the far end of the room. The barmaid brought them two frosted mugs of draught beer.

Jayce folded his arms and leaned back. There was nobody within hearing distance. They did appear to be a tourist couple on a buying spree.

Jayce raised one hand, palm up, and said, "Talk to me."

"When I was paroled, the local gendarmes watched me very closely to see if they could recover the stash. It looked like the insurance company made a deal with the police to donate to their retirement fund. Anyhow, they were not successful. I was happy, with a nice place to live, pretty girl to love, all that. One day, Percy, the inmate that used to live there, sent a couple around to collect some things from his stash. There was no danger to me but I did succeed in scaring hell out of the two. They paid Percy a goodly sum for some stuff that wasn't there. No surprise, the cops showed up and hauled us all off to the city lockup."

Jayce sighed, impatient. "Which has nothing to do with anything. Get on with it."

"In the jail, I made a lot of noise to get someone to listen to my outrage. I'd nothing to do with the other two. Never discount the communication network of the greedy fingers out there when there is money to be stolen. Someone got the word that a guy in the lockup had a heavy stash in need of laundering; some really neat pieces, jewels mostly, all set and sparkling. Makes my mouth water thinking of it."

“All right. I can see how that went together. You’ve been living off the proceeds ever since.”

“Yes, and I’d be dying if they get their way. I have a friend on Chicago’s South Side who is an expert in gender identity issues. A week with her and I was a guy. Now, let me tell you about this girl.”

“Shut up. I don’t want to go to Chicago and we don’t have to import any talent. Get on with it.”

Stefan laughed. “I’m enjoying this. Maybe I need to verbalize to get it all straight in my mind. Anyhow, to make the story short, the guys were happy to unload their stash on me and get my agreement to pay them off. I can see their position; it was too much individualized jewelry that could be evidential if it turned up. I did make a few payments, just as agreed. After that, I got nervous with the money running low. I had only the one contact they had provided to make payments to. That’s the one they hauled off in the Coroner’s van—the same guy you approached to get me into your small group. Like I said, there are questions, no answers.”

“I’d no idea I was flirting with danger. All I knew was our friend had the contacts I needed.”

“You have suddenly amassed a large and valuable stash. Add this to the business we are starting and you will soon have enough bread to start your own soup kitchen. What’s next?”

“It’s the Middlesex Clinic located in the hills over the city of Fort de France, Martinique; a French State. They have a reputation for excellent work not only in gender reassignment but obesity, cosmetic surgery, things like that. If you want to come along and get fitted to be a guy rather than a packin’ lesbo, I can arrange it.”

“Um no; thanks all the same. It’s good info; I’ll file it away in my emergency file. To continue my story. Our recently deceased friend rented me the space in the cobblestone room. It is highly probably he did not believe those thugs would kill him because his loss to the organization, tight as it is, would raise too much interest. To say it was a momentary crime of passion might be correct but not likely. It takes years to develop that kind of contact.”

They finished their beer and were soon on the narrow side streets leading to Jayce’s den. “What’s with Noriko Samisen?”

“I thought you liked her girlfriend?” Jayce asked.

“I do; that’s why I’m asking.”

III - Courier Mission

Jayce opened a spare bedroom for Stefan. There were some bulky clothes to use in the workroom. Stefan found comfortable work overalls with large pockets and an apron with a light rubberized finish.

He showered and sank gratefully into the hot tub. After that he did a quick tour in the steam room.

Sleep did not come easy even though he felt completely, physically relaxed. Several times during the day, he had rejected Jayce's efforts to entice him. 'There seems to be something attractive about being different than the rest,' he opened a silent monologue in his head. 'I sure qualify on that issue. Yesterday I owed Jayce nothing; today I'm beholden to him as a friend, savior, and partner with enough knowledge of me and my background to throw me to the wolves when he is ready. Best to keep that in mind.' He considered the nature of trust between human beings and decided that trust only exists when forces are nearly equal to one another.

"You find all you need, partner?" Jayce asked from the open doorway.

"Just settling in, thanks. It was a big day." He watched Jayce warily as the tall man moved swiftly across the room. He quickly slid over to let Jayce sit on the bunk next to him. "What's on your mind?" he asked.

"You. I couldn't get through the meeting with the clients this evening without thinking of you. I am sorry I declined to have video surveillance in the sauna area. I so wanted to see you as a girl. You are a really handsome guy."

Stefan grinned. "You can turn on the light if you wish. The facial tints that give me a masculine look have now been scrubbed thoroughly." He chuckled as if it was a joke. He almost reacted when he felt Jayce drop one hand onto his hip. He opted to say nothing about it. 'Let it be a friendly gesture,' he thought, 'even though I know it isn't. Just how much do I owe this person?'

He remained silent.

"Well," Jayce began after some thought. "The meeting tonight was about some transfer work we sometimes do for clients that want secure delivery. This time we have a satchel to bring to the coast. You seem to be the kind of guy/gal that can find an address. This one is between the Pass and Gulfport so it shouldn't be difficult."

"Oh? Do I get paid for this little journey?"

"Sure, these clients are generous. You get up-front expense money when you pick up the parcel, a cash bonus when you return with a letter from their operatives there. You said you wanted a day on the coast so this should fit in. Or have you decided against some private time?"

Stefan grinned. "I like the idea. Don't your contacts want to know more about me before entrusting me with this kind of mission?"

"No. I told them all they need to know. We have trust to keep us going."

Stefan's thoughts flashed back to the trust issues he had considered earlier. "Fine, when do I leave?"

Jayce stared at Stefan with the inscrutable glare Stefan had seen a few times before. "I sent a friend of ours to the real estate office to list your place. They were told you left unexpectedly. All your belongings are being picked up by a storage company. You can access them later when we feel there is no risk. Noriko is coming by in the morning to go with you to pick out some clothes. There are some shops on Rampart Street."

"And Tony Antoinette?" Stefan asked.

Jayce slapped Stefan's hip in a playful gesture. "I knew you were going to ask that. Tony has asked to lunch with you and Noriko after the shopping. You can all get better acquainted. You may want to take either or both of them to the coast with you. It's good cover; a guy and two pretty girls."

Stefan stared back at Jayce. "Have you had your pleasure with the two of them?"

Jayce smiled. "Yes. Sex is the initiation to our grand sorority. I may be unhappy with my present body but not unhappy with the expert attention of two sensual girls."

"I understand you've taken it upon yourself to study the motivated head ministrations of the American female? After your gender reassignment, you will be called upon to perform just such joyful activities. It will be unsavory, much like drinking from a spittoon; gross but necessary."

"Omigod! Stef, that was awful. It will take some time to get that vision out of my head."

Stefan laughed. "My point exactly."

He was still laughing when Jayce left the room.

#

Noriko rapped discreetly on Stefan's door. "Mister Stefan, are you decent?"

"Haven't been for years. Come in but be prepared for a shock."

Noriko stood in the doorway dressed in a red and yellow Japanese kimono that hugged her hips. A generous portion of thigh showed from a slit in the skirt when she walked.

"Oh, I see what you mean. I did not expect ..."

Stef grinned. "You weren't told I'm a girl?"

"Yes, but, I wasn't ready to see such a beautiful woman under all that man-garb."

"I'm just as thrilled with your fine figure so we're even. Give me a minute and we can go."

After several stops at clothing outlets, the two returned to the place they called the Proper Palace to find Tony waiting for them, comfortably settled on the patio bench next to the gurgling waterfall. Stefan excused himself to get dressed.

They had to get in line at the Malgré Café. Soon, Jayce came out to rescue them and bring them in through the side entrance to a booth she had reserved. A decanter of Amaretto and a tray of hors d'oeuvres decorated the table.

Stefan wore an orange and black headscarf tucked neatly around his neck and into the wide sweater top. His bulky jacket hid the modest breast line.

"Is Samisen a family name?" Stefan asked in an effort to make conversation.

Noriko's giggle was complete with her delicate hand over her mouth. It was a show of modesty that added to her allure. "I can tell you are not a student of Japanese culture," she said teasing him. "A samisen is a musical instrument in Japan. It has three strings and is played like a banjo or maybe a large ukulele."

His eyes twinkled in amusement. "So, Samisen is not your real name? With so much subterfuge around here, one does not know who is who or what is what. I like it."

Tony chuckled. "Jayce is the only one with masculine equipment hidden beneath her skirt. Not that anybody is interested in that." She emphasized 'that' with a note of disdain and they all laughed.

The luncheon arrived; they settled down to eat but the air was still heavy with the unexpected. "I know you are all wondering why I called this meeting," Jayce said in a false bravado voice. "I want to announce that Stefan here has joined our little band of entrepreneurs and we are discussing starting a new business. I'll let him explain it."

The two young girls were fascinated. They were aware that Jayce only included them in business news that affected them.

Stefan was slightly embarrassed as he had not really thought much about it since the murder on Decatur Street. "We are going to begin with the name— Heirlooms, Incorporated. From there he went into detail on the attractions of the business venture.

Jayce spoke up. "We want to begin small so we are limiting the organization to just us four for now. Noriko has many contacts, possible sources, in the oriental community. Tony has access to the college newspapers and other publications to set up advertising. Stefan is our behind-the-scenes man who will produce the custom jewelry, heirlooms, whatever. It was this special talent that gave us the idea."

Tony was pensive. "All this takes money before we see some income. What is our balance sheet to start with?"

"Spoken like a true venture capitalist," Jayce said, patting Tony's hand. "There is a small distribution warehouse in Biloxi, Mississippi, that I think we can use as a receiving and sending unit. They don't have to know the nature of Heirlooms, Incorporated. You need to visit them and set up an account." She paused and tugged her purse around onto her lap. "Take this check made out to them as escrow for their use. We will pay for their services on a unit basis. This money is to be used if they need C.O.D. or whatever. They won't ask many questions when they see the dollar figure."

Noriko squeezed her knee together, a gleeful motion. "This is so exciting. Do we all go to the Gulf Coast?"

"I think not. Unfortunately, I have some responsibilities here. Stefan, being the gentleman he is, will accompany you. He has a brief delivery to make near Pass Christian but that shouldn't slow you down. Be tourists on a holiday. Get a motel, play some. Some boat rides or tourist buses might be of interest. There are some gambling casinos. One thing, girls. Stefan has to maintain his male identity in public. Don't try to talk him out of it. In private, do as you wish, of course."

Jayce swilled the liqueur with a generous gesture. "That's the news. Noriko, if you don't want to drive your Jetta, go with Stefan to rent a car; medium size, nothing flashy. Tony, Stefan is not the boss so you don't owe him any special favors like you did for me. Noriko, the same goes for you. Stefan hasn't made up his mind yet about joining the larger organization. For now, it's just the heirloom business. Good luck."

In a moment she was gone.

#

Stefan took the off ramp from the freeway onto the coast highway. Once across the wide bay, he had no difficulty locating his drop location. It was an electrical supply store. He went in and asked for the name he had been given. He was promptly ushered to an office in the back. An handsome woman, maybe as old as forty, welcomed him and offered a drink. He declined, saying his favorite drink was a Mint Julep but he doubted she had any fresh mint. That was the password.

The woman stood and offered her hand. She was taller than Stefan by a few inches. When she came around the desk to stand next to him, she looked briefly startled.

"You're a girl, aren't you? Oh, don't be alarmed; I'm experienced in such matters. You carry your masculine side very well." She smiled, gracious. "That's a compliment; not many of you floating around."

Stefan felt awkward under the steady gaze. "Uh, I've brought you a gift from the Proper Palace in New Orleans. It's in the trunk of the car."

She touched his shoulder. "Drive around back. I'll meet you there. By the way, I'm instructed to give you this envelope for your leader. I trust all is in order."

When he went out to get the car, the two girls had their faces glued to the side window. They looked like children afraid they would miss something. He felt a warm tug of affection for them but reverted to his leadership role right away. He drove around back.

"Wow, Look!" Tony exclaimed when they stopped next to the svelte woman.

She leaned over to introduce herself while Stefan popped the trunk and dug out the satchel. He set it by the door and hurriedly stashed the envelope beneath the spare tire.

He moved on her with a family-type hug and they both smiled at the indulgence.

Soon the three were back on the coast highway enjoying the winking Gulf waters in the afternoon sun.

"She was super neat," Noriko said. "Where does Jayce get all these marvelous contacts? It's beyond me."

Tony laughed. "Did you see that mouth? Exquisite! I think that's how she picks 'em."

"In any event, we'll see more of her as time goes by. I almost gave her a sales talk on Heirlooms, Incorporated but thought better of it. One thing at a time," Stefan said. "She appears solid in the small community. With her interest in whatever was in that satchel, she might also be attracted to any young swain needing to create a name for himself."

At the motel, Stefan took two nights in a room with two double beds. It was walking distance to several restaurants and an easy jog to the sandy beach. He paid cash which didn't seem to disturb the spaced-out clerk.

He dropped off his jacket at the door and kicked aside his ankle boots.

"Well," Noriko said, hands on hips in a declaring gesture. "Are you going to feed us?"

He smiled. "Take this money and your pretty girlfriend to the eatery just down the coast. I'm for a shower and some sack time. Wake me if anything is going on. We'll find the distributor in Biloxi in the morning. Remember, if you spend all your allowance on the gaming tables, you go without breakfast."

The girls giggled and quickly were gone to their new adventure. As soon as the door closed, Stefan checked in with Jayce to let her know the drop was successful and that he had the envelope. "No problem unless the girls drink too much," he added.

As before, Jayce spoke like she had someone else in the room and made no mention of the worldly woman at the electrical supply store. Stefan shook his head in wonder, stripped and stepped into a steamy shower.

He didn't hear the girls return and was surprised to see them both sitting on the wide bed waiting for him.

"Uh oh," he said, tugging the large beach towel around his firm feminine body. "I didn't know you were here. Hope you're not offended."

"Looks good to me," Tony said and jabbed at Noriko with her elbow.

"We want to talk," Noriko said with an air of mystery.

"Then do so," Stefan said and sat on the other bed. He crossed his shapely legs and waited.

Noriko was first. "Where do you come from? We can't decide by your accent. How did Jayce know you have all this hidden talent? Also, why are you so obsessed with cross-dressing? You are a lovely girl."

Stefan grinned. "My, you two are curious." He stopped, thoughtful for the moment. "All right; we're in this together so I guess it's fair to give you both some background."

Tony moved forward on the side of the bed to get closer. "Start at the beginning," she said. Her mini-skirt inched higher.

"Some people are from Penn State; I come from State Pen. I did some hard time and am presently on parole. My expertise that so entranced your leader has to do with fencing, laundering is the word, jewels. I know gem value. I've marketed bracelets, brooches, all of

it. The man who was murdered on Decatur Street was friendly to both me and Jayce. Thus, the connection. I'm still pondering that minor event; there are questions, but no answers at the moment."

"What is your name?" Noriko asked.

He grinned. "I am Stella Picard. I hope that doesn't shock you. I learned my fascination for beautiful girls while in prison. You both send me into orbit with your feminine wiles. I know you had to perform, if that's the right word, for Jayce to get in our little group. I sure can't knock it; we all gravitate toward safety and security. I believe we have a promising future ahead of us. If Jayce is happy with our assignment here, more will be forthcoming. The drop we made today to the 'ultra-handsome' woman was essential in some way. She was a 'looker,' n'est pas?"

"Yes, for sure," Tony said, still staring at Stefan. "You are really good; anyone would have to know what to look for to decide if you are boy or girl. Begin with the voice; you have a deep tonal like a guy. You weren't born with that."

He laughed. "The voice change is attributed to a procedure known as phonoplasty. You just admitted it is effective. Makeup is by Suddenly Him, fairly new on the market. It makes me look like I need a shave. Eyeliner, haircut, all the rest is designed to hide me as a girl. Don't think of turning me in. All it will get you is a shallow grave." He winked at them.

Tony smiled. "Thanks; we needed to know if we are going to work together." She started to get up.

"Oh no, not that easy," Stefan said. "Start talking. That I'm allied with two lovely lesbians pleases me very much. Tell me about Jayce. Come on, all of it."

Tony looked at Noriko. Noriko nodded agreement.

"We started by doing odd jobs for Jayce. When she improved the business venture, she approached first me, then Noriko, to see if we wanted to join. We were both broke and hungry. To us, men are gross so joining the hooker platoon at the corner was a dismal last resort. Jayce told us in confidence that she felt like a girl trapped in a man's body. She plans to get gender reassignment surgery when there is enough money. We both see Jayce as a kindred soul. It took us both some time to adjust to the idea of blowing her but, when she paid the rent on our pad for a month, we were almost enthusiastic."

"Other employees?" Stefan asked.

Noriko spoke up. "They come and go, seldom long enough to get acquainted. She is generous in taking in street rejects. She gives 'em a place to sleep and some food. One pretty girl told me Jayce offered to buy her a bus ticket home in return for a blow job. The girl was gone the next day."

"Yes," Tony interrupted. "This is the point I think you want to hear. If you are not in the organization, you are in constant danger. Jayce owns no loyalty outside his defined group. If you refuse to join, you are at risk. She will drop you off at the lockup at any time it is to her advantage. The only way you can protect yourself now that you are so well known is to join the organization."

"And you are telling me joining will make me rich."

"No, we are telling you it will keep you alive," Tony said with flashing eyes. "We don't want that to happen to you. We might be back on the street without this heirloom business. Nevertheless, you are short term in Jayce's eyes. That's the way she works."

"I see," Stefan said after a long silence. The thoughts hung in the air like smoke. "I'll think it over. I am carrying an envelope the lady at the electric supply store gave me. It might be cash. If so, I could easily be out of the country and lounging on the beach in Tahiti. Why do you think Jayce trusts me with such a wad of ready cash?"

"It's a trial," Noriko answered. "What good is any amount of money if you are dead. You can't take it with you."

Stefan laughed. "My brother was faced with the same scenario. He said, as was his way, 'I'm not going to go.'"

They all laughed.

"What did you bring me from the restaurant? I'm sick of takeout Chinese."

Noriko pointed at the foil-covered meal on the table at the window. "We didn't spend all the money you gave us. Maybe if we try real hard, we can find a place to spend it. Where did you put the envelope full of cash?"

"I'm not going to tell you. It's hidden in a place you would never think to look. I considered one of those USPO blue boxes but thought better of it. You two go out, have a good time, get laid if you can manage it. I have some serious thinking to do. Hope you don't mind."

Tony stood up and looked at Noriko. "Stefan looks alive to me. We better try to keep him that way."

After cleaning up and applying fresh makeup, they were gone again.

Stefan sank gratefully into the bed; the fresh clean sheets impressed him and he recalled the adventures in the prison with the pretty cell mate. He was soon asleep.

Next morning, Stefan was up, showered and headed out the door when Noriko poked her head outside the covers. "Going out?" she asked.

"See you later," he called back. "Enjoy!"

The drive to Biloxi made him think he was on the Yellow Brick Road, it was so serene. He parked in the EZ-Zenith lot and went in. There were several army types browsing which surprised him until he recalled there is a large air base nearby. 'That little item,' he thought, 'is all to the good. Adds to the anonymity.' He mentally catalogued the scope of discount merchandise and decided Jayce was correct in her choice of distributor. When a clerk approached him, he asked to speak to the owner if that was possible. "A business matter," he explained.

The owner was prompt; another item for his report. The contact was friendly and direct. He collected addresses, telephone contacts, names; all the miscellany he felt essential. The gentleman took the check and whistled his approval. Within the hour after arriving, they had an account with their drop ship distributor. He was pleased.

Back at the motel, he surprised Noriko getting dressed for the day. Tony was in the shower.

"You went without us, didn't you?" Noriko asked. "Not very nice."

"We can drive past there when you get dressed, if you wish. Anyhow, our mission is complete; we have a contractual account. It's a cool place."

He stepped quickly next to her before she could get off the bed. He ran his fingers through the lustrous black hair and touched her lips with his finger.

"Please, Stefan. Don't complicate us. Tony and I play a lot but we don't cross that border unless, of course, Jayce tells us otherwise. I hope you are good at what you do for a man who likes a woman's mouth; if not, we are aliens for sure."

He ran both hands along the side of her face and onto her shoulders. Next he cupped both breasts, naked beneath the flimsy night-shirt. "Is Tony the only woman you've known? There are others, you know; other ways, other skills. Give that some thought."

She shuddered and looked up into Stefan's face. "I know you are more experienced. We have discussed that but are hesitant until you are at least a full member of the organization. After that, well, it's all family so to speak. And, if you must know, Jayce is the only guy successful in getting that big cock in my mouth. Not so with Tony; she told me what to do."

"I see. Thanks for being up-front with me. Non-family incest; interesting concept."

Stefan looked up when Tony came out of the bath. She was completely naked except for a white towel wrapped around her head to dry her hair before the



dryer treatment. She screamed at seeing Stefan and rushed to cover herself.

Noriko laughed. "She is so modest." She followed her lover with her eyes as Tony went swiftly back to the bathroom. The look of affection that sparkled in those oriental dark orbs did not miss Stefan's glance.

He moved just as quickly to caress Noriko's breasts again. "Darling," he said after hesitating. "You have been very complimentary when you saw me as a girl. Will you do one small thing to please me?"

Noriko was cautious. "Like what?"

"Just a quick display," Stefan answered and touched the girl's lips again.

"You haven't been in such an aroused mood in the past. What turned you on? Or is it that you've hidden from us all along?"

Without answer, Stefan dropped his jacket on the other bed and, watching Noriko intently, stripped off his shirt and the fitted elastic straps that hid the firm breasts. He stepped between Noriko's legs and leaned over to offer the melon-mounds to Noriko's lips. "Let me watch your lips and tongue, darling girl," he said in a whisper.

Noriko nodded, leaned forward and took first one breast, then the other. She played with the nipple with her tongue.

Stefan had the feeling she would have continued longer if Tony had not interrupted them.

"What's this? Payback? Uncool! Nothing sucks more," Tony said, stomping her foot.

Stefan backed away, put on his clothes and headed for the door. "I'll be at the Volcano Bar when you two get your act together. You both get a tour of our drop in Biloxi and a luncheon to take the place of the breakfast you slept through." He laughed, waved, and was gone.

IV - The First Heirloom Job

Jayce looked up to see Stefan in the doorway of her office.

"You wanted to see me?" Stefan asked.

Jayce looked her partner up and down. She could see Stefan's demeanor had changed slightly. Stefan still had the short haircut and the masculine swagger when he walked. Also, there could be no mistaking the deep masculine voice.

"Yes, please come in. We have the first heirloom scenario. Here are the particulars." She handed Stefan the worksheet. "It shows how much money the lad is willing to spend. His preferences run from a silver tea service to some antique necklaces set with diamonds

and, if possible, a signet ring, engraved. The family name is Seria, old and well-established locally. How is your calligraphy? I know you've been practicing."

"I'll have some examples for you to show your client. I suggest, before we permanently alter our inventory, that we get approval from young Mister Seria. He should know what he is getting and what the cost will be. Also, he may part with additional sums if he feels he can afford it."

"Excellent suggestion; we'll do it," Jayce replied. She smiled ruefully. "That boy wants in that pretty girl's pants so much he is willing to mortgage his soul."

Stefan smiled. "Call on Doctor Faustus."

Jayce grinned and put her fingertips together. "I hope you have noticed the additional sales from your stash. You should have collected a tidy sum by now. Tell me, are you happy here or do you want to get an apartment where you don't have to wait in line for the hot tub?"

"Yes but I've been a bit horny lately. I might have a more agreeable sex life if I had a place like you suggest. Still, I like the action here and, of course, access to the tools I need. I sometimes think over a problem and end up in the middle of the night finishing the job. I couldn't do that if there was a commute involved."

Jayce smiled. "Tony told me what happened on your trip to the coast. I think she has cooled down by now. In her view, nobody gets to mess with her chick. Seeing Noriko, one has to agree. Lovely."

"I don't handle rejection well but I'll get along. Who is that luscious peach you brought in yesterday? I saw her in the kitchen a while ago."

"You have good taste. A friend called to get her into our shelter. She is sobering up. If she cooperates, she will be on the next bus to Hattiesburg at our expense."

Stefan smiled. "You are certainly generous with our expense account." "Call it a fringe benefit. Speaking of which, my ambitious partner, are you aware that, if you would make yourself available for different assignments from time to time, your tidy sum would be double what it is now? Something to think about."

"Tell me, since you brought it up. Do you really find my person so attractive or is it a power play of some kind?"

Jayce smiled, showing a hint of even white teeth. "The answer to that is 'both.' I know you have a great body under all that guy stuff. There is more to the story which you may have forgotten. I'm saving for an important meeting with some medical specialists at the Middlesex Clinic in Martinique. Part of the sale of your stash is diverted to my personal fund. If you would come into the organization, be a full member, you would make more money for your future and, as it happens, so would I just having your many talents to call on when needed. Think it over; I'm very easy to please. The thought of...oh, well. That's all for now. Go seduce the drunk in the kitchen if it will make you feel any better."

Stefan returned to the workroom with his manifest for the love-sick gent named Seria. There was work to be done and it was their first real heirloom assignment.

#

"Can I see it?" Tony asked poking her head around the doorway to the lab. "Jayce told me you are near finished. I hope our client doesn't die of frustration before it is done."

"That would be inconsiderate of him. Yes, please come in. You need to bring me up to date on the advertising plans. Are you still angry that I was playing with lovely young Noriko?"

"Yes, I guess so. Resentments come easy for me; always have. Add a little jealousy and it becomes an irresolvable issue. We have several very discreet ads in different publications aimed at the lovelorn. I'll collect some clips and drop them off for you. Who gets to deliver these fancy pieces you've altered?"

"We will show the client photos of what he is buying. There is method in that. Next, the distributor in Biloxi will package and deliver certified. It gives it a flavor of clandestine expense."

Tony smiled. "And the photos, before and after, all dated, are available for extortion at a later time. It smells like Jayce, through and through."

Stefan rolled his swivel stool away from the work bench. "I saw Jayce a few hours ago. You might want to check in with her to see if she needs some of your, ah, support. She talks like she is near ready to embark for a Caribbean cruise or some such."

Tony frowned. "So that's what has her riled up lately. She not only gets my mouth but also Noriko's sensitive lips. I talked with a transient girl, very

pretty, a while ago. She was coming out of Jayce's loft and wiping her mouth. She said she had just earned the price of a ticket home. Yes, I'd say our leader is on the edge, as you suggest."

Stefan opened a velvet lined box and shoved it across the table to Tony. "This is it."

Tony's eyes lighted in appreciation. "Stefan, they are beautiful. And so old looking. Like, antique or other-worldly." She handled the bracelet, held it up to the light to see the glittering stones. Inside the rim was the family logo 'Seria' in a flourishing script. "So, you are into calligraphy. Stefan, this is all exquisite. Real or not, that girl should be pleased."

"We are cashing in on the remnants of southern culture. Mister Seria wouldn't be paying such a high price for this stuff unless he was certain he was marrying into a cache of old money. Fascinating, isn't it?"

"Yes, I think we should attend the wedding or the reception. I'd like to get a look at a girl who can command this kind of attention."

"We shall do it, if you wish."

Tony stood to go. "I've decided I'm no longer angry. I need to apologize for treating Noriko so shabbily. Continued abuse does not show any return." She stopped at the door and turned around. "Have you thought of joining the organization? I'm quite taken with you but don't want to do anything to anger our leader."

"Best offer I've had in months. And, I won't blab to Noriko either."

"Smart ass," Tony said and closed the door behind her. The lock clicked.

#

Noriko Samisen took a small table on the sidewalk portion of the Malgré Café. She ordered a coffee and waited patiently for Mister Seria to arrive. She saw him approach and stop.

Seria was a short, squat man of obvious Italian extraction with oily black hair. His beady eyes scanned the tables. He smiled when he saw what had been described—an Oriental girl, very pretty, poised and alone at an outside table. He waddled more than walked over to the table and touched his forehead with one finger.

"I'm to meet you here," he said with a slight stutter. "Am I correct?"

Noriko smiled. "Yes, Mister Seria, please sit down. Would you like to order something?"

He was nervous and made a considered attempt to keep his hands from trembling. "Do you have the photos?"

"Yes, sir. The reason we asked you to see these is to be certain of your selections." She handed him an envelope with a brief list of the contents, the price estimate and photos.

He first looked at the price, then at the photos. "It is about what I thought it would cost. When do I take delivery?"

Noriko smiled. "You should understand, sir, this work has been done in several locations. You will get a certified package to the address you've indicated. Your purchase is ready but will not ship until you tell us this is what you ordered. As for the heirloom inscriptions, we guarantee you will find them to your liking. Any questions?"

He looked around at the other tables in a nervous gesture. She thought him paranoid and wondered what he feared. Finally, he scribbled his name on the acceptance form, stood up, bowed politely and left. It was over.

She had been instructed to delay until the client was out of sight so she sipped her coffee and waited. After a few minutes, Jayce came in the side entrance from the patio and sat down across from her.

"Oh, you surprised me," she said with a smile. "Here is the folio, all complete, I think."

Jayce took it and tucked it in her oversize straw carry-bag that acted as purse and briefcase. "I watched you during the meeting. You were superb. He isn't what you expected, is he?"

"The poor man was about to have a nervous fit. Maybe some weighty concern of which we are not aware. But, why are you here? Were you worried I might blow the mission? No pun intended." She smiled.

"I have confidence in you. I want to talk to you about my plans for the organization. You three are destined for a lucrative scam, I've no doubt. Are you certain you want to view your future with both Antoinette and Stella?" She knew she was using names perhaps not familiar to Noriko.

"Uh, you mean Tony and Stefan. Yes, of course. Stefan's skill is, well, 'stunning' comes to mind. Tony and I haven't had a spat or anything."

Jayce frowned. "You can be more candid than that. I know that Stefan sampled your charms while you were on the coastal trip. I think Tony is simmering like yesterday's gumbo. I need the three of you to work as a team. I can't be with you every minute. Shortly I'm going on a vacation cruise in the Caribbean and will be out of immediate touch for awhile."

"Oh, what is it you wish me to do while you are away?"

"I'll be in touch by phone and email regularly. I'm not comfortable leaving the country when I nobody will be at the helm, so to speak. I want you and Tony to make yourselves up and use your best sexy selves to seduce Stefan and get him to agree to become a full member. I'm impressed with Stefan's skill and business sense as well as his desperate circumstances. Once in the group, he will be a loyal supporter, I'm sure. Will you do it?"

She touched her hand. "Of course, Jayce. We discussed this several times. Stefan is hesitant because of what you will require of him to close the contract. I think he is being silly but, nevertheless, he apparently does not see the advantages. We went to some length to let him know he is at risk by not joining."

Jayce moved to go after glancing at her watch. "I'm of the opinion Stefan will be agreeable if you and Tony offer Stefan the same services you have provided so often for me. You are both very talented girls. If you and Tony do not work together on this, he may back off. Stefan is a very sensitive man. Well, you understand."

Noriko was left alone at the table, sipping coffee and wondering at the meaning of Jayce's special needs regarding Stefan. Finally, she concluded Jayce was in the middle, not knowing which way to turn. Stefan's consistent refusal to go down on her was becoming an obsession. With that, she left the café and wandered through some shops while thinking over all that had transpired.

V - Stefan Relents

"Hush, he is almost here," Tony said in a tone of juvenile mischief.

Stefan was returning from the sauna, wrapped in a heavy terry-cloth robe. His slippers flopped on the wooden floor. "Ulp!" he said as he entered his room to find the two girls grinning at him. "What are you two doing?"

They both embraced him and pulled him onto the bed. He was struck with the thought that they learned the tactic in some long past pajama party at the sorority house. "We came to give you pleasure," Noriko said in her best coy tone.

“Yes, and we apologize for not being good partners. Noriko told me your Seria project was well received. We want you to join the company and are here to convince you to accept.” Tony grinned and clicked the roof of her mouth with her tongue.

Stefan slowly recovered from the surprise. “I’m not one to turn down such an attractive offer. Please explain. I asked Noriko to give me a few kisses and there has been tension for a month.”

“We want to kiss and make up,” Noriko said softly, her eyes misting with sincere tears.

“What am I agreeing to if I should accept this generous offer?”

“Contract with the organization. We want you to join,” Tony said lowering her eyes.

“Now I get it!” Stefan exclaimed. “Jayce put you two up to this.” He went to his dresser and pulled out clean panties and a bra. He almost laughed at the two girls sitting on the bed. His blatant display of an exquisite feminine body caught them speechless. He slowly dressed. Next it was his turn to spring a surprise. He walked over to them, kissed each on the forehead, turned around and left the room.

He rapped gently on Jayce’s door. Without waiting for her invitation, he barged in and stood firmly in front of Jayce’s desk.

“What’s this?” Jayce asked though she knew she had been caught in her childish scheme.

“We need to talk,” Stefan said. “Two issues fascinate me—bad decisions and injustice.”

Jayce looked up with the familiar half-grin. “Some additional thought might make you see both of these nagging issues are the same.”

“Keep talking,” he insisted. “I’ll not play semantics with the boss.”

“Forgive me for my misgivings. Thanks to your diligence and attention, there are two more issues we might discuss. I have made my deposit to the Middlesex Clinic and am now awaiting a time window. I sincerely admire your grasp of our business and want you to take over while I am gone. I will be in constant touch, of course, but you can easily handle any decisions.”

Stefan sighed and sat down on the high-back chair. He was making an effort to control his temper. Ideas and responses were flooding his perception. “All right!” he began with a raised voice. “I’m in. No self-respecting lesbian could resist the more than cooperative co-workers you sent to me.” He snapped the words out. “I have concluded you run this organization on what your analyst might call sensual control. You think the only way you can control me is to regularly remind me about the excellence of my oral skills. I’m aware we are all here because of your intellectual largess. Does it disturb you that I understand your management style so well?”

Jayce grinned. “Not at all. Very little disturbs me outside of my need to keep control of this happy family. Did the two girls I sent to you complete their mission?”

“No. When I realized you had pimped those two beautiful femmes in my favor, I became angry, which does not often happen. I realized within the last hour that I had to make a choice. I can take what cash I’ve set aside and run. That idea had an aura of free-

dom to it. At that I remembered your strategy; you have the stash and the means to turn it into real cash. If I depart, I've given you what I came by with so much effort. Not good."

Jayce stood up and walked across the room. She sat on the settee and straightened her skirts. "Good thinking; I've mentioned several times I admire your ability to analyze. It might even rival my own. What is the other choice you considered?"

"As if you didn't know. I feel safe here. If I'm in some form of management with you, do you provide the opportunities with the passing parade you enjoy? You've been honest with me. The first time we met, you wasted no time putting your hand inside my shirt and telling me what you wanted. If all I have to do is get on my knees when you have the need, well, balance that with some lovely pussy and I should not be disturbed."



Jayce wiggled on the settee as she thoroughly enjoyed Stefan's dialogue. "Your analysis might be a bit short-sighted. I want you to establish a relationship with some passing lovely if that's what you desire. The final topic is security, which you have avoided. You might have thought of a moment of freedom but down deep you know you are in mortal danger. I could turn you over to those thugs that murdered our friend but that would only get me murdered as well. My friend, we need each other and, frankly, I've waited long enough."

Stefan sighed and sat down next to Jayce. He let one hand rest on her thigh. "Do you like my hand there?" he asked.

"It's where it belongs. Six months from now, I should be secure in the knowledge that I am a woman of the world. My counselor suggests that I will no longer need the physical release you can give me. I am of the opinion that I will still need the oral skill you offer. It is, as you said earlier, a matter of

control. Time will tell. Would you please open your robe so I can finish what I started so long ago?"

Stefan bared a pair of perfectly formed breasts and allowed the ambitious girl freedom to caress, fondle and lick the nipples. "Well, Jayce, you seem to have a talent you've kept secret."

Jayce lunged and kissed, licked and fondled; she was seeking and pushing until she had thoroughly immersed her entire psyche in Stefan's feminine charms. She tugged until the bulky bathrobe was fully apart. "Stella Picard, you are beautiful," she whispered and moved to capture Stefan's lips. She held the kiss until she felt the warm flush of lust in Stefan's lips.

Stefan wasted no time. He released the mini-belt at Jayce's waist and slid one hand inside the silk panties. His fingers found what he expected and Jayce gasped in pleasure. "What shall I do with this?" he asked, teasing.

Jayce took a deep breath. "Get on your knees; put it in your hot mouth," she answered. "I want to see your legs folded while you kneel."

Stefan did as instructed and was soon bobbing up-and-down, in-and-out as Jayce crooned her pleasure. Working to get the firm erection deeper with each thrust, Stefan concentrated on his task. He was able to avoid the gag reflex. He kept his lithe fingers stroking as Jayce moaned and threw her hips up as if convulsed. Then came a spurting ejaculation into Stefan's throat; an erotic acceptance designed to change his life forever. He withdrew when Jayce let go of his head and gently nudged him away.

Stefan wiped his mouth and staggered briefly as he sat next to Jayce. They French kissed again as Stefan became immediately aware that Jayce enjoyed the flavor of his passion. They remained embraced for most of the hour.

VI - Travel Plans

"Noriko," Jayce said on the cell phone text. "Come to my quarters . Bring pad and pencil."

Noriko found Jayce in the midst of packing for her trip. "On duty here, Chiefette," she chimed and sat down on the couch. "Your passport should have at least six months before the expiration date. Some small-time extortion experts might get nervous."

Jayce smiled and glanced at the attractive Japanese girl; slender, firm breasts, expressive mouth. Hot. "Thanks but I'm not sure what a 'Chiefette' is. My scheduled arrival at the Middlesex Clinic is there on the pad. Please make travel arrangements and get my tickets."

"Sure will," Noriko answered gingerly. "How long will you be gone? We will miss you." She studied the travel information provided by the clinic. "Uh Jayce, is this right? There is a three-week gap you didn't take into account."

Jayce looked over her shoulder. "Right. I need reservations to Antigua; a short flight from San Juan. Book what's available. No hurry; I've waited this long."

Noriko went on the internet and began exploring airline and cruise schedules. "Oh," she said in surprise. "This might be just right for giving you some time off before the guys in white coats show up. There is a tramp sailing schooner, sixty-eight feet; it knocks around from port-to-port, carrying cargo, passengers, like that. You will be stuck in Antigua for a day or so. The boat makes some Windward Islands stops and should put you in Fort de France, Martinique, with a couple days to spare. How does that sound? Couple weeks on the high seas?"

Jayce looked at the photo on the monitor. "The Shanghai Joe" it said. He smiled. "Book me on that; should be a well-deserved change of pace. First class, if they have it. Pack some sailing shoes so I don't mar the deck. Also my white bell-bottoms. And, there is a round sailor's cap on the top shelf. Find out the expected weather so I bring the right clothes."

Noriko was busy with reservations and noting schedules. Soon she had Jayce's boarding pass. "What made you make a call to Antigua on your way in, or am I being too nosey?"

"No secret; I have a friend, charming to say the least, there. They pronounce it 'Ant-ee-ga' if that makes any difference."

Noriko smiled and continued taking notes. When she finished, she gathered it all together in a leather letter-pouch, tucked in the passport and credit card. "That should do it, Jayce. I notified the credit card company to let them know there will be some charges from various brothels in the islands. Just kidding. Don't show up with the clap." She laughed and slapped her knee.

Jayce caressed Noriko's neck and shoulders. "And I shall miss you, my Oriental flower." Jayce touched her lips and waited for her to lick her finger with her tiny bud of a tongue. "Open your blouse for me," she said in a lusty tone. She waited until Noriko's shapely breasts were bare. "Put my cock between them," Jayce whispered. "You do that so well."

"You want my mouth, don't you?" Noriko asked, knowing full well what the answer was.

#

Stefan looked up when Jayce came into the workroom. He was working on a setting for rubies and diamond tips to attach to a black velvet choker. He had selected some velvet fabric from a worn book cover at the second hand store. After carefully displaying the coat of arms designed for the customer on the back of the brooch, he used a pair of unpolished silver clips to hold it in place.

"That looks perfectly authentic," Jayce said, admiring the intricate work.

Stefan watched Jayce browse through some other collections. "What's the news? You about ready for your trip?"

"Yes, Noriko did all the detail work. I have a Miami flight this evening; San Juan after that." She perched on the tall step stool Stefan used to reach lights he wanted to adjust. "Are you angry because I took advantage of your rather perilous existence here? It was beautiful."

Stefan stared at the gaudy transvestite. "If I am harboring a resentment, there's very little I can do about it. Beggars, choosers, you know? Recalling the event that pleased you so much, I am completely aware you did not seduce me in the usual sense. Even with my situation here, I'm safer than I would be on the street. It is not an easy life, knowing each day may be your last."

Jayce was pensive, serious. "I want to ask if you would consider a sex change to enhance your anonymity? In one sense it would be a pity; Stella Picard is a comely, charming woman. If the threat passes, you would regret a permanent change to your body. At present, most of the surgical procedures are not reversible."

"Might you not feel the same way about your, uh, well-endowed masculinity?"

Jayce laughed. "I'll take that as a compliment. Yes, I've thought about it for a long time. You know how much joy I get from fellatio. My counselor tells me there should not be any concern on that point."

Stefan set the tray of jewels aside. "For the moment, let's keep the status quo. Is there anything you want me to attend to while you are off on the Windward Islands seducing the innocent?"

"You do flatter me. I've come to trust your judgment, especially in matters impacting Heirlooms, Incorporated. The balance sheet is in black ink for the first time. Have you noticed the increase in your cash holdings now that we have a better understanding of each other?"

Stefan shrugged. "Sure; my earnings are for skill and work." He pointed at the tray of jewels. "These little lovelies are an art form in their own right. Perhaps you agree."

Jayce replied, "Your two helpers are committed to you, so be gentle with them. They adore you. That's not a bond to be exploited."

"Relax, Jayce. If some little lost runaway teenager shows up on our doorstep, we'll gladly give her a bath and some fresh clothes. She may even be agreeable to a bus ticket home if the terms are right. You've taught us well." He turned away to continue his work. "Bon voyage; good luck on the duel with the surgical knives." He did not acknowledge when Jayce left the room.

That night after the farewell party for Jayce, Stefan undressed and sank into the hot tub. He was feeling pensive. It was a momentary nagging in his skull that, though his life-style was improved, there was more to life than this specialized hustle-and-bustle.

Later, he made one last chore in the workroom and put up his tools for the night. Still pensive, he fell asleep.

Stefan slipped into a deep sleep. He had reverted to his original self, Stella Picard. The dream setting was the time of the Sun King at the Palace at Versailles. As she swept in full regalia through the intricate rooms, she paused in the Mirror Room that had one full wall of reflectors angled to give depth to anyone passing there.



Stella scrutinized herself; the daring low cut bodice displayed her ample bosom to a perilous degree. The hoop skirts and bold flash of naked ankle stopped at silver buckles on her instep. The detailed, fitted wig framed her face and a cosmetic make-over highlighted her face. Her age was just out of puberty; she personified the Age of Innocence.

Candle sconces cast shadows of images that did not exist. Silk damask tenting. Small dogs with jeweled collars. A glittering crystal chandelier. The Prism Room created a breathtaking ambiance of lights bouncing off the pointed prisms, creating diamond quality brilliance.

At first she saw only a form in the distance. Coming closer, Stella stood aside and quickly stroked her fan, then touched her lips with the gentle blades. White, translucent flawless skin; eyes the color and purity of a blue-white diamond. Hair of platinum blonde. She was a jewel; she radiated the fire of a mysterious lust, dazzling to the eye. It was Marie Antoinette

standing next to her with a bemused look on her beautiful face.

Stefan woke with a start. The details of the exciting dream faded but the face of his own passion, Antoinette, stirred his emotions. Soon, sleep claimed him again.

VII - Antigua Adventure

Jayce dressed as a wealthy tourist; she had on a printed summer frock for the flight from San Juan. Landing in Antigua, she scanned the reception lobby for her friend. When she spotted her, she was amused not to be recognized.

She wore heels, skin tone stockings, her willowy hair was down to her shoulders. She had on a blouse with bare arms and her tiny earlobes were decorated with a carved amethyst which went perfectly with her hair.

Jayce went to the information desk and asked that her friend be paged.

"Darlene Hardusty, courtesy telephone please."

She watched Darlene walk crisply to the telephone booth. "This is Darlene Hardusty," she said.

"Pardon, Miss," Jayce said in her best feminine voice, "your friend is standing directly behind you."

"Omigod, Jayce, is that you? Can't be!"

Darlene fell into Jayce's embrace. She stifled a sob of joy.

"Well, not as you remember me, is it? Did you wonder why I didn't send you photos when we corresponded?"

Darlene accepted Jayce's hug which she kept longer than traditional. "Let's stop and get a drink," she said. "You have some explaining to do."

Jayce laughed. Once settled in the lounge and sipping a huge tropical drink in a frozen globe, Jayce explained the reason for the trip and expressed the hope that they could spend some time together.

Finally, Jayce brought up what was on her mind. "Do you know the name Stella Picard?"

"Sort of," Darlene answered. "I'm probably wrong but when we were in Atlanta and later in Mobile, the name was connected with jewelry or some such."

"You are precisely on target. She is a talented fingersmith. Guess what; I have her! She is not only beautiful she is a skilled technician when it comes to producing exquisite jewelry settings of all kinds. She made enough money to finance this trip and my gender reassignment. Interested?"

Darlene smiled and slid forward on the narrow bench. She sipped her drink and made gurgling sounds with the short straw. Her knees pressed Jayce's thighs. "Interested in what? You have something going; you always have. Come on, confess."

"Sorry; you still have the same effect on me as always. You are so sexy. Anyhow, we keep busy with a new company called Heirlooms, Incorporated and business is good."

"Are you still angry because of what happened when we were in college?" Darlene asked. "I've thought about that every time I get a little hot and bothered. Now, look at you; gorgeous and soon to be a real girl. Needless to say, I'm overwhelmed."

Jayce slid one hand beneath the table and fondled Darlene above the knees. "I was aggressive, wasn't I? Well, you would be well worth it. You have managed to keep that luscious figure all this time. I was hoping you remember how strong our attraction was. What is so exciting on your sexual agenda? You wouldn't talk when we were college coeds. You know I don't handle rejection well."

Darlene blushed and hoped the shadows in the airport lounge hid it. "I was wrong, Jayce. When you suggested a, uh, mutual intimacy, I wasn't ready. About a year ago, I met a bisexual island gal and she absolutely mesmerized me. It didn't last; she took off with a pretty girl without a backward glance. I'm still comforted just remembering the experience. But what has all this to do with Stella Picard?"

Jayce hesitated. "Stella is now Stefan but only as a transvestite. She is very proud of her femininity. She has been so successful in carrying the masculine aura that everyone, myself included, refers to her as 'he.' This brings us to my point. You have a nice setup here, right?"

Darlene frowned with a confused look. "What in the world has all this to do with me?"

"Our gal Stella is in a bit of a squeeze right now. She has been very successful at hiding and taking good care of herself financially. She did some time in prison because she lifted some valuables, stashed them and refused to reveal the hiding place. Because she refused to give up what she had fingered, she was in the lockup long enough to convince the authorities she was not going to surrender and give up her stash. When she was paroled, she managed to dip into her treasure trove occasionally when she needed some money."

"Quite a gal," Darlene said casually. She sipped her drink and continued studying Jayce. She compared Jayce with the Jayce she knew in college. "The scenario fascinates me, tell me more."

"As they say in the movies, the plot thickens. By some fluke she was picked up with an adventurous two-some and ended up in the county jail for a weekend before the cops realized she had nothing to do with the young couple. That's another story. Anyhow, her reputation came to her rescue. An underworld operative put up bail and a review showed she had been arrested without cause. That was when the guy that bailed her out pressed a heavy on her. Before long, she came in possession of a large cache of jewels, gold, silver filigree; the good stuff. She was employed by whoever had the goods to fence them, deduct her fee, and forward the cash. You can see how enterprising our gal Stella is. She ran off with the lot of it."

Darlene erupted in laughter. "Turn about, fair play. Like that. Bet there is an unhappy mobster involved."

"Correct; the insurance company as well. Secondly, some surly types on her trail murdered 'Stefan Picard's' operative. That was when we started the heirloom business. It's a blast!"

Darlene straightened her shoulders. "I want to hear all about it but if we stay here much longer, I'll be too drunk to drive. I checked on the location of the Shanghai Joe. They are roughly on schedule, should be here day after tomorrow. You can stay with me, can't you? You have no cause to be scared of me; I'm not going to attack you."

In Darlene's car, they sped along on paved roads past a quaint tropical décor. "If you wish, I can get a hotel room for the few days," Jayce said.

Darlene winced. "Out of the question; absolutely not! We have plenty of room. Daddy sometimes brings home some tourist types that interest him. You may recall that my mom died of cancer some years ago. I still miss her. Daddy invested heavily in marketing some island produce, most notably the 'black piZa'. He also has an interest in some hotels that cater to the sailing set. History has it that Admiral Nelson was a regular around here and there is a sheltered bay named after him. Still, tourists bring most of the euros into the economy. My but I talk too much."

"I'm fascinated. You have everything: money, traffic, location, an easy life. Wonderful. I'm looking forward to meeting your dad. I do not think he will remember me from the few times we met on the college green."

Darlene wheeled onto an overlook. She relaxed. "Tell me before I say or do the wrong thing, you are so chic. Those look like real breasts. Did the drugs they gave you have an effect on your male equipment?"

"I was told it would happen but, thankfully, my old fetish has kept the nearly worn-out tool in working condition. Just kidding; I still enjoy fellatio and will probably miss it after my operation. You will recall that fellatio was the issue du jour we had in school. I was obsessed with your sensual mouth."

Darlene chuckled. "I can see attractive men or women getting the surprise of their life. Must be fun."

"Oh, I can tell you some stories but that's not why I came here."

"Please spare me; no more call on my patience. It's about Stella Picard, isn't it?"

Jayce nodded. "Our present operation is perilous at best because our major contributor, now known as Stefan Picard, can blow the lid off with the slightest indiscretion. I've been studying my geography; Antigua has demographic appeal for us. How difficult would it be to move Heirlooms, Incorporated here? We have capital and should be able to market our expert service without fear of intervention."

"In my opinion, it could work. There are already several under-the-table operations that get in the news occasionally. One essential bothers me. A major portion of our economy is from tourism. It's natural, of course. As you noted, the island has everything the tourist desires. But a while ago, 2008, a young Welch couple was murdered and robbed in their hotel room. It does not take a rocket scientist to see how that had a negative impact

on our finances. If such rough characters come snooping around for Stella Picard, we would take a dim view. I hope you understand."

Jayce did not hesitate. "Yes, I see your point. Can we give it some thought? I may have overstated the danger but I do want you to realize there might be some risk."

"As long as that risk does not involve us, I don't see a problem from our point of view."

"Can I hire a driver to escort me around the island? I'd like to scope out some likely locations."

Darlene backed out of the overlook and continued the drive to her plantation home. She noticed Jayce's pensive mood. "By the merest coincidence I am free tomorrow to play tourist. No arguments!"

Jayce smiled. "Is this your pad? I can see you left Atlanta and Mobile far behind. Quite a spread."

"We like it. I'm often sad when I think of how much my mom would have loved it here. She was the garden and flower member of the family."

Jayce smiled. "Your dad won't be offended if I stay a few days?"

"Of course not; he is looking forward to your visit. There may be a rush extending to his loins when he sees you. I do think it would be best not to explain your gender complications. He would be very interested, however, in this Heirlooms, Incorporated you have going."

Later, in the drawing room that overlooked ornate gardens around the swimming pool, Jayce stood up when Jacob Hardusty came in.

He strode with strength, arm extended, and a big grin. "I'm Jake Hardusty," he boomed in good nature. "I'm better known as Dar's father."

Jayce accepted the hand. "Pleasure, sir," she said.

"I don't think we've met but, somehow, you look familiar. I could be mistaken only because I am so often."

Jayce smiled. "That's hard to believe. You have a marvelous home here. It complements the lovely daughter."

He went to the wet bar and set up three glasses. "Ah, you have good taste, Miss Darby. Scotch all around?" he asked and scooped up ice cubes.

Both girls came forward to accept the amber-tinted drinks the man handed out with a practiced ceremony. "What brings you to Antigua?" he asked squinting at Jayce. His eyes scanned her figure and rested on her lips.

"It's a double play; to play tourist and play catch-up with Darlene."

He laughed. "There are many double plays for lovely young girls these days. Not that I notice such things."

"Jayce owns a small distributing company," Darlene added. "She thinks Antigua would make a better residence than where she is now."

He switched from one girl to the other. "How interesting. Where did you come from to visit our fair jewel of the Caribbean? And, tell me about this company you own. Maybe I can help."

"Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin," Jayce answered with a quick glance at Darlene. "Snow country." She next did a quick overview of Heirlooms, Incorporated and purposely left out the marketing and procurement functions of the operation.

Darlene's mind was racing. "Dad, I told Jayce about the hotel murder. She is concerned about that."

"Of course. That was over ten years ago and we've not had such a tumultuous event since. However, Miss Darby... ." He paused to drain his drink. "We have a retreat up in the mountains a few minutes from here. Darlene can show it to you. It might be a possible location depending on how much space you need. Of course, the rental is very inexpensive. That's because I own it." He laughed at his own humor.

Jayce was impressed. "Yes, I'd like to see it. Is it seldom used?"

The conversation was interrupted by a telephone call. "Sorry, girls," he said. "I have an errand to run at the Sparkle Resort. Just business, nothing pretty girls would find of interest. Miss Darby, please make yourself at home; we are pleased you can stay for a few days. Give some thought to our opportunity for a location here. Frankly, Darlene has too few girls of her own background; you would be a welcome addition." He disappeared as quickly as he had come.

Darlene smiled, walked behind the wet bar and made them both another drink. "Dad forgot to mention that he can arrange duty free commerce which might help your bottom line. He was serious about the mountain retreat. Why he is keeping it, I've no clue. I can't remember when anyone ever used it. Shall we go take a look in the morning? We can start our tour after that."

"Great! Thanks. Is that the swimming pool?"

"Swim?"

"Let's enjoy," Jayce answered.

#

Later, Darlene came into Jayce's room. "Dad is not back from his business call; not unusual. I think he has a girlfriend, and why not?"

Jayce was sitting on the vanity bench when Darlene approached from behind. She felt Darlene's strong fingers massaging her shoulders, delicate at first, then with studied skill. "That feels splendid," Jayce whispered and reached to touch Darlene's hand resting on her shoulder. "I couldn't help noticing your attention to my form while we were on the side of the swimming pool. Any comments?"

Darlene was momentarily embarrassed. "You don't mind? Well, you said you still had your male equipment but it was not visible. Explain that."

"It is called a gaff; a specialized jock strap that tucks the genitalia back between the legs out of sight. The only problem that sometimes comes up is a response to your beauty called an erection."

Darlene grinned. "You always know how to tease me."

Jayce glanced down at Darlene's naked legs. "You are as lovely as I remember," she whispered, her voice choked with emotion. "Are you afraid of me?"

"I don't think so. You fascinate me; you have that aura us girls find intriguing. Can I be honest? I think I'll like you better when you get back from the Middlesex Clinic."

Jayce turned quickly and kissed Darlene on the mouth before the confused girl could escape. She held the kiss and began a tantalizing exploration of Darlene's lips with an errant tongue tip

"Oh Jayce, have some pity on my inexperience."

"Then tell me about the island queen who loves pretty girls and leaves 'em. You are as sexy as you were at the sorority picnic so long ago."

"Thanks. Uh, she liked my body, I guess. Anyhow, I didn't respond like she thought I should."

Jayce nodded her head. "An old story. I can tell you what happened. She went down on you and after that, when she was in the throes of passion, you panicked and ran."

"Yes, I've thought a long time about it. I'm still not certain it is the life for me but the thought of losing my virginity to some local jock terrifies me."

Jayce kissed her again. "Well, how about you! Our sexy Darlene Hardusty with a low libido. I don't believe it."

Darlene allowed Jayce to position her on the bed. The two embraced and continued kissing. "Are you in love with Stella Picard?" Darlene asked.

"I think not. There are great many qualities to love in our Miss Picard. Crossing that line from acceptance to love is sometimes tricky. How about you? All these years and only one lover? Hard to imagine."

Darlene grinned. "Keep 'em at arms length is what my mom told me. She said it so often I thought it was the way to get along with the boys and girls in my own crowd. Of course, now I know what she was saying; keep safe, don't get involved, don't get hurt."

"She wasn't all wrong, I can tell you," Jayce answered. "Now and then you meet someone, maybe Miss Picard is an example, you certainly qualify eminently, that you are tempted to risk getting involved with. All of a sudden, a new set of rules comes up. You begin thinking about what the other person needs from you. You are startled by your willingness to engage in harmless petting until it begins to rattle your passion-cage." Jayce stopped abruptly and kissed the spectacular girl stretched out next to her. Holding the kiss, Jayce worked one hand beneath Darlene's pajama tops until she caught the round firm breast. "You are lovely; why your island girl would leave you is a mystery."

Darlene shifted to allow Jayce freedom to fondle both breasts. "I believe it was as you said earlier; she needed me and I rejected her."

“Some of us have difficulty with rejection. It goes back to that acceptance we were talking about earlier. You know I’ve been toying with your pretty lips with my tongue. Now you are anticipating how my mouth will feel on your breasts. Am I correct?”

“You are teasing me again. I have to make a confession which, I’m told, is good for mental health. My island lover snuggled between my legs and kept at me –lips, tongue and hands—until I had several orgasms. She sat up when I pushed her away. She guided my head to her breasts which are every bit as lovely as yours. She wanted me to excite her that way. I saw it as a prelude to going down on her. That was when I panicked. I moved away and sat up. She got out of bed, slapped me and left the room. I never saw her again.”

Jayce sighed. “How many times since then have you reconsidered? Did you place so little value on what she gave you emotionally that you were not willing to secure it? Is that feminine logic? I’d like very much to get your view.”

“I’m surprised I can be so candid with you. I regret a lot of issues in my life that caused fear.”

“I’m not surprised. You know I’m not going to ask you to do what your lover asked. I don’t have the correct genitals. Therefore, you allow yourself to be comfortable with me. Is this part of the mystery? Down inside your stunning body, in that little lust pocket so artfully hidden, you want me to do enough forceful cunnilingus to make you have another of those orgasms you spoke of with such rapture.”

Darlene began to cry. “Oh Jayce, please help me. I know you want me to give you fellatio; I cannot do it. I think I better leave. We need to be up and eating breakfast or...Jayce, please, don’t be angry.”

“I’m not. It is very likely I’m the first and last transgender lover you will encounter. The reason I’m holding your arm so tight is that I want you to lay back down here. The time for talk is over. I have oral skills of which you need to take advantage.”

She pulled Darlene onto the bed and settled a scorching French kiss on the distraught girl. Without bothering with the tantalizing ritual of undressing her, Jayce tucked her pajama tops around her throat and began fondling the pert breasts with her tongue.

Darlene squealed and wet her lips in the lusty moment. She raised her hips to allow Jayce to remove the velvet-lined shorts. Next she let both hands ride on Jayce’s shoulders to follow her down until she felt a tongue playing with her navel.

Jayce ran one arm beneath her leg, pulled and deftly began lapping the passionate girl’s mons pubis. She expertly alternately sucked, then licked, each labia, touched the clit gently and finally plunged her tongue with vigor into Darlene’s vaginal folds.

Darlene screamed, grabbed for Jayce’s head and threw her legs wider apart. The sex continued until she fell back; the signal for Jayce to stop.

Jayce kissed her again, let her tongue linger so she could taste herself and tenderly positioned her on the pillow. She pulled the sheet up to cover the naked girl.

“Relax, darling,” Jayce said and urged the exhausted girl to close her eyes. “Get some rest.”

Darlene was soon asleep.

#

Jayce wrapped her bathrobe around her and cinched the belt. She was careful to tip-toe out of the room. The lights were still on at the pool so she went there and sat on the cushions stacked on the bench next to the pool shed.

Jacob Hardusty was standing in the lee of the shed. He had been watching her as she strolled across the lawn to the pool area.

"Too much excitement. Can't sleep, young lady?" he asked.

"Oh, you startled me. Just out for a little night air, sir. It is very beautiful here."

"I'm glad we have a private moment to chat. You were very careful earlier to omit some salient facts about your heirloom business. I liked the idea enough to investigate. There is no such company listed in the corporation papers. Sheboygan Falls has no company or address in the directory. Would you mind explaining, please? I do not want some difficult situation to develop based on my daughter's loyalty to an old college friend."

Jayce looked up at him. He was standing tall next to her. The look on his face was stern. "Nobody has ever cared to look up our legalities. I can make it clear, if you wish. Perhaps it would be best as I am anxious to relocate. We are in a high risk situation. Of course, Sheboygan Falls is a fiction. We are based in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Our most important, highly skilled employee who produces exquisite jewelry, is an ex-con. In addition to violating parole, she has skipped on an obligation to some underworld thugs. To keep her person disguised, she cross-dresses as a guy. She goes by the name Stefan Picard."

He sighed but remained standing next to her. The light falling on her face etched the stress. "You take me for an idiot. Maybe I am but you will not move your operation here without my permission. Be candid with me as to how you go about making such exorbitant profits. Second, what is your interest in my daughter? She is just now adjusting to her mother's death. I don't need any trauma. Do you love her? If you do, I have no objection. I was pleased to see her with an island girl for awhile but that didn't work. It is possible she will find some outlet for her natural impulses. Do you have a comment on any of this?"

"Does the name Stella Picard mean anything to you?"

He laughed. "Of course; the celebrated fingersmith. She has upset many an apple cart in her young career. Is she part of your, uh, group?"

"She is the skilled technician that is part of our production staff. Refer to her as Stefan Picard. So far we have not thought it necessary to change her last name. The Stefan name and her remarkable success in appearing as a male has been a comfort. Cross-dressing has come to a fine art as you are aware. How might we get your permission to set up shop here? If we can get your blessing, I feel we will come under your umbrella of protection. It appears that way."

He stood in stony silence. Next he reached and touched Jayce's head. "I fear I have misjudged you, Miss Darby. Your knowledge and intelligence are awesome. To perceive that I am more than a casual business man on this island was very astute of you. I think it possible that we can get along very well. What are your immediate plans?"

Jayce was grasping at straws. Jacob Hardusty had more going for him than a few hotels and some 'black piZa'. "In a few days, I'll be on a cruise through the islands to Martinique. I'm scheduled for some specialized surgery at the Middlesex Clinic. After that, I'll likely come back here to recuperate. I'm told it takes a while."

He clapped his hands together. "I knew it! You can't be a card-carrying lesbian with male genitalia. I think we are going to get along just fine. One word of caution, Miss Darby. If you think your situation is in some threat right now, it is nothing compared to what will happen if you hurt my little girl. I want to see her happy and I charge you with every ounce of discretion you can manage. Do you understand?"

Jayce gulped, nervous. "Yes, sir. I have known Dar for a long time; I admire her and want to be close to her. I've no reason to risk our relationship. Will that be all?"

He squinted at her. "One more thought, Miss Darby. I want you to understand I do not make idle threats. You will recall the story about the couple who were murdered in a hotel here. A simple investigation uncovered an ugly truth. A syndicate had long, greedy fingers aimed at our shores. The murder was indeed of innocent tourists but, I learned it was a mistake. The thugs made an error of identity."

"How awful," Jayce managed to squeak out.

"It would have turned out more than just 'awful.' Armed with what we had learned, I had the murderers run through a kangaroo court with ample publicity. We executed them but only when we were sure the syndicate got the message. End of story. We've had no further incidents because the word is out. Don't mess with us; the penalty is fatal." He turned to go. "Do keep me informed, Miss Darby. This has to be a no-nonsense connection you are proposing. The penalty, as I've described, is severe. Good night." He walked away as unconcerned as if he had just been walking his dog.

#

"Are you mad at me?" Darlene asked as they turned onto a secondary road. "You hardly spoke at breakfast. Are we good?"

Jayce smiled. "Yes, of course we are all right. I had a nice chat with your dad last night while you were in the arms of Morpheus. Wish I could sleep like that."

"That's why I asked. Do you regret what we did?"

"No, you are beautiful. And, to be able to respond like that, thrice over even, was a marvel, for sure. Oh, I see; it's your old remorse. I am not self-centered like your island

friend. You do not owe me a thing. When you are mentally ready to participate more, well, it will be welcome but I'm not promoting it."

"That's a relief. I was anxious. Waking up this morning with you next to me was very satisfying." She made another turn onto a narrow road that skirted the side of a cliff. "We're almost there."

The panorama took Jayce's breath away. They came onto a clearing surrounded by trees. She saw the realtor's sign, "Rent or Lease, will alter to suit long-term tenant."

Darlene had keys to the entrance. They walked in to a spacious room with picture windows overlooking the valley they had crossed to get there. "You should find this comfortable but I don't know if it is suitable. There are extra rooms at the rear, a cozy apartment if you need live-in amenities and a work shed outside you can't see from the road."

Jayce was amazed. "Dar, this is terrific! I really was expecting a hunter's cabin or some such. And to think I was humoring you by letting you drag me up the mountain to look at some shack before we could get down to the real business of finding a place. Driving time to town must be fifteen minutes; just right."

Jayce went to the out-building hidden in the back. She paced to get the length and width. Next she returned to find Darlene on the sofa thumbing through 'Curve' magazine.

"What's the verdict, judge?" Darlene said playfully. "Too large? Too small? Just right? What?"

"I want Stefan to see this before we make an offer. He knows the space and other requirements better because he works in it all day. I'll get in touch."

Darlene was quickly on the telephone to the realtor. "They will accept a week or ten days for you to make a decision. Why not? They haven't had a prospect for a long time. Would you like to see the apartment? It's around this way."

Jayce followed Darlene until they found the doorway beneath the staircase which led to the upper level. The apartment had floor-to-ceiling leaded French-style windows that viewed the primitive forest. It was fully furnished, comfortable with a stone fireplace that backed the fireplace on the other side of the wall. She could see the hastily thrown bedclothes.

"Whoever was here last, left in a hurry," Jayce observed. She looked at Darlene and noted the look of distress on the young woman's face. "I was teasing, Dar. This is where you met, isn't it?"

Darlene came forward and put her arms around Jayce's neck. "This is where she slapped me. I haven't been here since that day." She sat on the side of the bed, momentarily dejected. Next she looked up at Jayce and smiled. "I think last night prepared me for coming here. Maybe I knew deep down it was time to put it all behind me. I thank you for that."

Jayce stood so close their knees jammed against one another. "I thought that was it. There is no reason in affairs of the heart but sometimes us lowly lovers can figure it out, make allowances and forgive ourselves for the folly."

Darlene looked up, eyes misty, to see the grave expression on Jayce's face. "You are not as insensitive as you would have the rest of the world believe. Thank you for pulling me out of the abyss. You understood that I 'came out' to find this new freedom."

Jayce touched her lips with her finger tip. "Darling, one day the fire your lover quenched in our loins will be only an ember. Yet, that ember may be just what you need to get the next fire started. Do not be too harsh on yourself. You acted naturally and with honesty. Nobody asks more than that. Sex with someone you love will be more fulfilling. You'll be able to involve your senses without giving way to fear, guilt, anxiety and stress. Wait and see; you will agree with me one day."

"And you, Jayce, what will you be when you come back?"

She sat on the bed next to her friend. She held her hand lightly in both of hers. "I hope to be someone you will let me into that private life of yours. Remember the story of the three blind men asked to describe an elephant after only one touch? Emotions can be like that; never really sure what you feel is real or complete."

"You are correct, of course," Darlene answered. She put her head on Jayce's shoulder. "You wanted me last night, didn't you? You focused on me entirely. I realize that now. No anxiety or stress, just involving me in your passion. It was beautiful. Would that I can do that one day."

Jayce stood up. She walked to the windows and studied the expanse of limbs and leaves being rustled by an errant breeze. "I love it here. If it is all right with Dad, I'll stay here on my return from the islands. It's your special place and I feel right about it."

They embraced, kissed and walked arm-in-arm out of the cabin. It was a new day, they considered, for both of them.

VIII - The Shanghai Joe

The three of them, Dad, Darlene and Jayce, sat at the quay-side table. They sipped wine coolers and munched on scones covered with powdered sugar.

Holding up one scone, Jayce puffed a cloud of sugar and smiled. "Just like home, except there we have beignets."

Dad grinned. "We'll be able to see the masts first; it will come from the south. I've been on it a few times. The owner and master is Captain Levinson. The board of directors at our bank loaned him some money several years ago for a new diesel engine."

Jayce was thoughtful. "Sailing schooners don't need diesel engines; it's unpatriotic or something."

They all laughed.

"The good captain explained the engine helps him maintain the heading as well as getting in and out of tight berthing in remote places in the islands. He's an interesting fellow, Jayce. You will see."

Darlene touched her dad's hand. "I've never met him, Daddy. Is there some reason you kept me locked in the pantry in the basement when the raucous captain was about?"

The moment was festive. They continued watching for the approach of the Shanghai Joe. "It wasn't the pantry, it was the wine cellar," Dad said with a wink at Jayce. "Captain Levinson has a special interest in pretty young girls like you two."

"Look!" Darlene exclaimed. She could see the main gaff topsail coming into view. "Oh, this is so exciting."

"Speak for yourself, love," Jayce said in a stage whisper. "You get excited and I go to the doom of my manhood. Fine friend you are!"

Dad laughed and nudged Jayce's leg. "Think of that; you not only have a date with the firing squad but you have to pay them as well."

"Funny, funny," Jayce answered.

The Shanghai Joe moved smartly into the harbor with sails full of the afternoon winds. Sailors were securing the main and staysail in preparation for docking. Mooring lines were at the ready.

They walked along the wharf. "Hola! Captain Levinson," Dad called out.

"Jake, put the girls on board and go away."

They walked up the short gangplank. "So it's not your week for boys; don't complain," Dad said.

Both men embraced and Dad introduced Darlene and Jayce. "Jayce is your passenger. You don't get to keep them both; not this time."

Captain Levinson nodded at his steward who was standing by with a clipboard ready to record the cargo. There were some other passengers but the captain led Jacob Hardusty, Darlene and Jayce to the large stateroom Jayce had reserved.

Jacob Hardusty left them and headed for the captain's quarters which were immediately behind the wheelhouse. He helped himself to a Texas Jigger of Scotch whisky. When the captain and the two girls came in, Dad had commandeered the bar and was taking orders. They all laughed.

Jayce didn't miss the captain's interest in Darlene and herself. She carefully glanced at the captain when he looked out the porthole to check the activity on the wharf. He had a ruddy, weathered complexion which reflected his years facing the wind and spray. The dark skin and hook nose was like a caption. 'Greek!' Jayce thought, her curiosity peaked.

The festive moment was interrupted by the steward who knocked politely before entering. He reported all passengers and cargo were on board and accounted for. Next, in a whisper meant only for the captain, he said, "The young girl is in cabin three." The captain thanked him and excused himself from his company to check on the details of the schooner.

Jacob Hardusty drained his glass, belched lightly, holding his stomach and said, "Time to go before we are all sold to slavers. You know what the shepherd said," he boomed.

Darlene was impatient with the often-heard quip. "Yes, Dad, let's get the flock out of here."

Jayce winced. When Darlene approached, they embraced and kissed cheeks Continental style. In a moment they were gone. Nothing was said because they all knew Jayce's plans and concerns.

Darlene and her dad stopped at the gangplank, looked up at the wheelhouse and waved goodbye. The captain waved back with a wide grin.

Her dad was in one of his good moods. He belched again and the two went down the wharf, arm-in-arm.

Jayce watched them go. She felt a longing to be with them again but finally shrugged and went to her stateroom.

After a refreshing shower and repairing her makeup, Jayce made her way forward to the dining saloon. She sat opposite a young girl.

"Are you traveling alone?" Jayce asked, smiling. "You can't be over 12 or 14 years old."

"Yes, my parents are in residence at the Frangipani Hotel on Bequia. I've been in boarding school in New Orleans."

"Of course, you do look like a Cajun throwback. Just kidding. Will you be going to Fortier High School soon?" She was trying to make the youngster comfortable. Mention of the school helped the girl relax.

They chatted like old shipmates during the meal. Afterward, Jayce suggested they go to the fantail bar.

"I'm not allowed to drink; underage," the girl said.

"Age means very little outside the 12-mile limit. Besides, I'm buying. It would be very impolite to refuse. I'll turn you in to the Bourbon Street Irregulars when you get back."

The girl laughed.

After being served a colorful, very fruity, tropical drink, the two girls sat quietly to watch the white wake churning as the boat made headway back to the islands. Jayce touched her hand. "Are you asleep?"

She laughed. "No, just enjoying the moment."

Jayce laughed. "All right; no more drinks for you. Tell me, are you lonesome all by yourself in that big cabin?"

"I was but I'm cool now. You have been very nice to me. Guess I needed a friend."

Jayce ordered two more drinks and the deck steward brought them a blanket. He said something about the chill night air as he tucked them in together. Jayce thought the air hot and humid, anything but chilly.

"This is cozy; we'll be engaged before the cruise reaches your hotel."

The girl giggled. "Where are you going?"

“Well, I have an appointment in Fort de France, Martinique, but it isn’t for a week or ten days. This seemed like a better way to spend my time than sitting in a hotel room in Antigua. Besides, now I’ve met you, I feel much better about the trip. I hope you feel the same.”

“What’s in Martinique that’s so important?”

Jayce was feeling impulsive which she attributed to the alcohol. “There is a famous clinic up in the mountains. They do corrective surgery; obesity, cosmetic corrections, burn skin grafting, sex gender change – all like that.”

The girl’s eyes were wide with wonder. “You don’t look sick or, like that.”

“Only sick at heart; I want to be a girl. They are going to help me.”

She giggled. “You already are a girl, anyone can see that.”

“You spend most of your years in New Orleans and don’t know about transgender people? You surprise me.” She moved one arm around the girl’s waist and was pleased when she rested her head on her shoulder. Still feeling adventurous, she let the blanket slip down so the girl could see her cleavage.

“I know you are foolin’ with me.”

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

“No, I’m afraid of boys. I’m supposed to get over that when I’m older.”

Jayce smiled. “Maybe you have a girlfriend?”

“Well, I have a neat roommate. We do things together.”

“What things? Have you had sex with a girl?”

The girl sat up quickly, shocked. “Certainly not!”

“One day you might get lucky.” Jayce stopped and looked around. The bar was closing so she hopped up and ordered two more drinks. After that, she and the young girl carried their drinks back to Stateroom Three. “Invite me in,” she said firmly.

Inside, she plunked down on the bunk and fluffed up some pillows.

“I saw you with that very beautiful girl when you came on board. Is she the girlfriend you talk about?”

“I certainly hope I shall get that status one day soon. Right now she is not interested in a guy headed for a transgender operation.”

The girl drained her drink. “I’ve never been so confused in my whole life,” she said finally. Her tone was exasperated. “You tell me you are a guy and you have larger breasts than me. Are they real?”

Jayce pulled the girl toward her until they were both sitting on the bunk, feet on the floor. “It is time for you to trust me,” she said after a moment. “Give me your hand.”

The girl pulled her hand back like she had been burned. “What are you going to do?”

Jayce unbuttoned the top of her blouse. With a quick twist, the bra cups were free. She forced the girl’s hand onto her naked torso and watched for the reaction. “See? They are

real. I've been taking special drugs and hormones for a long time. Do you like feeling them?"

The girl's hands were shaking, a nervous convulsion but she looked up into Jayce's eyes. "Yes; I think they are marvelous. Maybe I will have 'em one day."

"I'm glad," Jayce whispered. She deftly reached beneath her skirt and released the gaff. "I have something else to show you; not likely you will have one of these in your lifetime."

The young girl looked terrified. "I am not ready for this," she stuttered.

Jayce leaned back and lightly caressed the girl's budding breasts. "There is plenty of time; perhaps tomorrow? Will that be all right?"

She released a sigh of relief. "Yes. No. I don't know."

#

Later in the dark of night with only a dim stanchion light to define the companionway, Jayce heard a gentle rap-rap at her door. She glanced through her porthole to see Captain Levinson standing there. He rapped very softly several times before she decided to answer.

"Yes? Who is it?"

"Captain Levinson. May I have a word with you, Miss Darby?"

"Captain! Good grief! It's the middle of the night. Don't you ever sleep?"

He rapped again. "There is an irregularity in your passport, Miss. Please come to the saloon so we can clear it up. Nothing serious. You will be pleased to know the crew is busy attending to breakfast so there is fresh brewed coffee."

Jayce glanced at the ship's clock attached to the wall over her bed. "Four in the morning is no time to go calling, Captain."

She looked again through her porthole. He was gone. Not bothering to dress in more than her nightclothes, she slipped into her robe and pulled the belt tight.

She found him at one of the dining tables in conference with a sailor. He acknowledged her with a quick nod when she came into the room. There were some papers and clutter on the table. He picked up the blue passport folder and motioned to her

Jayce was wary but she didn't know why.

"Please sit down, Miss Darby. Are you an early morning coffee drinker?"

"Thank you, Captain; black please."

The steward returned with steaming coffee and a small paper plate of macaroons.

"Sorry to get you up but we have to get everything done today so we can have our leisure tomorrow. My, but you are pretty. Please, notice your passport is not signed." He pointed to the bottom of the page opposite her photo and personal data.

"My oversight," she answered and took the pen he offered her. She scribbled her name and moved to go. He had a firm hold on her arm.

"Relax, Miss," he said. "You can spare a minute for your lonely captain. I noticed by the manifest that your destination is Fort de France. Often I get a chance to chat with young people such as you who are expected at the Middlesex Clinic. You are such a stunning young lady, my curiosity is piqued." He moved his hand along her arm and brushed her breast.

She moved quickly away. "Please, Captain, no games. I apologize for the passport discrepancy but I find your attitude offensive."

He smiled; the dark eyes sparkled. "Perhaps you will join me for a drink in my quarters. It is rare I get the company of such a marvelous girl."

She moved away from him. "Forget it, Captain. I repeat, no games. With your vast experience you should be aware that I am not a girl; I'm a guy. Please, just cool it. I have enough on my mind right now."

He relaxed his hand on her arm. "It was reported to me that you spent several hours in Stateroom Three. You were perhaps seducing that young girl. Carnal knowledge with an underage girl can be complicated even in these remote corners of the planet. It would not take long to get the youngster to confess your, uh, dalliance with her." His fingers again grasped her arm. "I repeat, would you please come along to my quarters? I have some excellent brandy; a gift from Jacob Hardusty as a matter of fact."

Jayce's mind was racing. She considered her situation. 'The jerk has a friendship bond with Jake Hardusty. That could get complicated. He might use this unsavory situation to get Darlene into the sack. I wouldn't put it past him.' She looked him in the eyes with a stark stare.

"As you wish, Captain. I've no need to cause trouble for you or Jacob Hardusty. I have to respect your interest in Darlene Hardusty; she is lovely."

"You two seemed friendly. College friends? Did you go down on her?"

She wanted to scream at him 'None of your business' but she kept her cool. Finally, she looked again into those flashing eyes. She nodded her head. She said nothing further.

He led the way and stood aside at the door to motion her in. "Might I presume, Captain, that you are of Greek descent? Is that why you had no objection when I told you I'm not a girl?"

He chuckled as he closed the door and threw the bolt. "I've waited a long time for a girl/guy like you to come aboard my schooner. Now that you've guessed at what I need from you, perhaps you will come in here to my bunk. I do not wish to argue with you. I just need your delightful tight buns."

Jayce had the odd feeling that the handsome captain was enjoying exactly the same power over her that she had so often with others on her own turf. "Where can I hang my robe?"

IX - Debut of Stefan Picard

The big jumbo jet was lumbering down the touchdown runway. Stefan retrieved his carry-on satchel overhead and waited patiently for his turn to exit the aircraft.

He knew Jayce was a long way off so he did not expect anyone to greet him. In the taxi he gave the name Jayce had sent him. "Sparkle Hotel and Spa," he said.

His reservations in order, he found the room and stripped to enjoy a hot shower. The New Orleans humidity seemed to him to stick with him.

After a pleasant dinner, Stefan wandered into the lounge and walked up to the bar. The dark-skinned island girl served him a double brandy with a short beer on the side. Next was the surprise.

"Stefan Picard," the voice on the intercom called. "Message for you."

He high-signed the barmaid and thanked her when she settled the telephone on the bar. "This is Stefan," he said, suddenly wary.

"My name is Darlene Hardusty," the girl said. "Miss Darby said I might catch you in the bar. No offense for the intrusion, I hope."

"Not at all. I had an excellent dinner and am about to drop my tired frame into bed. Can you give me directions to the mountain retreat? I'd like to see it promptly if possible."

"I have been assigned to ferry you from the hotel to the cabin. What time in the morning is convenient?"

After finishing the conversation, he was haunted by the sweet, articulate voice. 'Jayce has been toying with me again,' he thought absently.

After breakfast, Stefan sat in the lobby where he could see the door. He wore a dark gray suede vest, white turtle neck and black trousers. His shoes were polished to perfection. 'Not a bad showing,' he thought, 'for a girl on the run.'

Several attractive women came in from the parking area. He was busy admiring their charms. He expected his driver, Miss Hardusty, to go to the desk and ask for him. He had notified the clerk where he would be seated.

"Stefan? I'm Darlene. It's a pleasure meeting you." She stood next to him looking down at his upturned face. His mouth dropped, speechless.

She was ladylike glamour personified. The modest skirt with brief hem hugged her knees. If beauty ever had power, she embodied it. Her matching pearls worn on a velvet choker and cuffs added serenity.

He struggled to get up. "I'm Stefan," he said as he forwarded his hand to greet her. "Darby didn't warn me. Pardon me for staring, you are gorgeous."

She gave him her coy smile. "And you say that to all the girls. Shall we go?"

As they travelled up the mountain trail, Stefan could not keep his eyes off her. The tight skirt rolled and flashed flesh as she shifted gears, worked the brakes and handled the steering with skill.

'Omigod!' he thought. 'I'm in love. This simply cannot be—such a seductive beauty. I don't care if this place is a pup tent; I'm buying whatever she is selling.'

Darlene was genuinely amused at the effect she was having on the handsome guy. She did a brief inventory of his neat clothes, perfect fingernails, soft hands, sensual lips and clear steel-gray eyes. His voice, she noted, was well-toned, articulate and expressive. 'All this and a skilled craftsman as well,' she thought. 'Well, it's going to be an interesting day.'

She wheeled into the parking area in front of the mountain cabin. As she had done for Jayce, she showed Stefan around. Still distracted by his congenial guide, Stefan analyzed the space in terms of what he would need.

"Your friend Jayce Darby has a good eye. This is perfect. When can we take possession? We are anxious to locate."

She was sitting quietly on the sofa. Stefan sat next to her.

"You already have it. Jayce gave a verbal commitment but wanted you to see the structural layout first. "You really astonish me," she said looking directly at him.

"How so? I'm just the hired help."

She was pensive. "Jayce told on you. Your reputation is known here. We will meet my dad for lunch. He can fill in any details about real estate; all the particulars. I know you are Stella Picard. I know you have been in prison. One issue bothers me, Sir Stefan. You don't look at all like an ex-con and, beyond that, you don't look like a girl. Needless to say, I'm impressed."

Stefan shrugged his shoulders. "It took some effort but you do what you must to stay alive. I've made some mistakes in the past but now you see, I'm just a guy trying to make a decent living."

She laughed and touched his hand with hers. "All right; your secret is safe with me. I wouldn't have this much information if your leader did not trust my discretion."

Stefan sighed. "There are four of us in the package. You already know Jayce. In addition to me, we have two very excellent operatives; Noriko Samisen and Antoinette Tyler. Noriko is first generation Japanese. Antoinette goes by the name 'Tony.' She is a grad student at Tulane University. Her interests are antiquities and other girls."

Darlene laughed. "Oh, you are so subtle. They are girlfriends, I take it?"

"Not just that; the two of them are a terror around the sorority set."

"Will locating here be a problem for Tony if she is serious about her studies?"

"She did not seem concerned. She comes from a wealthy family. They own large tracts of sugar cane and have some oil drilling platforms down in the Delta Country. We call it the crawfish circuit."

Darlene smiled. "I'd like to know if I should expect them to compete for your attention."

Stefan chuckled. "You are a born diplomat. We are very close knit but on one mission several months ago, I made a pass at Noriko. Tony caught us and it was Hiroshima for a while. To answer your question, didn't Jayce tell you I learned the lesbian arts while in a girl's prison? Don't be frightened; I'll not attack you but, from what I see now in front of me, you better not get too close. I singe easily."

Darlene burst out laughing. "All right, friends we shall be. My dad is very interested in Heirlooms, Incorporated and is looking forward to seeing some of your work. One thing more and we can get going to meet for lunch. How do you market such a delicate service?"

"Noriko has connections in the Oriental community which includes anyone with slant eyes, I suppose. Tony places advertising in proper places and handles the inquiries when they come in. We all use the Internet almost exclusively so the location is of little importance."

"I see. Thank you for being candid with me. You are a most remarkable person."

On the drive back down the mountain road, Stefan took a moment away from admiring the stunning Darlene Hardusty to put together all that had to be done to get the operation moving. Finally, he spoke up, "I understand Jayce gets the apartment at the cabin. That's patently unfair because she will have to spend a significant amount of time on travel. She has projects we don't know about and then some."

Darlene glanced across the seat to Stefan. "Do you have a girlfriend?"

It was abrupt and harsh. She had asked it with a strained voice. 'Can this be possible?' he thought. 'Could this terrific girl have a roving eye?'

"The answer is no but the thought is hanging between us. I've told you about my interests. You already know about Jayce Darby. What of you, Darlene?"

She drove in silence for a long while until they were on the double highway into town. "Jayce told me my one experience with an attractive island girl would be remembered as a fire. She also said that fire would always be an ember ready to ignite a new interest. I'm being honest; I'm interested in widening my horizon. Masculine ways not only bore me, they terrify me to think of what nature has proscribed. Am I clear?"

"Transparently; thanks. We will have time to get to know each other. It appears today is my lucky day. Astonishing after all this time." He hesitated. "I have to find suitable quarters for Noriko and Tony as well as for myself. I do not like to have a commute. If I solve a problem or need to get out a rush order, running about the countryside is to be avoided."

She was thoughtful. "Two options assuming you don't want to move in with the two girls. First, find a cottage not far from the mountain cabin. Second, depending on finances, build a personal retreat within walking distance. What do you think?"

"I like the last one. We can park a mobile home behind the work shed."

"Then we'll have to find what you need. What about finances? If you are temporarily short, my dad owns a bank."

"I think we should concentrate on getting our shipment in and situated. As soon as we get back in production, finances will take care of it. We have some really sophisticated equipment. The crisp mountain air should be favorable; more so than the humid New Orleans climate. Did Jayce tell you about Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin? That's a blast."

"Yes," Darlene answered giggling. "Dad caught her on it. We all had a big belly laugh; it seems there is no such place."

"I love you, Darlene Hardusty," Stefan said under his breath, a mere whisper.

"What did you say?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing. Keep driving."

Lunch was at the Sparkle Hotel and Spa. They settled the lease on the cabin and Stefan was permitted to park a mobile home behind the shed. Jacob Hardusty declined to comment on the chemistry between his daughter and Stefan Picard. All the details settled, Stefan went to his room to pack and get transport to the airport.

As he put the telephone down after making travel arrangements, he heard the light knock at the door.

"Hello, again," Darlene said with a smile. "I came by to wish you bon voyage. When will you be returning?"

Her beauty, the innate charm laced with lust, left him tongue tied. His mind sped back to the many girls he had deftly guided into his arms and bed. 'Why,' he asked himself, 'is this girl different?' He knew from experience the devastation of losing the right moment.

She looked at him as he approached. She heard nothing, felt a giddy sensation in her tummy and knew her eyes were welling with tears. "Stefan, I..."

He held her embrace; they were close as two pages in their own book. With her eyes closed and tears streaming down her face, he caught her soft lips with his and they shared a passion alien to them both.

"Come here, love, I want to talk to you," he managed to say. He tugged her to the narrow love seat in the room. They kissed again, he held her longer; his tongue tip teased her lower lip. "Darling, do you not remember? I am a girl who adores you. Could this mean anything more than just one kiss?"

"I have never been so attracted to another person; boy or girl means nothing to me right now. Your tenderness, the genuine touch you give me is unlike any guy, fictional or otherwise. I want us to have a future however untenable."

He kissed her again and they became one with his mouth on hers and her arms around him pulling to get closer.

When he relaxed, she touched his lips with one finger. She let her fingertip linger before drawing a line over his chin, down along his neck. She brushed his torso with a light touch. She looked up at him with a huge question on her face. "How do you do all this so well?"

"I am told I have an attractive feminine figure. Or, maybe it is the allure of the unknown, the curiosity that prompts your kisses. Is that it?"

"I've no call to be curious. To be sure, I cannot match your experience but I know what you are thinking when you look at me and wet your lips. We are not children at the church picnic."

He kissed her again and they sank into a new embrace. He kissed her ear and the white flesh of her neck and shoulder. He whispered, "Did Jayce go down on you? Was she your first? Withhold your answer if you wish."

She sighed. "I've known Jayce for a long time. We were almost lovers back on the college quad when Jayce was one hundred percent guy. I couldn't do it; still have not, uh, indulged. For a while I enjoyed the attention of a pretty island girl. She left me."

"We all have to find our own path, he said in a bemused way. "I have the two friends I told you about but we are not lovers. It would be easy; they are both smashing, as the Brits are fond of saying. But they have each other and I really admire that. I'd like to have a relationship to match it. Are you the one?"

Darlene burst out crying. Sobs wracked her body. "Stef, I'm frightened."

"No more than I am," Stefan answered. He stood up and peeled off his jacket. Without taking his eyes away from the adorable girl watching him, he unbuttoned his Van Heusen shirt and tugged it off his shoulders. Next was the T-shirt. He set that aside. "You can finish this, darling girl. It's to answer the question in your mind and to come face-to-face with your fears."

Darlene released the tiny clasp and with trembling fingers began unwrapping Stefan's torso. With each layer removed, she could see more of the breast line. She continued. "Stefan, is this all right?"

"You want to know, don't you?"

"I have to; can't help it." She let the last of the wrapping fall to reveal a perfect pair of breasts, full, nipples pink and firm. She knew he was waiting. After briefly looking into his eyes, she leaned over and nudged one breast. She caught the nipple with her lips; with a tiny squeal she plunged until Stefan's breast almost filled her mouth. She brought both hands up to fondle and caress.

"There is more," Stefan whispered. He kissed her again to calm the hapless girl. With one hand, he caught her breast in his palm.

She sighed. "I know, Stef. This is more than I've ever done, as boy or girl. Can you give me some time? I want to please you, I really do."

He carefully moved one hand beneath the hem of her mini skirt. "You might want to remember my touch," he said as he boldly fingered the fleshy upper thigh.

She was enthralled, suddenly free of the fear and anxiety Jayce had told her about. "I want you," she said simply.

"Then, come here, darling." She allowed him to part her legs and watched with amazement as he knelt in front of her. He pressed his lips against the silk and lace of her panties and breathed a warm cloud of lust. "That's the rapture I want you to remember," he said as he stood up. He reached for the clothes strewn in disarray on the floor.

After dressing, he grabbed his carry-on and moved quickly to be by her side. He kissed her on the cheek and said, "Later, alligator."

At the door, he turned and looked at the defeated girl still seated. She nodded and with a half-smile, waved.

X - Double Play

Darlene was still in a daze from her encounter with Stefan Picard. The hope in her heart seemed drowned by the threat of Stefan's lifestyle. She walked across the parking area to her car. She should have known better but she did not see the sleek black limo pull in the space next to her. When the risk dawned on her she turned to retrace her steps to the hotel.

"One moment, Miss Hardusty." She was blocked by a tall, muscular man with a Brooklyn accent.

She looked frantically around for help. Nothing. When she turned to run, another man stopped her. "Calm down, Miss," the man said. "You are in no danger."

"What do you want?" The sudden terror raised goose bumps on her arms.

"Just come along with us," he answered and pushed her gently toward the stretch limo.

She tried to run again but the men had more strength. She put together the obvious; the limo was expensive, both men were well-groomed and dressed. They spoke her name. She knew then she was part of something larger than a chance encounter in the hotel parking lot. Verbalizing abandoned her.

In the limo she was told to sit next to a tall, 'ultra-handsome' woman maybe as old as forty. Her smile was friendly but her eyes were hostile, cold and harsh. "My name is Carni Caynan. Please relax. You are to be our guest for a while. This is a pleasure, Miss Hardusty; I wasn't told you are beautiful."

Darlene opted to say nothing. She reasoned she might learn more by listening rather than argument. She glanced out the window when the limo started moving from the commercial area. From there, they drove down the coast highway.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

"You will see. We thought at first we would get you and Stefan together as he is headed for the airport. Stefan is an amazing person, you no doubt agree. I met him briefly at a drop I was managing for a while. It was not my best day. Stella/Stefan Picard slipped

right through my fingers. Jayce Darby is one of the most enterprising people I know. Add Stella's stash and she comes out wealthy."

"I don't know what you are talking about," Darlene said softly, a catch in her throat.

"No matter; just making conversation. We are operatives for the syndicate that trusted Stella with a highly valuable jewelry collection. We want it back. You, dear girl, are insurance."

"My dad will take this island apart when he discovers me missing. Make note of that."

"We have, believe me. None of this would have gone together without Stella Picard crossing international borders. Interpol has an extensive file."

"So what? I can't help you with somebody's lost jewels."

"But you can, darling. Your delightful transvestite friend will be anxious to get you back. Are you lovers? If Stella didn't put the make on you, Jayce certainly has. You've been a busy little vixen." She reached down and flipped Darlene's skirt up. "Lovely legs as well."

The limo paused while large double garage doors opened. Once inside, they secured the doors and windows.

Carni Caynan took Darlene by the arm. "It's this way. We are staying here for a while. Later you get to go for an airplane ride. Exciting." She led Darlene to a narrow stairway. "We stay at the living quarters on the second level. Come along, please."

Darlene looked around the dismal room; no windows. She had only a small bunk, chest of drawers, vanity and private bath. 'Not so bad,' she thought. 'It might get worse.'

Carni came in and flipped the bolt. "Now, it's communication time. I want you to know our strategy so you don't do anything foolish."

Darlene overheard Carni talking to her superiors. "Yes, she is right here. We are secure for now. Take your time, she is very sexy." She laughed, a low chuckle. She was delighted to see the stricken look on Darlene's face.

Off the telephone, Carni sat next to Darlene on the bunk bed. "You are gorgeous. Next, if you will, it would be courteous to tell your father you are in custody, unharmed and that we are appealing to Stella Picard to return what is rightfully ours. Will you do that? It will make your stay with us much more pleasant."

Darlene forced a wave of anger. "And if I don't? What then? "

Carni was pensive. "We need to be assured there is no risk here. Just explain to your father that the issue does not involve you or him. We are only applying a little pressure to get Stella's cooperation. One look at you told me we have good reason to expect Stella's agreement."

Darlene tugged at the hem of her skirt when she saw Carni's speculating glance. "Leave me alone. Back off!" she said with a conviction she did not feel.

"Why do you persist? I've only asked you for a simple service to keep us all safe. We don't need any complications."

Darlene moved away from the older woman. "Why is one phone call so important to you?"

"It's the plan. When Stefan/Stella calls looking for you at the Hardusty plantation, he will run into an enraged father. Not a pleasant prospect. If you will just urge your dad to tell Stella Picard to cooperate, nobody will get hurt."

"You are bluffing; you don't know where Stefan is. He could be in South America by now."

Carni giggled. "Or the Middlesex Clinic, more likely. We were happy to get your friend Jayce Darby out of the way for this transaction. When Stella is faced with your angry father as well as her missing, charming girlfriend, it is very likely our property will be returned to us. Please make the phone call." She handed the telephone to Darlene.

"I want to think it over."

"Stalling for what? Time is not on your side. We are willing to abuse you if that's what needs to be done. This is not your fight unless you so choose. You are being very foolish." She slapped both legs with the palms of her hand. The young girl was exasperating. "All right. You think it over. We'll talk later."

She slammed the door. Darlene promptly locked it. She sat down on the bunk and started crying. 'This is not helping,' she thought seriously. 'I should figure a way to warn Stefan. It could be perilous. I remember what he told me about the operative on Decatur Street who gave his life for his loyalty.' She patted her eyes with a tissue and blew her nose.

Darlene realized it had been several hours since she had eaten. She went to the door and unlocked it. She turned the knob and was surprised it opened so easily. "Hello," she called out.

One of the well-dressed goons came out of a side room. "What is it? Carni isn't here."

"I'm hungry. Are you guys going to starve me?"

He approached her. His pure bulk made her quiver. "We are going to make sandwiches. I'll make an extra for you." He looked her up and down. "Aren't you supposed to be on the telephone?" He stepped close enough to touch her. Before she could recoil from his grasp, he had both hands on her breasts.

"Cool it, buster; I'm not your girl."

He grinned and stood in front of her, hands on both of her shoulders. He was staring. "How very nice," he said in appreciation.

"What are you looking at?"

"Your mouth. Sexy. Maybe I'll get some action from you if you persist in avoiding the telephone call."

"Dream on," she said and moved away from him. "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him fuck fish."

He roared with laughter. "That's a good one. You just gave away your true self. The sweet innocent little girl act doesn't cut it."

She had a feeling of remorse but shrugged it off. 'No need to be angry,' she thought. 'This guy doesn't have hands, he has ham hocks.'

"Hey, what's going on?" Carni said. "I told you to leave the little chick alone. She's mine."

The unhappy hulk backed a few steps. "Just trying to get a little head," he said.

"If anybody gets some, it will be me. You know the rules."

The man trudged away.

Carni followed Darlene into the room. "I have news about Stella Picard. She is on the passenger list of Delta Airlines. We've made arrangements to meet her. Call it a welcoming committee."

"Can I make a phone call? I want to warn him. Whatever he has done does not earn you the right to push people around."

"Ah, so noble. The answer is yes. Maybe. Call your dad and he will call off the National Guard. You do that and I'll connect you with the folks who by now are waiting on the exit concourse." She again picked up the telephone. "Here, just tell him to call off the search. The place is crawling with cops."

Darlene was so nervous that her hands shook. "I fear I waited too long if your thugs are in the airport waiting for Stefan. Maybe I could have alerted him to the danger earlier."

Carni's phone buzzed. "Yes, thanks. It's on St. Ann Street between Royal and Bourbon. There is an exit that leads to a patio of a home on Dumaine Street right behind him. She'll be coming out there with the box of jewels. Don't take any lip from her; she stole from us." She turned to face Darlene. "Your lover slipped out the side; probably knows the layout. Anyhow, we'll catch up to the famous Stella Picard shortly. You can relax, little love, we could have avoided a messy ending to this but our error was in expecting you to see reason."

Darlene started to cry. Tears were dampening her blouse. She accepted the box of tissues from Carni. "It's hopeless, isn't it?"

"Very likely. If everyone does as they are told, we will have our jewels and the insurance company will have Stella Picard. It's a double play."

"I noticed you are more than a messenger. You were giving orders like an army sergeant."

Carni looked at the distraught girl. "I'm well paid. The insurance company has a reward out for the return of their client's property. I'll get a chunk of that. Stella Picard has her own foolhardy nature to blame."

"What happens now? Are you going to bring me home?"

"The last link in the chain around Stella's neck has yet to be forged. We wait. Now that I think of it, I can see Stella might have had a nice life here with you and whatever she does with that jewelry. It was Jayce's obsession that led them all astray." She again looked at Darlene. She touched her hair and the side of her face.

"Please don't," Darlene said with an emotional note.

"Have you had sex with a girl?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"You are so lovely and so sensual. I think you would erupt in one orgasm after another."

Not on your terms. I choose my own lovers."

Carni smiled. She started unbuttoning Darlene's blouse. "I've been itching to get my hands on your body all day. Do you like me doing this?"

She fondled the breast through the light cups and tickled the nipple with her thumb.

"I told you no. There was a time today when I expected you to come on to me. That was when your opportunity to coerce me was best. Now, just take me home."

Carni tugged until the starched blouse was free of the belt holding Darlene's skirt. In one quick twist, she had Darlene's bra free so she could pull it with the blouse off her shoulders. "Creamy skin, perfect," she said.

Darlene pushed to get away. "I said 'no' and I meant it."

"Ah, pity. I thought I was going to get a sex bonus for my efforts today. Not to be, is it?"

"Thank you. Please leave me alone."

"I'm a bit of a voyeur by nature. I'm going to turn you over to my two husky assistants. They get horny just looking at you."

"You wouldn't!"

"Wouldn't what? Wouldn't beg, coerce, cajole? Wouldn't drug you and pass you around like a hooker on the edge of oblivion? You are right; you will be Silly Putty in the hands of those guys. They play rough." She headed for the door to call her helpers.

"Wait!" Darlene screamed. "I'm a virgin. I want to stay that way for reasons of my own."

Carni turned and stared at the frightened girl. "Get on the bed. Do as you are told and you can keep your precious cherry."

Darlene frowned and looked up at the tall woman towering over her. "Yes, ma'am," she whispered.

#

Stefan glanced at the crowd of well-wishers jamming the concourse on the other side of the security screening point. He searched for Tony and Noriko until he spotted them standing in the window recess trying to be seen.

He waved then frowned. Noriko, the taller of the two, was raising herself up on her heels holding her hands high. She made the sign of a 'T' with both forefingers. It was their signal for trouble.

'Uh oh,' Stefan thought. He turned around and went back to the entrance lobby and into the rest room. On the way, he motioned to a red cap porter pushing an empty wheel chair. He waved a hundred dollar bill to get the lad's attention.

In the restroom, he hurriedly rummaged through his carry-on bag. He waited until the porter undressed and told him to dress in his clothes. They were approximately the same size. He found the right cosmetic cream; in a very few moments he was as black as the porter. Even the red cap fit. He gave the lad another hundred. "Where is the exit? What do I need to get out of here?"

The delighted porter was admiring himself in the mirror. He turned and grinned. He handed Stefan a key card. "This is all you need. Go to the bottom of the ramp, dump the wheel chair and go through the baggage claim area. There is no action on the carousel right now."

"Thanks," Stefan said.

"Thank you," the man replied.

Stefan wandered to the parking area, acting like he had just finished his shift. He looked around and saw Noriko and Tony straining to see him exit the lobby. They were blocked in by two unmarked police cars.

Stefan slid onto a shuttle bus to the French Quarter hotels and sat in the back, acting unconcerned as he looked out the window.

On the 1100 block of Decatur Street he wandered into a bar and out the back door onto a cluttered patio. After that, he disappeared.

XI - Ship Ahoy!

A year later, an expensive Chris-Craft antique yacht came into Admiral Nelson Harbor and berthed in the overnight slip. Some sailors lounging nearby helped them secure the huge boat with anchor and spring lines.

"You did that like an expert," one sailor said to the next in line for an assignment.

"Not complex," Stefan answered. "Can you get jobs here? Maybe they have one so I don't have to answer any questions."

The sailor laughed. "You mean make up answers, right?"

"Something like that."

A forty foot sailing sloop was getting ready to depart for an evening cruise. The skipper was pacing the deck. Stefan approached. "Needing an extra hand? Maybe I can help."

"Well, can you man the helm while I raise the main? I have to pick up a party of drunks around the other side of the island. I'm already late."

"Right, Skipper," Stefan said. With practiced skill, he brought the boat out from the harbor.

A few hours later, the boat was docking at the Sparkle Hotel & Spa Marina. The extra sailors the owner had engaged were waiting.

"Thanks, sailor. You did a good job. Maybe we'll see you again some time. Don't forget your duffle." He pressed some twenty dollar bills into Stefan's hand.

Stefan saluted smartly, shouldered his duffle and headed across the wharf to a beach restaurant that was near closing. He bought some dinner and struck up a conversation with the waiter.

"I'm looking for work," he said. "Do you know of anything around here? I just arrived from Admiral Nelson Harbor."

"Check back here in the morning. There are usually some transients looking for day work."

Stefan climbed beneath the wharf, snuggled his head on the duffle and was soon asleep.

#

Next morning, he fell in with a few guys who were hired to the local hotel to do garden work. He was pleased to get it without having to fill out a stack of papers.

Working the shrubs along the entrance, it was natural for him to remember some better times when he had dined at that very hotel. He kept working toward the other gardener moving his way.

He moved aside to let a taxi pull up to the entrance. An attractive young woman jumped gingerly out and headed for the side entrance.

"Pardon, Miss," Stefan called out. "Yours, I believe." He handed her the scarf she had dropped getting out of the cab.

"Thanks," she answered but stopped a moment to look at the bedraggled man in worn sailor's clothes and dusty boots. There was something in the man's eyes that startled her. "Have you had breakfast?" she asked.

"No, Miss. I was lucky to get this job when I did. Not one to complain."

Of course, he knew she was Darlene Hardusty and he looked for a wedding band on her finger. He followed her into the breakfast kitchen and took a seat at the table used to feed the hired help. He overheard Darlene speak to the sous-chef. "Give him some breakfast and let him wash dishes or something but he does need a bath." She grinned and wrinkled her nose, a gesture he knew well.

Later, he reported to the kitchen in clean clothes, a uniform cap and a smile. He went out into the hotel breakfast area to pick up dishes when the customers left.

"Well, you look much better," Darlene said, smiling.

"It was nice of you to help out. I've been down on my luck, as the saying goes."

"We need steady help here; I hope you stay."

"Thank you, Darlene," he whispered under his breath.

"What was that? Did you say my name? Maybe you overheard someone talking."

"That must be it." He turned and began pushing the cart toward the kitchen. He couldn't suppress a grin.

She took his arm and spun him around. "Nobody calls me Darlene here. I'm in management; my dad is the owner. I am Miss Hardusty. How did you... Omigod! Stella!" she screamed and fainted.

In moments, the chef was on him with a dozen curses. Darlene awoke to see the chef's concerned face. "Are you all right, Miss?" he said with concern.

She looked around quickly. "Where did he go?"

"The young man? I fired him. We can't have this sort of thing in my kitchen."

She struggled to get up. "Find him and send him to my office immediately."

"Yes Miss, right away."

Stefan came into her office and took off his hat. He had the same mischievous grin she remembered so well.

"Close the door. Give an account of yourself. Needless to say you've made me a very angry woman. You could have at least... Oh, I know; you didn't want to involve me."

"Dar, I hurt you enough. It was just pure chance I landed here last night. I dreamed about you being not so far away while I slept under the wharf. I'm not one to complain, remember?"

She grabbed the telephone. "Jayce, he's here."

"Who is?"

"Stella Picard and as sassy as ever."

"Well, I'll be damned. Maybe we can get back in business now that a genuine fingersmith is in our grasp."

"Oh, no, you don't. She has done enough for both of us. Hands off, she's mine."

Stefan stood at the side of her walnut swivel chair and waited for her to stand up. "I said this once before but you didn't hear me. I love you, Darlene Hardusty."

T h e E n d