



Reluctant Press presents:

Eye Of The Lotus



Monica James

A 'Her TV' E-BOOK

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The Eye Of The Lotus

By Monica James

There was once a chronicle to unfold
Of life and love enrolled in two souls together.
A quiet story to be gently told.
Our own beach sand, bleached by the sun,
Overlooked the wet horizon
As we kissed the surf and were loved by the sea.
There will never be a love as right as you and me
And when I remember us, I can only trust
The light I saw that set us free.

Paul Truman 2011

I.

"Why not?" Danny demanded as he continued to force his hands higher on Amanda Delphine's thigh. "We are going to be married."

Amanda could see the bulge in her boyfriend's trousers. Though she admitted to strong feelings for him, an inner conviction fed her defense. "You will have to wait," she said with an exasperated huff. "I am not fond of you pawing me every time we go out. It's getting so I dread it."

Danny sat stiffly at the wheel of his car. "That is not an explanation; it's an excuse to avoid giving me what I need. I don't mess with other girls but if you can't tell me what is so very wrong about how I feel, I'm going to break up with you."

"That's your option. When did I ever promise you sex? Every other issue that comes up, we handle really well."

"This is an impasse," he said angrily. He started the car. "I'm taking you home now."

She tried to control her grief by reasoning. 'I knew this would happen, Grandmere told me it would. She said I was born under a different star; one that hung too low in the sky. Danny wants me to be pregnant so I'll do those other things he wants. What do *I* want?' She looked out the window as the panorama of the night sped by. The old bridge over Bayou Teche rumbled when he drove over.

He slammed on the brakes leaving a cloud of dust in her driveway. "Don't call me, I'll call you," he said curtly.

She turned to face him so he could see the tense expression on her face. He reached over, touched her lips with her fingers and next dropped his hand to fondle her breasts.

She pushed his hand away and in a display of anger-fused energy, slammed the door behind her. She didn't look back.

Once in the house she threw herself into her grandmother's arms. "We broke up," she sobbed. "It's because I wouldn't have sex with him. I wanted to but I couldn't. Am I going to be in this austere prison all my life? Is there no escape?"

Noranda patted her on the back. "You have your mother's instinct. You didn't want to get into a relationship that would come back on you. Come along now. I'll fix you some coffee. We need to talk."

They went into the kitchen. Amanda sat morosely at the table and fingered a paper napkin. She watched as Noranda poured the coffee, added a like amount of hot milk and set the cup in front of the distraught girl.

"Here you are, dear," Noranda said. "Don't be too harsh on the young men. Your beauty attracts 'em."

Amanda sipped the *café au lait* and briefly considered adding some strong spirits to settle her ruffled feathers. "I am concerned which is natural, I suppose. I didn't want to break up with him for precisely the reason you just said. I'll attract more attention once the word gets around. I almost told him I needed to be his girl so all his Cajun buddies would leave me alone. It's as if I've lost interest in boys. That's a revelation."

Noranda frowned. "You can't lose what you never had, dear." She paused in thought. "I see your mother in you every day. There's no doubt about that. Her sad-

ness was brought on by a man that broke her in one night and disappeared the next day. She told me about it with the excuse she had to learn what it was like. That guy, your father, must have been very fertile. Your mom's brief escapade ended with the birth of twins. She brought you and your sister here to me, as you know. After a few days, she came back for one of the twins. How adorable you both were. She went to the magistrate to file a claim. I never saw either of them again. When I inquired, the magistrate wouldn't talk to me."

Amanda sipped the warm brew. "Do you know why she never again came to you? Did she somehow know her twin daughters would end up as she had?"

"I've asked myself many times in search of an answer. When your grandpere died, I truly had my hands full caring for you and the house. I've never seen nor heard anything since."

"Tonight with Danny Guice, it was as if my mother was there warning me to avoid her destiny. Didn't my mom have any guys calling on her?"

"It seems she did at school but I don't recall any visiting her here. She did have several close girlfriends but they have babies of their own by now."

"Thank you for explaining what could never be explained," Amanda whispered and patted the back of her grandmother's hand.

#

Danny waited until Amanda was inside her house. He threw the gears in full, revved the engine and

screached the tires. Speeding down the familiar road, he headed for the Bayou Bar.

‘That witch was using me,’ he told his reeling brain. ‘Take me here, go there; come at such a time; all of it. I was a fool to let her lead me around by the nose. So pretty; what can a guy expect? Cold pussy! She never knew a mom and dad; only that doddering old woman that disappears into the swamps. What does that old bat do there? Does she have a coven or a band of zombies to care for? Nothing would surprise me.’

He raced past the Creole Kitchen, across the bayou bridge and headlong in a rush to the fork in the road. To the left was home; to the right was the Bayou Bar. Indecision swept over him and he impulsively jerked the steering wheel until his car smashed hard enough against a huge oak to scatter some Spanish moss.

The forlorn call of his horn broke the silence of the night. He was slumped over the wheel with his neck crushed between the dashboard and the shattered windshield. Later there was the distant sound of a siren but he was unconscious.

II.

Clouds scudded across the night sky. The moon flashed silver like a newly-minted coin.

Noranda made her way along the path to the boat-house. The silence of the backwater swamp was broken by occasional calls from the wild. She unhooked her pirogue, took up the paddle and was soon slipping across the dark water to the other shore, to a nearly submerged island.

‘Barataria is quiet tonight,’ she thought as she approached the temple entrance. The cypress grove appeared to her grotesque, nearly naked branches reached into the night, each stump like a huge club foot.

She retrieved her pouch from a hiding place beneath a stone slab used for a table. She arranged some herbs around the *Eye Of The Lotus*, a large amulet handed down to her. Basking in the ghostly glow of the mythological water lily promoted a comfortable spell. The amulet she valued was believed to have magic power. Her incantation was pleading for attention.

“Bring Danny Guice through this terrible tragedy,” she began in a fervent whisper. “Our innocent Amanda is not able to handle such a burden of guilt.”

She rearranged the circle of herbs and adjusted the amulet to draw on the light of the moon. Her moans increased and she broke into dismay with sad lyrics from the ancestral cant. An ephemeral cloud arose and Noranda fell forward, semi-conscious under the charm’s influence.

Alone, draped in hospital white, Danny Guice was inert while the medical apparatus kept him alive. At the precise moment Noranda fell forward, though it was many miles away, he opened his eyes.

#

“Your injuries are very serious,” the doctor said. “We had to reshape your spine and begin the first stage of a series of operations to restore you well enough to function.” His voice was soothing, confident.

“Like what?” Danny asked. His voice startled him because it was high-pitched like a girl.

“You might have already noticed the change in your genitals. Well, we had to remove most of the torn tissue. We have a cosmetic specialty surgeon on call so we’ll be able to give you an update after the consult.”

Danny tried to move his hips to get more comfortable. He cried out in alarm at the sharp pain coursing through his body. He searched the doctor’s face as the competent physician perused the clipboard.

“Will I always squeak like this?” he asked.

The doctor smiled. “We can’t be certain until the phonoplasty is complete. We hope, of course, for a full recovery but it is likely your voice will continue to be that of a mature woman.”

“Phono what?” Danny asked. He was getting more nervous by the moment and began to suspect the medical establishment was playing games with his crushed body. “What else?” he asked angrily.

“Listen! You were driving; you smashed up your car and your body. Don’t be annoyed with us for an event you caused.”

“Sorry, Doctor. How long will this recovery take? What can I expect?”

The doctor frowned. “More surgery and a lot of rehab. Don’t depend on a full physical recovery.”

“Omigod! Am I never going to get laid again?”

The doctor smiled. “A young lady spent a lot of time here. She said she was your fiancée.”

“We had a fight and I lost it. Her name is Amanda Delphine; I’d like to see her if that is all right.”

The doctor set the clipboard down. "The nurse will limit the time but it appears you do have some issues to discuss."

"Like I'll never be able to have children. Is that what you mean?"

"Among other tacky conditions," the doctor answered and left the room.

#

Amanda and her grandmother, Noranda, were asleep in the hospital lobby when the nurse woke them. She said Danny was awake but they couldn't stay long and warned against allowing her patient to get overtired.

Amanda touched his hand and smiled when he opened his eyes. "Danny, I'm so sorry!" she said. "I'll stay with you as long as you want me."

Saying nothing, Noranda sprinkled some powder in a circle around Danny's bed. After that, she left.

"Grandmere invoked some magic power she is familiar with. It is helping your recovery," Amanda said. "She knew exactly when the spell took effect."

"Hogwash!" Danny said. "No, don't touch me; I hurt all over. Look Amanda, maybe you and your grandmother should leave. I learned from the doctor. I have a girl's voice and, worse than that, I'll not pester you for sex. Well, maybe later but I still want you, Amanda."

"The nurse told us about that. You might go on a poster as the annual seat belt cover girl." She smiled and hoped he would be encouraged.

"I am NOT a girl!"

"Something to think about," she answered. "We have to go now. I'll see you tomorrow. The doctor said I could visit. He didn't ask about your family."

Danny frowned. "It is well you don't say anything to them. We don't need my dad careering through here in a drunken rage."

"There will be insurance forms and such," she said after a pause. "I can help you with the paperwork." She pressed her lips, touched them with her fingers and threw him a kiss.

III.

"Grandmere," Amanda began while they were driving home, "how did you know when Danny was going to recover?"

Noranda was pensive. "There is a turnabout and boat launching area just ahead. Pull in there, we'll open our picnic lunch and have a chat. Like it or not, you are due to inherit some special powers. But first you have to learn what they are."

"You know I don't believe in voodoo rites," Amanda said slowly, aware that she might hurt the elder lady's feelings.

"You believe the sun will rise tomorrow; it isn't all that difficult." Noranda grasped the picnic basket and began setting up their lunch on the rustic table. They settled on the benches which were darkened by age and the weather.

A slight breeze rustled long lost leaves near the BBQ pit. "If it is important to you, I will listen. But, if

this charm riding on some sort of spell or fetish is real, I've yet to experience any of it."

Noranda opened a can of beer and offered Amanda one. "Like anyone else, you scarcely are aware of forces most people can neither see nor feel. Centuries ago, there was family activity in the Atlantic Ocean center passage. Our people remained on the Cape Verde Islands until the authorities there sold them to cover their costs. The town is Mindelo. My father took me there when I was a young girl. It is beautiful, untouched, and sits nestled in the foothills of the Monte Cara mountains. There has been so much intermarriage over the generations that you were born with the slightly dark skin and features more French than Creole."

Amanda flushed, almost frightened of what her grandmother was going to say. She was unsure she wanted to hear it at all, any of it. "There are legends," she said finally. "Weird stories we heard in whispers about zombies, the undead."

Noranda touched her arm. "There is no threat. Some people out of the past were so maltreated that they longed for death. Their bodies would not allow them that luxury. They walk even today around the Barataria Temple. It is a strange manifestation augmented by Voodoo rites."

"Strange without a doubt," Amanda said. "Do you see them when you go into the wetlands?"

"I do not fear them. They leave me alone. Sometimes in the dead of night I can hear them moaning. Maybe it is a way of speaking, I don't know."

"So we are descendants of refugees from the islands. What then?"

“Our ways are firmly rooted in Haitian Vodou which the tribal records detail. You have to decide about your own life, dear girl. Do you want to risk bringing babies into this topsy-turvy world?”

Amanda toyed with a po’boy and licked the juices oozing from the bread. “It is hearsay; all the girls talk about family and husbands. I am not sure but it seems clear to me, from what you are telling me, that I should think very seriously before producing some copy of a deified ancestor. It is scary but I recognize the confusion.”

“There is conflict in everyone’s lives, darling,” Noranda answered. “Now, what about Danny Guice?”

“What are you asking me? He is in no shape to marry and raise a family. How can we predict what the future might hold?”

Noranda began packing up the lunch. Standing, she let one hand rest on Amanda’s shoulder. “While you were visiting with Danny, I talked to a resident physician assigned to his case. His opinion is that Danny will be happier if he can adjust to being a girl.”

IV.

Several visits to the hospital over the months of struggling rehabilitation netted Amanda little more than snarls and recriminations. She hesitated to voice any feelings, instead waiting for Danny to open the subject of their future together.

“I know this is not your fault,” he said one sunny afternoon. “But I still blame you. Now look at this broken body of mine. How can you remain loyal to me when I can give you nothing?”

"I'm not asking you for anything, you know. I'm not going to abandon you just because you are in a bit of trouble."

"More than a bit," he said sarcastically. He glanced at the lovely girl sitting next to his bed, knees together, mini-skirt recklessly pulled aside and her blouse pulled firmly against her breasts. He leaned over as if to speak confidentially.

"Last night I dreamed I was a man again," he said sadly. "You were in the dream; we were walking along the bayou talking about the Creole Kitchen of all places."

"I'm happy you were allowing me in your dream. Lately you've given me the feeling I'm not welcome when I visit you. Yet, what can I do? You still blame me for what you did. That isn't likely to change, is it?"

"I cannot give you sex like other guys. That's another issue I don't see getting corrected. Yet, as always, you turn me on just looking at you. Would you do something for me? It won't hurt, I don't think."

She smiled and shifted in her chair, closer to the bed. "Do they have sex videos on your TV? Maybe that will brighten your day."

One of his rare smiles appeared. "I guess they do but I only compare what I see with what I know about you. I want you to raise your skirt so I can see your nice figure. You can walk around the bed like you are on a stage. Will you object if I kiss you?"

She was overjoyed. "Oh Danny, you are really getting well if you can talk like that. Of course I'll put on a show for you." She leaned against the bed, angled her torso and softly kissed him on the lips.

#

Amanda left the New Orleans Charity Hospital and wandered aimlessly until she came to the outskirts of the French Quarter. Her mind was filled with Danny's recovery and she began to consider what their lives might be like with his infirmity. Drawing on her feelings, most of which she did not understand, she turned onto Iberville Street.

'Moses Bar & Lounge,' the sign said. She turned in, not knowing for certain why she had the compelling sense that she had been directed there.

A tall, handsome woman with muscular shoulders smiled as she entered.

"Is Moses here?" Amanda asked lightly.

The hostess grinned and touched Amanda's arm. "'He was but we lost him in the bulrushes.'"

"Oh!" Amanda exclaimed. "You are making a joke. I'm not offended; it happens all the time."

"Come in, darling and I'll buy you a drink. Have you been here before? I don't recall seeing you."

Amanda viewed the cozy barroom when her eyes adjusted to the dim lighting. "Thank you, I'm sure," she said and let the hostess lead her to the lineup of barstools.

The barmaid set a cocktail napkin in front of her. "This girl is so beautiful she makes me glad I came to work today."

There were several tables near the tiny dance floor. Dreamy soft music wafted in the stale air. That was when Amanda saw the full-scale painting over the bar. She gasped.

“What is it?” the hostess asked. “What do you see?”

Amanda turned and looked at the door. She was ready to bolt but the hostess’s firm hand on her shoulder kept her seated. “It is Grandmere; her name is Noranda,” she said. Her voice shook with panic as she tried to control it.

“Another drink,” the hostess said to the barmaid. “We have a celebrity here.” Her tone was light, amused.

Amanda downed the second mixed drink and retched slightly as it burned her throat. “Who is going to explain this?” she asked.

The barmaid had summoned the owner. “My name is Faye Sienna.” It was a soft voice behind her.

Amanda faced the stunning woman and tried to smile. “I’m confused about the painting,” Amanda said pointing at the eerie backdrop behind the bar. “It is my grandmother sitting there looking at me.” She fidgeted under the speculative gaze of the owner. “To my knowledge, Grandmere has never been near a place like this.”

Faye smiled and moved the adjacent barstool aside. The mural did not depict a woman; only a peaceful scene from the river delta. She put one arm around Amanda’s waist, the other on the bar. “We need to talk,” she said with quiet conviction. “Apparently you are getting a special message from your grandmother. She led you here for a reason. Would you like to learn more?” She was role-playing, a game she enjoyed.

Amanda gulped. “Yes, of course, uh, Faye; thank you.” She squared her shoulders and faced the gorgeous woman standing close enough to transmit sensual vibes.

“And, in return for these secrets,” Faye said slowly, “will you explain why you’ve come here? We are delighted to meet you, of course. Is your grandmere still living?”

“Yes; she took my twin sister and I into her home many years ago.”

“Oh? Twin sister was it? You get more fascinating by the minute.” She moved one hand to Amanda’s knees and fondled the smooth flesh there. “And where is your twin sister now?”

“I do not know; there are conflicting stories. One is that my mom died giving birth. Another tale is that she ran off with my sister into the swamps. It is likely we will never learn the truth, mostly because it does not matter.”

Faye moved one hand higher on Amanda’s thigh. “There are many unexplained mysteries in the wetlands, I know.”

Amanda was growing impatient though fortified with the third drink from the bar. “Why are you feeling my legs?” she asked, making an effort to hide her surging hostility.

“Are you offended?” Faye asked and drew her fingers on the shapely thigh.

“No, only more confused.”

“Have you had sex with a woman?”

Amanda was startled. She pushed until she was standing. Everyone else, the hostess and barmaid plus some curious patrons, did not show interest. “No and this is not the time or the place, I suppose, to drape my body on your bed.”

Faye laughed, a light tinkle in her throat. "Moses Bar & Lounge is a gay hangout but of a special kind. You have been led by some power neither of us understand because of your concern for a transsexual in your life. The women you see here, including me, are now or may once have been guys."

"Omigod! No! You guessed my burden; remarkable." She glanced quickly to gather reassurance from the mural she earlier saw as her grandmother. It had disappeared.

"Naturally I don't know the full story but there has to be some reason you are here," Faye answered. She kept one hand on Amanda's thigh. "Are you interested in dressing up?"

Amanda swiftly took up the cocktail napkin off the bar and covered her face. She started to cry but, even with such an emotional display, only Faye was interested. "Let me tell you," she said finally. "My fiancé, Danny Guice, is in the hospital recovery ward. He was badly mangled in an auto wreck. His vocal chords were ruptured so he talks like a girl. Even after some restorative surgery, he won't be able to function as a man. He is permanently impotent and dysfunctional."

Faye sighed and touched Amanda's waist. She appeared complacent while only a moment before she was anxious to persuade Amanda to cooperate.

"I see. Does your Danny boy want to take up life as a girl? Pardon me, obviously I've misinterpreted why you are here. Maybe your fiancé is the one that needs to visit us. He already is a kindred soul from what you say."

“One of the hospital residents, a physician assigned to assist him, has mentioned that very option. Of course, Danny is firmly opposed.”

“Of course,” Faye repeated. “I understand. You came here to learn about our second world and the people that inhabit it.” She reached behind the bar and pulled out a catalogue. It was titled “*Suddenly Fem.*” It had a cover girl in a sexy pose and a website, www.crossdresser.com. “Bring this to Danny,” she said, forcing the catalogue into Amanda’s hands. “Talk to him about learning to live as a girl if he is to function at all. Tell me, have you two enjoyed each other sexually?”

Again, Amanda looked toward the door. “I’ve no experience about that. I have a very strict family home. Grandmere is from the ‘old school’ that girls are girls until they are wed. Really, Faye, you have been wonderful to put up with my histrionics. I apologize but I must run if I’m to get back in time.”

Faye stepped aside to let the distraught Amanda stand. When Amanda’s step faltered, she quickly grasped the girl’s shoulder to support her. “Here now, you better take it easy. You’ve only had a couple drinks.”

“I don’t have much tolerance to alcohol,” Amanda answered. “Cheap date, I suppose.”

Faye supported Amanda with one arm across her back. She spoke crisply to the barmaid. “Carafe of black coffee to the hospitality room.”

The small room a few steps from the end of the bar was used for counseling, business obligations and computer services. There was a large picture window so Faye could observe the lounge area uninterrupted.



“Here, darling girl,” Faye said, settling Amanda on the love seat that was angled in one corner of the office area. “Catch your breath and help me drink this strong coffee.”

Amanda sipped from the decorated mug and forced a smile. "I'm being a big baby, I know. I'll go as soon as my head stops spinning."

"We can chat for awhile. You are not only lovely in the everyday sense, you are what is known on the street as 'hot.' To tell me you've never had any experience is difficult to believe but a sheltered life would explain it. You seem so attached to Danny that I think there must be more to his story."

"There is," Amanda replied. "We were an item during school and after graduation. I consistently avoided sensual contact and we often argued about it. He said, since we are to be married, that I should be more, uh, giving. I couldn't do it."

Faye was fascinated. "All right, what's the rest of it?"

"You are quick," Amanda said and crossed her legs. She leaned forward to give the impression of confidentiality. "One night we had a big fight. Danny became very angry. He roared off, spun his wheels and sped down the road. He lost control of the car and smashed himself and the car in a wreck. I feel it would not have happened if I had allowed him some small liberty to encourage him. He admits it is not my fault but he still blames me."

Faye embraced the girl. Amanda sobbed quietly, her body shivered with the depth of feeling. She kissed Amanda on the forehead and smoothed her hair to one side of her face. "There there, pretty girl. From all you've told me, I firmly believe we have the answer to Danny's problem. If I'm right, you will no longer have to carry the guilt in your heart."

Amanda sniveled. "You are so nice; thank you. Tell me more about the attractive people here."

"As I said earlier, it's a different world for us. When you came in, the incident was not unusual. Pretty girl loose on the town looking for someone to eat her pussy. My behavior, as you learned, was to that end because you are not only charming but have a terrific body. This is one small corner of the world that has people dedicated to honesty in their relationships. Not always easy otherwise."

Amanda sat up and dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. "I admire honesty but your language borders on offensive. Of course I've heard of girls enjoying oral sex but to be so graphic bothers me."

Faye slipped one hand around Amanda's waist. "It's something you should consider in light of present circumstances. Would you object if Danny took your body 'all-the-way' just using his mouth?"

"Right; it's something I have to think about. When I show this cross-dressing catalogue to him, I shall mention that I am agreeable if he wants to be my lover."

Faye clapped her hands. "Good for you. If you just stick with him to help him adjust, it is very possible you can both live a comfortable life together since your love is obvious."

Amanda frowned. "Now I have to decide if I am going along with this because it is an obligation or if I really want him to satisfy his primal urges. Such a predicament!"

Faye went swiftly to her desk to answer a call. While speaking to a vendor she turned to admire the gorgeous Amanda sitting quietly so close and yet so far. When she put the phone down, she was adamant

that this marvelous girl would be far better off experiencing the art of cunnilingus. But, she knew full well, tough times are to be expected.

Amanda stood up and extended her hand. "Thank you so much for taking an interest in us," she said. "I am feeling better now. I want to learn more about all this." She waved her hand in the air to include the lounge and especially the people.

Faye smiled and stepped close to her. She caught Amanda's chin with the tip of her finger, tilted the girl's head slightly and kissed her tenderly on the lips.

"Darling, please come see me when you can. I've made you my secret mission in life."

Amanda chuckled and stopped at the bar on the way out. She offered to pay for the drinks but the busy barmaid just waved her on. She thanked her and, for the first time ever, cast a critical eye on the cute girl. 'Is she or isn't she,' was the question in her mind. 'Is he or isn't he?' she further considered.

V.

Noranda was standing in the kitchen doorway tapping her foot in anger. "Where have you been, young lady?"

Taken by surprise, Amanda brightened, "I left the hospital and went for a walk. Met some interesting people in New Orleans. I knew it is late, but I went back to see Danny anyhow. They wouldn't let me in; after hours they said."

"What did you do with these interesting people?"

"Just talked, mostly. A fine lady not much older than I am listened to my sad tale about Danny, the car wreck, the injuries and all. Her name is Faye Sienna. She runs a bar for people with alternative lifestyles."

Noranda raised one eyebrow. "I want to meet this lady because I have my suspicions. You are too beautiful to go running loose on the French Quarter streets."

"What suspicions? She was very nice to me."

"I've no doubt of that. Did you tell this snake charmer you are a 'nice' girl?"

Amanda acted shocked. "Grandmere! It isn't like that; well, perhaps some. She can help Danny adjust to his trauma by coaching him to live like a girl. Danny already has the high voice. Quite charming, actually. He will never be able to have sex like other men. That's what we talked about."

Noranda reached for her wrap, a hand knit fascinator. "We will discuss this further," she said tersely. "I'm going out."

Amanda stepped forward, hands on hips. "Where do you go in the middle of the night?"

Noranda paused and studied her granddaughter with a critical eye. "You asked how I knew Danny would recover. I did that with some magic my mother brought with her from Haiti. Now I am going to see to Danny's recovery which I hope will include him accepting his situation." She stared as if obsessed. "I think it is time for you to come with me. We can talk on the way."

Noranda held the pirogue steady while Amanda settled on the center seat. She dipped the oar in the black swamp water as she crossed the bayou to

Barataria Island. An eerie silence descended on them like the eye of a tropical storm.

She tied up the boat at the makeshift dock as by habit. "Come along, dear. Just a few steps from here to the temple."

Amanda was taken with a sudden fright. The mystery, the grove of cypress trees casting shadows and Noranda's obsessive attitude affected her. "What temple?" she asked.

Noranda spoke in a guttural whisper. "It is this way, dear. You will see. It is the Barataria Temple but for all I know it is haunted by Jean Lafitte and Dominic Yu. Not likely; don't be frightened. There is no threat."

Amanda stood in a small clearing vaguely outlined by the light of the moon. "Grandmere! They were blood-thirsty pirates."

Noranda flashed a wan smile. "The temple is over this way," she said. "True, they were pirates but when men of their fame and stature lose their blood, they become zombies."

"You are really scaring me now," Amanda said, trembling.

Noranda chuckled. "There is nothing to fear. I have been coming here for many years. I think it is time for you to get exposed to the influence of your ancestors."

Amanda followed her grandmother along a narrow path through a copse of brush and short trees. They went over a rickety bridge of rough hewn timbers. "If I have a legacy, I want to know about it. This is my day to learn about new adventurers."

Noranda whispered under her breath. "Which includes being seduced by a beautiful transvestite."

“What was that?”

“Oh, nothing. Here we are. Stand over there so you don’t break the light into a bunch of shadows we don’t need.”

The temple, Amanda could see, had seen better days. Several of the more narrow columns lay crisscrossed on the ground. Decaying vegetation left a stench in the air of which neither Noranda nor Amanda was aware. Several large timbers were supported by the standing columns. Amanda watched in growing horror as Noranda uncovered her hidden stash. She peered at the array of contents with a nervous tremor. When Noranda gasped in surprise, Amanda stepped back. “What is it, Grandmere?”

Noranda sat back on her heels. “In time you will learn about each of these charms and the magic spells. Incredible as it may seem, there is an addition to my fetish collection. Do you know this item?” She held up a torn and threadbare glove made for the left hand.

Amanda’s voice went up a decibel. “It’s Danny’s driving glove. I’d swear to it. How did it get here?” Goose bumps scattered on her naked arms and creased her skull. She watched as Noranda completed the sacred rites. The last motion was after a long pause while she sat staring at the *Eye Of The Lotus* amulet. She held the driving glove lightly in her hand and with a majestic gesture, set it on one side of the circle of charms. She sprinkled some herbs and the glove burst into blue and yellow flames like natural gas on the stove. “We must go now,” she said with a tired voice.

“Not soon enough for me,” Amanda said. “What happened? Why did you burn the glove? Was it like a sacrifice of some kind?”

Noranda smiled. "Sacrifices are not necessary. The glove, note it was from the left hand, helped us communicate, which we did until it was no longer needed."

"How so? Do the spirits understand Danny's trauma?"

"I can't answer that because I don't know. I called on the mystic powers to influence Danny's decision to make a life for him and you. The rest is up to you."

They clambered onto the narrow boat and Amanda sensed Noranda was hastily making an escape of some kind. "Me? That makes no sense. Danny wants sex and can't perform. I can't do anything about it."

As they strolled back on the path that skirted the bayou's edge, Noranda was pondering how to say what was on her mind. "I realize you think of me as a crazy old woman. However, the people you met at the Moses Bar know how to find satisfaction. It is up to you to investigate that. I would suggest you tell Danny what you have learned and how you feel. With the forces put in motion this very evening, he may grasp the straw of opportunity."

Amanda did not reply. Being a virgin the rest of her life was not in her plan.

#

Amanda disciplined her attitude before tugging open the hospital doors. She forced a smile on her face and stood next to Danny's bed as he lay sleeping. She considered what she had learned and tried to analyze her feelings for the injured fiancé. When his eyes flickered, she touched him on the cheek.

"You can't be Dangerous Dan and sleep all the time," she said lightly.

"Oh, hello; glad you came by. I read that catalogue, 'Suddenly Fem' that you gave me. It made me so angry I threw it across the room. Can you imagine me dressed up in such clothes? Oh, no, not me; that's what I thought."

Amanda's chin quivered. "Danny, I'm trying to help but nothing seems to do much good."

"You are wrong again. When you danced around the room to show me your body, it was an immense turn-on. Remembering you like that put things in perspective. Last night the orderly came in and I asked him to retrieve the catalogue as I'm a bit restricted here. I was overcome with a weird feeling. Putting aside all my attitudes and concentrating on you, I've decided I have no option but to cross-dress so I can be someone you would like."

Amanda approached him. She took his hand. "Danny; important! What time was it when you had this change of heart?"

"How do I know?" he asked, surly. "If you are that curious, look at the entry on my clipboard. The night orderly has to record when he was here."

Somewhat afraid to calculate the times, she realized Danny's revelation came at precisely the time Noranda burned the glove. She shook her head in wonder. "Dan, I met some people. A lady gave me that catalogue when I told her why I was so deeply disturbed."

His grin was sheepish. "When do I get to meet this lady?"

"I don't know. I'll find out. It appears you aren't going anywhere." She tried to affect an affable voice.

He reached beneath his pillow and brought out the catalogue. "I want to know more about all this," he said with conviction. "My big question is how these people survive with their pent-up sexual needs. Also, what will you think if you walk down the street holding hands with another girl?"

Amanda was encouraged. "We can learn together. Her name is Faye Sienna; she runs a bar in the French Quarter called Moses. The girls I met there are nice in the extreme. Faye told me some of them endured a restorative operation changing their gender from male to female. That's what you are. A potential girl and the more I think of it, the more I am intrigued. As for the sex, Faye says some are happy with oral sex."

Danny's eyes opened wide. "Of all the times I've tried to feel you, you never once told me you would like me to go down on you. Now what are you telling me?"

She blinked away some sincere tears. "There is much to decide. Most girls I know think only in terms of a family, diapers and not much sleep. It would take a man with a firm hand to get me into that situation. You are no longer such a man."

"You didn't answer my question. I would dearly love to feel your body explode under my touch. I've never felt otherwise about you."

Amanda moved her chair closer to the bed. Taking his hand, she fondled it with her thumb. "Would you forgive me for what happened if I let you do that?"

"Let me? Get serious! This isn't a one-way street. Do you want me to do it?"

She stifled a sob. "I don't know, Danny. Will you forgive me?"

He stared at her for a long time. "When I get over this sense of confusion, my attitude should change. Are you willing to try? Knowing I have sex with you in my future will make all this hardship easier to endure."

She kissed him on the lips and touched his neck below his ear. "I never noticed that about you before," she whispered.

"What, silly girl?"

"You have a sexy mouth."

#

"What did Danny say?" Noranda asked.

"He wants to try but it requires some progress in rehab. Are you going to the Barataria Temple tonight?"

Noranda brightened with a broad smile. "I wasn't planning on it but if you want to go, I'll show you the way again. Tell me what you are thinking."

"It is simple. I asked Danny precisely when he decided to consider the transsexual life. He told me to look on his chart. It was there, plain as day. The time was when you burned the driving glove. Grandmere, I take it all back; this is not mumbo-jumbo zombie magic. I do not need any stronger result to convince me. Now I want some help along the way. I believe you have led me to the answer."

Noranda embraced the vivacious girl. "The moon is not in the perfect arc right now but we can go. There is an issue there I want you to understand."

They continued to chat during dinner and when the evening shadows crept along the bayou trail, they headed for the boathouse.

Once in the temple, they sat on the stone bench and held hands. "There is a special magic here for people like us. Not everyone can communicate. It has to do with your outlook. As the number of visits here add up, you will begin to find some peace in your heart. Problems that once seemed immense will disappear or be resolved without effort."

Thus said, Noranda retrieved her legacy pouch and instructed Amanda on each charm, fetish or talisman. The *Eye Of The Lotus* shone brightly and winked in the moonlight. "It is important," Noranda said, "to understand where the power comes from." When the evening visit was over, Amanda felt completely exhausted while Noranda's step had a new bounce.

"It really is magic," Amanda said.

#

Amanda's head was full of girlish visions of romance. She looked forward to going to the Barataria Temple each evening. After several trips, Noranda left her to find her own way which was the tradition in the family.

"Are you ready to discuss Danny's transition with him?" Noranda asked.

It had been a week since she last visited the hospital though she telephoned several times a day. "Soon, Grandmere," she answered. "I have my studies to do but all I've learned thus far is how wrong I've been to shelter my life and future under a rock. Tell me about my twin sister. I've asked at the temple without result. Maybe there isn't any history to reveal."

They were sitting on the wide wrap-around porch overlooking the road that was like a loose ribbon skirting the Barataria swamp. "I have criticized myself for letting her go," Noranda answered. "You were both so adorable and formed a sisterly bond so easily. Her name is Daphne, Daphne Delphine."

Amanda sipped her coffee. She was pensive. "I shall ask for her this evening. Maybe I needed the name or, like the driving glove, something to communicate."

Noranda grinned. "You learn fast. I hope whatever you find will put the matter to rest. One issue is certain; Daphne is in your heart."

"If that is so, I only need my heart to get the attention of some deified ancestor."

Noranda finished in the kitchen and set fresh flowers on the dining room table. Glancing out the window she saw Amanda Delphine, the forlorn sister, walking steadfastly to the bayou trail. In that moment she saw herself when she was Amanda's age, all wrapped up in dreams and purpose.

At the temple, Amanda took out the legacy pouch and went through her usual litany of recognizing the mystical powers before discussing her most personal thoughts.

A cloud of tranquility descended on her as she knelt and fingered each of the fetish items. She praised Danny's progress in rehab and was thankful she was able to recognize the growing need to discuss all this with someone close who understood Danny's circumstances. She knew that 'someone' was Faye Sienna.

Finishing the visit, she carefully gathered together all the items which she called human reminders. Clos-

ing the pouch, she was startled to feel a new weight. Curious, and thinking she might have dropped something extra in the pouch, she looked again. It was a panic flash. Danny's driving glove was included in the collection. She knew at once her thoughts had been answered. She stood tall with her feet slightly parted and looked around the temple enclosure. The words that tumbled from her lips seemed inadequate to the moment but she took a deep breath and exhaled slowly as she said, "Don't stop."

There was an unseasonable breeze that night as she paddled across the choppy water. Her paddle seemed to have little effect so she let the boat drift downstream to the next landing. She knew there was ample space along the path to pull the pirogue home with the mooring rope. It was not to be. The wind shoved the boat back into the current and against the far shore, an area new to her.

She finally realized she was being asked to return to the Barataria Temple. After securing the boat, she retraced the shore line and found the familiar path.

Approaching the temple, she was surprised to come on a small group of members. The light was only from the quarter moon. Two tall men moved about in ungainly steps. The only sound was the breeze whistling through the trees.

She crept closer, not wishing to disturb the meeting. That was when she saw the girl standing near the entrance. When she recognized the girl, she caught her breath, stared incredulously and fainted. The mystic of the night had presented her clone, correct to the last detail: She believed it was she herself.

She regained consciousness to find her pirogue properly moored. She told herself it was a dream or

hallucination but the message had been clear. She had been inducted into the society accompanied by the souls of the undead. Instead of being terrified at the significance, she was elated because the peace of the ages had accepted her. One unknown task remained; she knew there would be a trial of sorts, the initiation.

She ran with abandon up the well-worn path. Her skirts flopped on her naked thighs. "Grandmere! You will never believe what happened."

#

Amanda rushed along the hospital corridor to Danny's room. Her heart dropped in disappointment. He was not there. She inquired at the nurse's station to learn Danny was in rehab and should be returned to his room in an hour. She thanked the nurse and walked down Tulane Avenue until she crossed Canal Street. Moses Bar & Lounge was her direct destination.

She hesitated at the door. The dim lighting bewildered her. The hostess came out of the shadows. "Nice to see you again," she said sweetly. "Amanda, isn't it?"

"Yes, hello. I was at the hospital to see my fiancé but he is not available right now." She stepped inside as the room's features became visible.

The hostess smiled. "You better get out of the light streaming from outside. It is directly behind you and everyone in the room can see your stunning figure."

Amanda blushed. "Right, thanks. I don't want to start a riot."

They both laughed. "If there is anything I enjoy in a country girl, it is self-confidence."

Amanda went to the bar and plunked her purse down. "No free drinks for me; I'll pay. Last time I was here, you gals got me smashed. Well, almost."

Amanda sipped her mixed drink. She wore a smart collegiate cardigan, mini-skirt and some feathers woven into her hair. Her smile was bright and charming as she looked around. Her search caught the cute barmaid's attention.

"Last time I looked, Faye was hiding in the hospital room. Shall I announce you?"

Amanda grabbed her purse in one hand and her drink in the other. "No, I'll surprise her."

The girl giggled. "Believe me, there is very little that will surprise our intrepid leader."

She stood in the doorway and, causing no distraction, deliberately admired the handsome business owner. Faye wore a matching vest and skirt, spike heels and a white starched blouse with lace ruffles at the throat.

Faye finally looked up to see the marvelous girl with a wide grin on her face watching her intently. "Amanda. Wonderful. Come in."

"You aren't angry because I didn't keep in touch like I promised?"

They embraced and Faye held the hug longer than proper. Their breasts meshed which electrified them both.

"You were full of whisky; drunks promise all sorts of things." Faye laughed and guided Amanda to the love seat in the corner. "Bring me up to date. How is, uh, Danny boy? Did I get the name right?"

Amanda let her body relax into Faye's. "You seldom miss on anything. Danny is in rehab today. I came here so you wouldn't forget me."

"Oh, and the catalogue; what did he say about that?"

Amanda grinned happily. She was aware of Faye's hand fondling her knees. "He had a few bad moments at first which, I believe, you predicted. After some persuasion which included a hospital room strip show of sorts, he now tells me he wants to learn more."

"That surprises me," Faye answered. "I can wager the strip show with you as the star was very influential."

"He likes my figure. We briefly discussed what I later learned is called cunnilingus. It was a lot closer than he had ever been with me and now, with his extended injuries, he understood I wanted to encourage him."

Faye moved one hand higher on Amanda's leg. "Wonderful! What did you have in mind?"

"To enlist you to give him a personal interview. I told him you were knowledgeable as well as attractive. In the full view, he is interested." She opened her purse and took out a brief folder of snapshots. "This is my guy," she said handing the pictures to Faye. "Just ignore the photo of me in my bathing suit."

"Hard to miss that." Faye leaned forward and planted a firm, erotic kiss on Amanda's lips. "Oh, darling girl," she whispered. "How long can you stay in the city? We need to get better acquainted."

"My time is my own. I told Grandmere I would look for you. I also told her about Danny accepting the

cross-dressing. There is more but it is ancient history already.”

Faye’s stared at Amanda’s lips. “I look forward to hearing the entire story.”

With the next kiss, Amanda moved one hand to Faye’s shoulder. She sighed happily. “I’m still the naïve backwoods girl from Bayou Teche. I’ve thought of little else than some of the things you suggested when we first met.”

“Hmm, since Danny can’t come here yet, we might meet in his hospital social room, I guess. Really, honey, this is awkward. I’ve conducted many counseling sessions but usually in a more intimate atmosphere. If I’m not comfortable in my surroundings, my message can easily go astray. What do you think?”

Amanda relaxed back and parted her knees a few inches. “Since Danny is agreeable, we are not in an intervention here. Therefore, I see nothing urgent. Can we just let time take its course like the Bayou Teche?”

Faye kissed her again and moved one hand inside her cardigan to mold her fingers to Amanda’s breast. “You are delightful. Do you mind my kisses and caresses?”

Amanda squirmed as Faye’s hand moved higher onto her thigh. “Just recently I went over all this in my mind and speaking to an imaginary suitor, I said ‘don’t stop.’ Don’t think of me as a country tart trying to take Bourbon Street by storm. Not my style.”

Faye sighed and relaxed back. “Bourbon Street has weathered many a storm, not one of which was as beautiful as you. Have you had something to eat? Let’s go out.”

“Well, certainly, if you wish. I have some money.”

Faye smiled. "Your grandmother provides for her li'l darling."

They settled on a tasty dinner at Broussard's and went on a short walk toward Jackson Square. "This is all so interesting," Amanda gushed. "You take such good care of me."

Faye pointed to a block long row of apartments facing a tidy park. "I have a studio apartment here. Would you like to see it?"

"Lead on," Amanda said. There was no improper thought in her head. She had convinced herself that whatever the night might bring added experience to her eventual goal in assisting her fiancé.

In the apartment, Faye served them both an aperitif and they went out onto the narrow balcony to view the early evening revelers. "Did you think of what your plans might be if I refused to help Danny with the transition?"

Amanda was taken aback. "Well, no; I did not. Human assumption is hardly redemption, am I right? What are you suggesting?"

"Your cooperation; that should be payment in kind."

"Then you have it. Are you going to tell me what I'm to do?"

"Yes but first you have to understand the underlying physical changes that take place in a transgender adjustment. It isn't just the daily living arrangement but the satisfying of special needs that often come up out of the blue."

Amanda was perplexed but not alarmed. She shivered slightly in the night air. Faye was quick to cover

them both with a downy blanket. "You better explain that," she said.

Faye soon had her hand beneath the blanket, caressing Amanda's thighs. "I'd like to enlighten you. You have to expand your knowledge if you are going to please me." They kissed again and Amanda dutifully parted her lips to allow Faye's tongue to explore. "If you are chilled, we can go inside. It sometimes gets cool in the evening. The damp air, perhaps."

"I like it here," Amanda replied. She knew she was delaying Faye's advances.

Faye moved her hand onto Amanda's mons and pressed. It was a lusty suggestion and Amanda sighed. "Do you give yourself a finger wave?"

"You mean? Uh, yes, with one hand but only recently."

"What do you think of when you excite yourself?"

Amanda blushed. "For true? All right; I think of the way you kissed me just now. It doesn't always send me over the edge but I can feel the tickle in secret places. Why?"

Faye took Amanda's hand and pressed it to her breast. "Feel me," she said in a low voice registering her growing passion. "Do you like doing that?"

Amanda nodded her head 'yes.' "You are the most exciting woman I've ever met."

"Are you distressed that Danny will never be a man for you? Have you told him what he could do about it?"

"Yes but not in detail because I didn't know that much. He wants anything of me he can get. I told him I think he has a sexy mouth. He liked that."

“And do you like my mouth, hot little Amanda?”

“Yes, of course. I told you that.” Her tone suggested impatience.

Faye kissed her again and let her tongue linger on Amanda’s lips, then her smooth neck and shoulders. “Do you know I want to go down on you?”

“I’ve never had that before,” Amanda said with wide-eyed innocence.

Faye stared fully into Amanda’s eyes. “After tonight you won’t be able to say that. Are you afraid?”

“No; I thought you might say or do something toward that end. At first I was uncomfortable not knowing precisely what to expect. No, not afraid.”

“Now to our agreement of cooperation. Are you ready for the next step?”

Amanda was startled because the ideas and the emotions were getting confused. “Yes; I agree to cooperate. What’s next?”

Faye kissed her again, long and tender, gently. “I want your mouth, Amanda.”

“Oh, you mean me? Yes, you do.” She pointed her finger at Faye and for the first time saw the lust shaping the older girl’s face. “Please be patient with me.”

“I promise. Come on; let’s go in before you take a chill. If truth be known, I’m hot enough to warm us both.”

Amanda giggled and followed Faye into the combination den and bedroom. “How elegant,” she said and sank back as Faye embraced her from behind. She shivered with joy when Faye’s hand caressed her firm buns.

“Give me your hand,” Faye said and forced Amanda’s hand onto her crotch. Still in the back embrace, she felt Amanda making an effort to explore her. Then Amanda stopped.

“What? Faye, I don’t understand this.”

“It’s called an erection, darling. I’m not a girl but will be soon.”

“Oh my god, Faye. Why didn’t you tell me? Am I to squander my virginity on a chic bar owner?”

Faye turned her around to face her but kept pushing the young girl’s hand onto the hard tool. “I want you to put it in your pretty mouth.”

“So this is the initiation,” Amanda said with conviction.

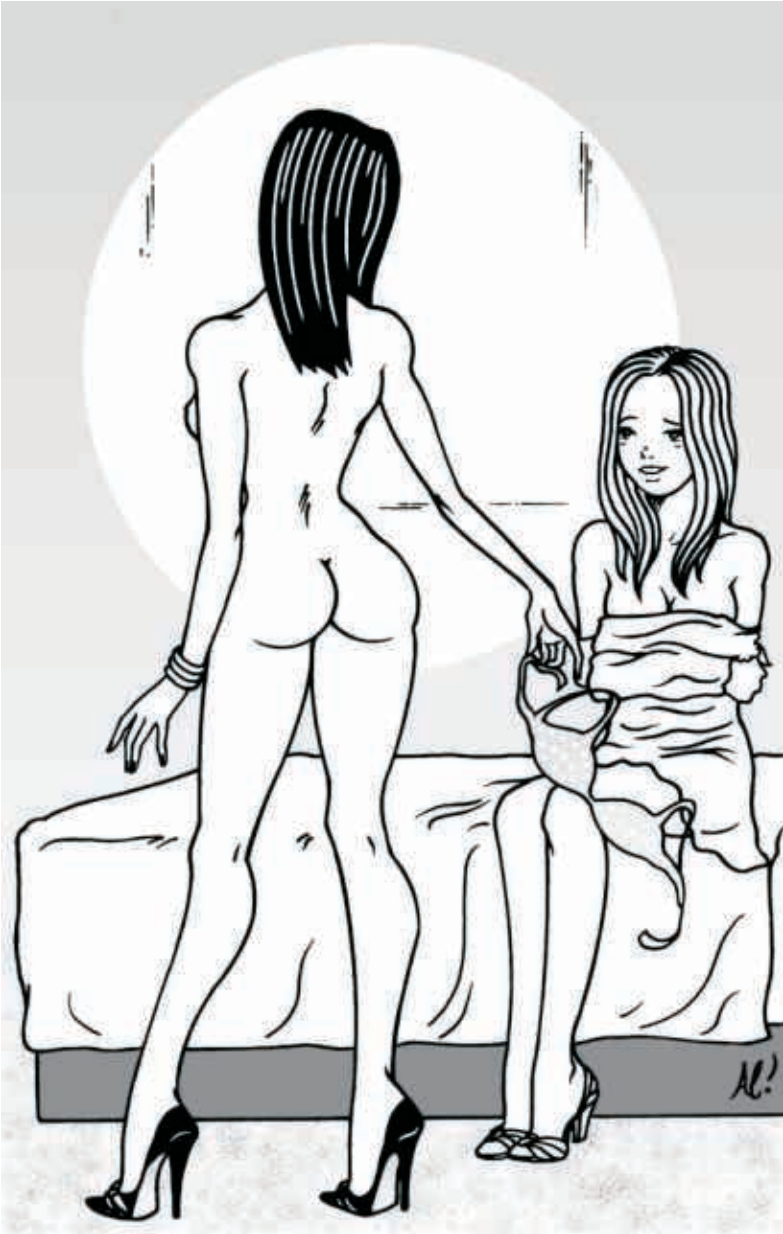
Faye smiled. “Initiation? Explain that.”

“I will one day when you come out to the bayou with me. It’s too long a story now. I wondered what I would be asked to do. Now that you’ve told me, I actually feel relieved.”

“There are some deeds that do not need a reason. You don’t have to take me all the way if you are opposed. Just seeing your lips in action will be quite enough.” Faye threw a small pillow between Amanda’s feet and motioned to her. “On your knees, country wench,” she said and pressed down with both hands on the girl’s shoulders.

Amanda gulped. ‘I should be terrified but I’m not,’ she thought when her knees hit the pillow. ‘It is an act Danny wanted me to do and now, after all the turmoil, I am about to do it.’ She worked her nubile fingers until Faye’s skirt fell to the floor bunched around her feet.

“Don’t push, I’ll lick you,” she said with a lusty tremor in her voice.



Faye lost her balance and fell backward onto the bed. Amanda moved with her. The sight of Amanda's tongue licking the sides of her rigid cock was a study in eroticism. "Go, Amanda," she said with pent-up breath. "You can do it; you know you want it in your mouth. It's an act you need to do. This is not the end but the beginning of a long career doing exactly, oh-yes, what you are gulping now." When she sensed Amanda growing tired, she withdrew and began undressing the amazed girl.

Amanda sat on the edge of the bed, her feet firmly on the carpet. She had a dazed look in her eyes and her shoulders drooped. "I feel used," she said in a low voice.

Faye removed Amanda's blouse and bra. "Don't be despondent, darling," Faye said as she set the clothes on a night table. She moved both hands onto the firm, peaked breasts until Amanda looked up with pleading eyes.

"How you lasted this long without getting the sex your body deserves, I can only credit to your grandmother's strict care." She undressed slowly with deliberate sensual movements until finally the two were lovers stretched out on the bed. "Take this with your sweet lips," she said forcing Amanda's face against her torso.

Amanda licked and fondled with her tongue. "How can you have such well-developed breasts and be a guy?"

Faye chuckled. "It's part of the regimen. I'll be able to explain it all when we have less demands on our time."

Amanda was slowly getting control, retreating from the edge of panic. "Are all the pretty girls at your bar guys?"

"No, darling. Some completely feminine girls hang out there hoping to get some transvestite interested in going down on them. Others are like me; in the physical void awaiting the transgender operation. It is very expensive."

"I'm beginning to get the picture," Amanda said and moved to the other breast.

"Once in awhile we have a party to welcome home a transsexual that was a guy and has survived the operation for gender reassignment. Our hostess is very happy with her body. She was once a very unhappy guy."

"I see. And the barmaid? She is cute."

"Loves getting head. Actually, she will tell you, lesbians are best but she does need the job with us."

"It goes on and on, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does and after tonight when some transgender you fancy approaches you, your tummy will turn to jelly. Let me know if I'm wrong." They kissed again and Faye instructed Amanda in the message given when the lower lip is licked, then the upper. "Later, when you open your eyes to the passion your body exudes, you will see my full head of hair between your pretty legs as you bounce to the rhythm of sex gone wild."

"Why am I not turned on like I was a couple hours ago?"

Faye caressed Amanda's sleek figure. "Too much, too soon, I suspect. When we started you said, 'don't stop' and as you saw, I did not stop."

"I'm not arguing. I'm overwhelmed by you. Who can blame me? Pretty girl, sexy look, confident, firm lips and tongue, and the ultimate suggestion that you can make me come with your lips and tongue."

"That's it precisely," Faye said. "Come here, little sexpot. Your time has arrived."

VI.

Amanda arrived home bubbling with enthusiasm over her new-found erotic adventure. There was a note from Noranda hanging on the refrigerator door. "Come to Baratara Temple; festival of souls tonight." She was perplexed and wondered at her grandmother's reference to a festival which was news to her. Reading further, "There is a full-length robe on your bed. Don't wear anything bulky beneath it that will change your appearance."

Amanda shrugged her shoulders, showered and, wearing just panties and bra, put on the robe. It was white with a hood and extended to brush the instep of her feet when she walked. With that, she put on her open-toe sandals, clamped her hair in a bun and tugged the hood into place. 'Sure I am,' she thought casually, 'that this looks like I'm going to a KKK meeting. Hope not.'

In the pirogue, she paddled across the Bayou Teche tributary with practiced élan. She had to pull the robe up to be able to navigate easily. Her white naked legs glistened in the humidity.

She took the familiar path to the temple area and, on approaching, saw a dozen members in the same style white robes. Drums beyond the enclosure were beating an even tempo. She was unable to identify which one was Noranda. They were in two small circles standing with their hands clasped in front of them. When Amanda entered through the temple gate, the nearest circle shuffled about to include her. She stood holding her hands to copy the others. A stack of wooden pegs which could possibly be icons of some kind were ready for lighting to illuminate them in the gathering dusk with a tidy bonfire.

The temple was a rough copy of the classical colonnaded garden with a narrow row of individual benches, theater style. Walls flanked on either side of the small dais were adorned with multi-colored fetishes, each with a unique drawing or attachment that held some mystical meaning Amanda was yet to learn. When the voodoo priest, known as the 'houngan' stepped onto the small stage, the drums immediately ceased, leaving an eerie silence in the swampy enclave.

Amanda watched in fascination as the priest opened his personal cache of fetishes and charms. He raised his arms and the entire group clothed in white turned to face him. They formed six small lines, two or three at a time, with hands on the waist of the 'spirit' in front of them, samba style. Being second in her line, Amanda felt the warm hands at her waist and when the robed member moved against her from behind, she felt the firm breasts on her back. A brief thrill coursed through her but she struggled to keep her place in line. With the drums still silent, the priest turned his back on the group and opened a heavy curtain to a panorama of the small adjacent area adorned with decorations, a few flickering lanterns and a larger stack of

wood ready for the torch. She saw movement to one side as her first sight of a zombie, the living dead, moved toward the center of the field. Her grandmother had informed her of what to expect. She might have been frightened but was so caught up in the increasing foray of feeling that she was exhilarated. The hands of the woman who once stood behind her were removed and the entire group, as if of one mind, began to sway and chant. She went along as best she could, like a child in an unfamiliar community sing.

The zombie moved with stealth, barely raising one foot to meet the next step. His eyes were turned aside, glassy, and a short crop of hair dusted his brow. Behind him, as the temple members watched, several more zombies appeared walking toward the growing bonfire. Everyone was rigid, awaiting the outcome of the ceremony. Amanda had no knowledge of any of the routines.

Amanda stood transfixed, amazed at the ritual as the priest went about his preparations with routine efficiency. He concocted a puffer-fish-based powder and worked it gingerly into a coarse paste. The paste was then spread on an unleavened slice of bread ready for serving.

Two robed members of the group moved on Amanda from each side. She was alert but felt no threat. They escorted her to the priest's table. The drums started up again but with a different tempo. She looked frantically around for Noranda but couldn't identify her. Members had their faces shadowed by the hood.

The priest offered her one of the treated crackers but she recoiled, not being certain what was expected of her. The strong arms enveloped her and she was

sternly directed to take the cracker laced with puffer-fish powder. She stared into the priest's eyes but could not read his stiff demeanor. He leaned forward, touched her lips with his finger and, saying nothing, pressed until she took the deliriant into her mouth.

Initially, a feeling of serenity came over her. After that, she sank into confusion, in and out of consciousness, trembling and assailed by the spectrum of color perceptions. She awoke hours later, blinked and tried to sit up. Noranda was at her side stroking her head with gentle caresses.

Her robe had been torn in several places but the panties and bra were untouched. "Can you hear me?" Noranda asked. "Nod your head."

"Oh, Grandmere; I'm all right, I think." She looked around. "Where did everyone go?"

Noranda smiled. "They danced and shared the left-over hallucinogen. Lots of partying while you were only semi-conscious. The initiation is over."

"That was the initiation?" Amanda asked with wide eyes filled with wonder. "I only remember feeling sort of numb, if that makes sense." She considered what to say next. "I made an error, Grandmere; I thought my recent adventures in the French Quarter with my friend were the initiation. It was not what I expected but, then, neither was this. I'm glad everyone had a party. It makes it for them, I suppose."

"I was with you all the time. Some curiosity seekers lifted your robe or took some swaths as souvenirs. You are very popular."

Amanda tried to get up and dropped back down. "I think I have a hangover; everything is turning and making me dizzy."

She patted the young girl's hand. "It will soon be better; don't worry. I'll tow your pirogue with the rope from mine. Ready?"

"Yes, I want to tell you about my experience at Moses Bar."

Safely home, Amanda had double helpings of shrimp gumbo and a bowl of jambalaya. Noranda looked on in silence, knowing that the hallucinogenic event was the cause of increased appetite. She smiled benignly as Amanda went over her sexual escapade.

Amanda omitted some of the graphic details but Noranda was able to fill in the missing parts.

"Did she go down on you? Is that why you went with her to her apartment?"

Amanda blushed slightly. "Yes; looking back on it, I had Danny Guice in mind all the while. I was afraid I would turn cold on Danny but I learned I liked oral sex."

"Then it is up to Danny. Do you think he will be satisfied with that? Imagine the mental anguish nagging him now."

Amanda winked back a sincere tear. "Yes but I'm encouraged by his positive outlook."

"If you spend your life with him, and if you like the sexual extreme, how do you feel about his inability to give you babies?"

"I've thought that over and want to ask the resident that has been so nice about all this. Maybe there are semen deposits that can be injected, I think."

Noranda sighed. "The doctor will know after a consult with the surgeon, I imagine. Did you go down on your lady friend?"

Amanda squirmed in her chair. "No; by the time she finished with me, I was still on an orgasm high. I didn't think about it until afterward."

Noranda had a stern, serious, look on her face. "Do you want to do that? I'm not prying, dear. It seems to me you might be bisexual. If you learn that early on, life will be less confusing for you."

Amanda helped clear the dishes from the table. "Yes, I need to know that, don't I?"

"Sincere love is good," Noranda answered with a final note of truth.

#

Danny was sitting up in bed when Amanda came in. He smiled and they embraced. "I can get out of bed now," he said happily. "Well, I wouldn't do that if you are in the bed with me."

"You are awful. Just joking. What have you learned? Will you eventually be able to get around all right, go to work and like that?"

"I'm encouraged. Do you still want us to be married? The resident assigned to my case brought in a counselor in transgender issues. We had a long talk. I feel better about being a girl now, not that I really have any choice."

"Do you still blame me for wrecking your body and your car?"

"I was being stupid, grasping at straws like I was doing. Now I know you might forgive me. You had a right to what happened that night. I didn't want to face it. I'm better now." He kissed her again and fondled

her breasts. "I'm ready to learn new sex issues. It won't be any good without you."

Amanda grinned happily. "Remember, I told you about my new friend, Faye Sienna. She has agreed to help you but wants to wait until you are able to visit at her place rather than come here. That should give you some incentive."

He reached for her and pulled her closer. "You are all the encouragement I need." He cupped her breasts and considered her body with longing when she raised her skirt to show her figure.

"I talked to the resident physician about getting you out of here to see about some alternate clothing. He seemed pleased."

"I know what he's pleased about, your looks. I'm looking forward to being your guy. Can you live with satisfaction with oral sex until I investigate some other methods?"

"Faye Sienna was talking about 'packing' but I didn't get it all. She seems to have the answers to help you adjust."

"Great; when can we go?"

"I'll talk to her and we can make an appointment."

He grinned, sheepish in the knowledge he was on the cusp of a new sex life.

#

Early one evening, Amanda stepped into Moses Bar & Lounge after a tiring day helping Danny in rehab. She was pleased with his efforts and encouraged that she could see his release soon.

“Ah, here you are,” Faye said with a welcoming smile. “How is the patient?”

“We should be here with you any day now. I am proud of him.”

Faye embraced Amanda and tugged her into the small office. “I have good news for you,” she began with a joyful bounce on the balls of her feet. “One of our tenants around the corner on Chartres Street turned in his key. You can have a convenient pad to go along with the extended time you are spending with Danny. What do you think?”

Amanda sat on the cozy love seat. She crossed her legs. “I don’t know, Faye; we have some money left from the settlement. We were saving for his adjustment. We shouldn’t go into the added expense right now.”

Faye frowned. “Did I misunderstand? I thought the trip would be too tiresome when he becomes an out-patient. Would you like to see it?”

“Well, yes; sure. I don’t want to be disagreeable. I didn’t think it through.”

They walked hand-in-hand to the patio garden studio apartment. “This should be comfortable for two people. See what you think.”

Amanda spun around on her heels and squealed. “How quaint it is. I love it. It has to be more than we can afford even without the saving from not having to run back and forth from the bayou.”

Faye put one arm around Amanda’s waist. “It is always money, isn’t it? Well, I am willing to make you an offer. If you will work for us at the bar on a part-time basis, we can apply what you earn to the expense here. What do you say?”

Amanda jumped and clapped her hands. "Faye, this is wonderful. I did not know you had a job to offer me."

Faye waited patiently, looking out the front windows at the small garden of flowers with a gurgling fountain. "Look it over, sweetie; I think we can furnish what you may need in the way of linens and kitchen stuff."

Amanda came up from behind Faye and wrapped her arms around the taller girl. She pulled her back against her until their bodies met. "When do I go to work?"

Faye chuckled. In one swift move, she captured Amanda for a tender, searching kiss. "I expect you to be grateful for the opportunity. I know you are carrying some baggage with your fiancé laid up like he is. I admire your courage."

Amanda nodded and momentarily wondered why she enjoyed Faye's kisses so much more than when compared to Danny's coarse masculine efforts. "Yes, it looks like I owe you one," she said after a moment of thought. "You want us to be intimate here, don't you? Eventually, Danny and I will be keeping house like old married folks. You do realize this?"

"I've not made a secret of the attraction I feel for you. I'm certain I'm not alone but just happen to be in a place to take advantage. Can we seal our agreement?"

"Of course; I'll not refuse you. Not after all you have done for me." She accepted another kiss and parted her lips to allow Faye's tongue to explore. "Um, how nice," she whispered almost out of breath. "What will be my job at the bar?"

"I talked all this over with the other girls. They are unanimous in allowing you to share their tips. To begin, you'll just have to help with the hundred little chores; washing glasses, waiting on tables, like that."

Amanda's thoughts went to the cute barmaid and the aggressive hostess. "You told me some time ago the reason your barmaid enjoyed working there. Am I included in the retinue?"

They sat on the wide sofa. Faye kissed her again. "Yes, you are lovely."

Amanda blinked. I am aware you expect me to cooperate. No surprise, actually but I'm a bit annoyed you are taking advantage of me knowing the emotional strain I'm under."

Faye slipped one hand beneath Amanda's light jacket and fondled her breasts. "There is something in my experience that tells me you were flailing about like a beached whale looking for any escape from the terrors of your mind. How much of that goes back to the bayou country? You said you would take me there one day. What would I see?"

"You are so comfortable in the little niche in your life: the transgender goal, pretty girls coming and going, all of it. I come from a completely different culture even though it is not all that great a distance away. You surmised correctly I would fall for your sexual needs especially giving you enough head to encourage you. It took some adjusting on my part but I'm OK with doing it now. As for going down on the girls in your place, it's new to me."

"Perhaps just as novel a change as I might find entering your world of mystery."

Amanda disciplined herself. "Of that you can be certain. I will not go back on my offer just as you don't expect me to go back on your plan however bizarre. Each of us will learn as time goes on. Do those girls think I am a cruising lesbian?"

Faye giggled. "No, darling. I explained it all to them but your personality and looks trumped the game. Without going into detail, I merely said I believed you could be seduced."

"I guess that is the truth. I'm guessing the gender doesn't matter once you get me on my knees for your pleasure. I'm learning, not arguing."

Faye relaxed. She took Amanda's hand and pressed it against the raging erection. "We understand each other," she said and moved the young girl's fingers up and down. "You came a heavy burst when I licked and lapped the way to your lustful heart. I'll leave the present situation to your discretion. If you agree to share this place with Danny, expect to do what he wants without regard to any indignity. You shouldn't object to spreading your pretty legs so a girl that fancies you can find delight. Am I correct?"

"All I can do is promise to try. It would be different with strangers that wander in for the happy hour. I like the girls you employ."

Faye flushed with desire. Her lips were dry so she ran her tongue along the fine lines. "You did something the day we were at the apartment that resounds in my memory like winning a cherished childish game. While you worked with your clever fingers to undo my slacks, you had the most adorable, concentrated look on your face. Really, honey; you would look like that cracking the safe at Fort Knox."

Amanda giggled. "I shall try again if it pleased you so much." She tugged at the zipper and soon had Faye's hard cock in her hand. "Speaking of mysteries, how can you have such beautiful breasts? The male apparatus and female form don't go together in my view."

"I have been on a regimen of drugs and hormones for several months. The breasts were sore at first. Now I just want to see you toy with my nipples with your cute mouth."

Amanda dutifully unbuttoned Faye's lace blouse and worked to free the firm breasts. She kept stimulating her throbbing cock while she worked her tongue for the boss's pleasure. "Why is it called a blow job? Gross depiction when considering the satisfaction."

Faye grinned. "Go to the archives in out-of-print books from the Victorian age and you will find references. Understandably, the act was once known as 'Be-low job' which goes more to location. Now it is shortened to 'blow job.'"

Walking back to the bar, Amanda was overtaken with a feeling of complete fatigue. She knew it was the pressure, the burden, more than the emotion involved in pleasing the discerning lady.

"He is here!" the hostess said and pointed to the small group at several tables they had pushed together.

Amanda's heart was in her throat. "Oh, how wonderful! Come meet our new leader lady. Faye, this is Danny Guice."

VIII.

"Noranda, I'm home," Amanda called out as she came in off the porch. She found her grandmother at the kitchen table cleaning shrimp to add to the gumbo for dinner.

Noranda nodded and glanced at the vivacious granddaughter. "Do you have to be so noisy?" she asked in a tone meant to be amusing. "You better bring me up on the news. Some of it I can see in the new maturity in your eyes."

"Are we going to the Barataria Temple tonight? I have some new life issues to air for the mystics. Last time I was there, the entire colony of undead made sport of my half-naked body."

Noranda shook the colander and set the shrimp on the side board. She rolled up the newspaper and smiled in pleasure as Amanda took out the husks and tails. The back door slammed. Noranda shuddered. 'A little short on lessons from childhood,' she thought.

After a spicy dinner of gumbo and rice, they sat on the wide porch as the sunset sent shadows from the pines.

Amanda carefully related how pleased she was with Danny's progress, the impromptu visit to Moses Bar and Lounge, and the rousing welcome he relished so much. She purposefully omitted the temporary studio in the French Quarter as well as the sexual advances.

Danny's wardrobe, mostly from Goodwill or the Salvation Army, was hand off lady's clothes. Danny enthusiastically learned to walk in mini-heels and, at Amanda's urging, allowed her to shave his legs. That

was when she observed the physical damage Danny would have to live with for the rest of his life. She was momentarily distraught when she remembered Faye's handy secret, the dildo that appeared so exact in every way.

She explained to Noranda the extent of his genital injuries as well as the higher pitched voice. They discussed the outlook for a 'normal' social life under the circumstances and Noranda correctly questioned Amanda's decision to honor her bond with Danny without the conjugal love she might have expected before the accident.

There were issues to consider which Amanda weighed as they trudged down the bayou path to the boathouse. Once across the narrow water, Amanda secured the pirogue and they went to the temple. It was deserted which pleased them both. Noranda knelt between two high decorated urns and, with her eyes tightly closed, mumbled some incantations she had learned from the elders.

Amanda searched for Danny's glove; it was missing. Remembering her last trip into Noranda's fetish pouch, she was confused, knowing the glove had been there when she closed it for storage. She began to say something to Noranda about it but did not interrupt.

As Amanda was arranging the content of the fetish collection, she heard a rustle in the foliage. The priest emerged and stood to one side, hands folded in front of him. He looked very severe at the pouch collection spread out.

Amanda began the small fire and set the pewter cup on the rack for warming.

“You are welcome here, daughter,” the priest said in a soft voice. “Was there some reason for your impromptu visit? We know your heart carries a heavy burden.” He stood tall next to her while she knelt to make ready her ceremony. She looked up when she felt his hand on her head. “At your initiation celebration, I had the pleasure of viewing your ripe body. Is there a violation you wish to discuss?”

She glanced at her grandmother who sat quietly as if in a trance of some kind. Her lips were moving but Amanda heard no voice.

“Thank you for the compliment, Vodun,” she said expressing high respect for the priest. She did not know his real name. “There is no violation but I’m deeply involved in caring for Danny Guice since he wrecked his car.”

The priest viewed the contents of their family stash with a look of approval. “So that’s the famous talisman known as the *Eye Of The Lotus*. It has power and influence in that glow.” He turned without comment and disappeared down a narrow path. Amanda continued with her ritual, going over each and every nuance of meaning in her recent past. Next she implored the mystic powers present there for some sign or guidance to help her. She firmly believed the invocation of which she was the subject would make her destiny known.

After completing her symbolic ablutions, Amanda accompanied Noranda to the boat landing.

“Are you better now?” Noranda asked. “What did Vodun say? It has to be important if he spoke to you. In all our years, he has never as much as looked at me. You are beautiful but even that doesn’t usually budge him from his daily routine.”

Amanda frowned in thought. "It's not what he said," she considered. "It was how he looked at me. He was searching for some issue, whatever, and left after admiring the *Eye Of The Lotus*. That's a guess. He said our amulet had power in some way."

Noranda waited until Amanda was settled on the boat. Next she shoved it and clambered aboard. Midway to their dock, Noranda lifted her paddle from the water and laid it carefully across the sides. "What has happened to cause you such an upset heart? What did you go to the temple to resolve?"

Amanda hesitated. "Sex," she answered firmly. "I had sex."

"Why is that such a burden? If any issue at all, you might have coped with such a life event a long time ago. I know it was not Danny Guice. Is it a secret?"

Amanda felt trapped. In the center of the placid bayou, there was no escape. "Not a guy, a woman," she blurted out.

Noranda nodded, grasped the paddle and continued across without comment. Nothing more was said.

#

Next day, Danny was out of bed, dressed and waiting for her as he lounged in the lobby thumbing through a magazine.

She came in wearing her pleated skirt, short like a cheerleader, pumps and bulky blouse. They embraced and Danny held her close.

She relaxed her hips against him. "Is this all right? I don't want to hurt you."

He grinned and moved one hand over the curve of her derriere. "It feels good. No pain, only inspiration. I have to be back here in a couple hours for my rehab session. Can we go to the bar? Bring money, I'm thirsty."

Walking past the nurse's station arm-in-arm caused a stir in the nurses assembled there. Danny wore makeup including eye shadow, a full-length colorful skirt decorated with blossoms and long-sleeved blouse with lace scallops around the neck.

At Moses Bar & Lounge, they settled on a small table near the dance floor. The hostess called their arrival to the attention of all the employees. She grinned and touched Danny's head.

"Why did you bring this girl to work so late? She just made it in time to leave for lunch," the hostess said.

Danny chuckled and sipped the tall rum collins. "I planned the whole scene," he answered. He looked askance at Amanda. "Why all the fuss? I've been here before."

The barmaid approached. "We had a legit ancestor of zombie lore in here around noon. He told us a lock of Amanda's hair brings good luck. Prepare to donate," she said laughing.

Danny was possessive. "Wait a second. Amanda is no zombie. What a ridiculous thought. We both grew up with rumors that some far-out souls are wandering in the swamps, like not alive and not dead. We can't substantiate that."

Amanda remained silent, thinking that maybe someone could read her mind. She shuddered, shook off the spooky feeling and forced a smile. "Next time

you get a zombie lover in here, let me know. I want to talk to him. Or, was it a woman?"

"With the outlandish costume, Mardi Gras beads, weird leather harness around the middle, we couldn't decide. Anyhow, he paraded out of here while the rest of us were open-mouth astonished." The barmaid enjoying telling the tale. "Now, may I have a lock of your hair? Oh, either of you, I suppose. Bayou people are a special breed but I do need some good luck in my life."

Danny shook his head, amused. "Sure, go right ahead. Not only did I forget my scissors, I left my crystal ball on the side table."

Another of the waitresses came forward and snipped some hair from Amanda's head. She was swift, the act was done and she retreated.

Finally, Faye Sienna came out to break up the group gathered around the celebrities of the day. She smiled at Danny and Amanda. "Wonderful to see you both so happy. Danny, come with me for a moment. I have something I want to show you."

Danny nodded and moved away from the table. As Amanda began to join them, Faye waived her hand. "This is between us girls," Faye said laughing. Amanda sat back down and watched as Faye escorted Danny to the small office.

"When can you come in for a fitting? We have much to discuss. There are some basics like silicone breast cups, special slacks or skirts made to be worn by men and designed to suit your lifestyle."

Danny frowned and looked for a long moment into Faye's eyes. "Why are you so intent on helping me in this transition? I read the catalogue, 'Suddenly Fem,'

you gave me. If all this will help me in a firm bond with Amanda, I am of course, at your service."

"Amanda is beautiful, young and pretty as well as so personable. Once you get accustomed to your new life, I want to show you how to use this item you've probably heard of. It's called a strap-on dildo." She opened a brochure showing different sex toys available. "When you dress up to impress the girls, they will be able to see a slight bulge in your crotch. It's called 'packing'."

"Do I really need this?" he asked. "Outlandish, I say. Didn't I understand we could have a sex life that included fingering and oral sex?"

Faye smiled. "I want you to be acquainted with this. One thing more; I ordered these for you." She handed Danny a vial of pills. "After checking this out with your resident physician at the hospital, take these as directed. He will know what they are. All you need to know is that they are hormones to stimulate breast growth and some other body changes."

Danny was suddenly fearful. "This is all new to me and I know there are

many transsexual men wandering the streets dressed as women. I am beginning to suspect your interest in me has something to do with Amanda. Am I right?"

Faye was stern and her eyes closed to slits as they did when she was confronted. "Yes, I see a great future for Amanda. As well, you seem capable of becoming a part of that; call it destiny." She stood up. "Shall we go?"

On the walk back to the hospital, Amanda was aware Danny's steps were reflecting his fatigue. She paced next to him. "What did Faye want?" she asked.

"We just talked. She is very nice, isn't she? Well, she gave me this vitamin or something I'm supposed to take. She also invited me back so she could go more into detail about her concerns for us. It seems she has something in mind."

Amanda nodded and was silent. 'Something in mind,' she thought, going over his words. 'We are getting set up but I don't know why. How far can I trust the charming lady?' She frowned and waited for the traffic control so they could cross the Avenue. She held Danny's hand.

"Don't worry," she said trying to be cheerful. "We will know soon enough."

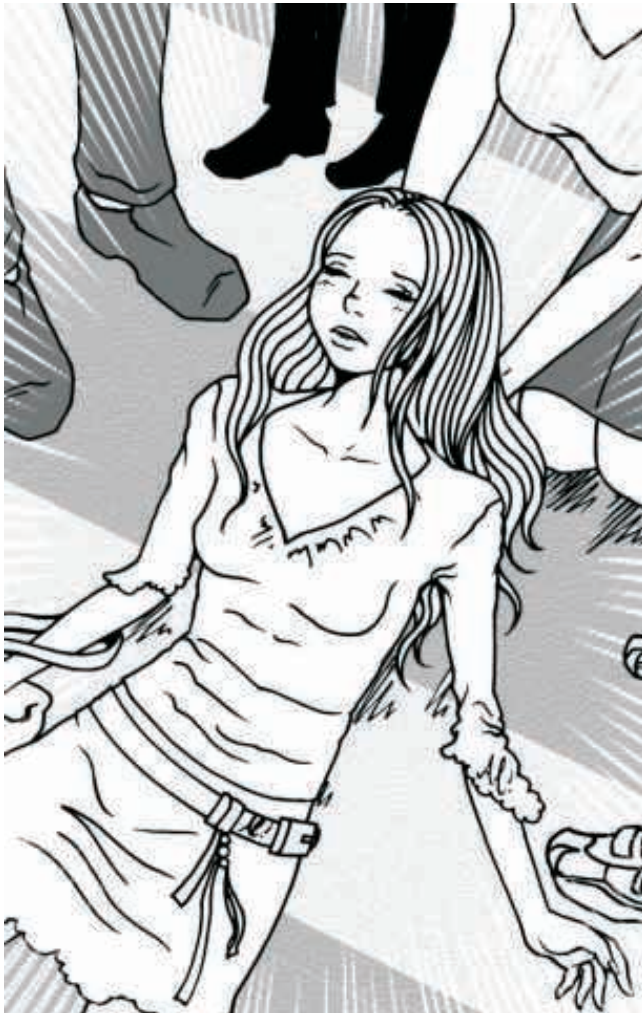
#

After leaving the hospital, Amanda wandered along the worn sidewalks to think over the events of the day. She remembered how confident she felt when she left the temple after the brief contact with Vodun. She tried to make some sense of the mysterious visitor to the bar who claimed some special knowledge. It was confusing, then depressing. The enthusiasm the girls displayed about getting so many locks of her hair made her realize the weird stranger did indeed have an influence on them. 'Hmm,' she thought. 'I have a feeling he will be back again.'

She turned onto Chartres Street. She squeezed the key in her pocket like it was an icon.

Early evening shadows crept along the ancient streets. At the entrance to the patio, she stopped briefly to chat with a neighbor and learned the girl was a clerk at the department store. She reached for her key and was momentarily dismayed when it was not where she thought it should be. She glanced up and saw a form nailed to her door. She screamed and fainted.

It was Danny's glove.



When she opened her eyes, she was sprawled on the walkway. The girl she had chatted with earlier was holding her and stroking her forehead. She heard different voices as a small group of neighbors collected.

“Is she drunk?”

“Maybe. Might be pregnant.”

“Face is pale; probably a drop in blood pressure.”

“Well, something hit her right quick because she was all right earlier.”

“Did you talk to her?”

“Yes, she works at Moses Bar & Lounge.”

“Poor dear, let’s help her into the front room. Her eyes are open.”

Amanda lifted up and pointed at the door like a baby in a mother’s arms. She looked close unable to trust her eyesight.

There was no glove nailed to the door.

#

Unable to sleep, Amanda dressed and stepped out onto the patio. She glanced at her watch and wondered if the hospital would let her visit. ‘I’m in such a state,’ she thought as she wandered onto the narrow street. ‘I have to talk to someone. What to do?’ Her sure footsteps took her to Moses Bar & Lounge which was busy with the late-nighters just arrived from the jazz concert at Preservation Hall.

Faye saw Amanda standing at the door weaving as if from strong drinks. She rushed to her and led her into the small office. She closed the drapes to ensure

their privacy. "What is it, darling? What has happened? You look like the demon offspring of one of your zombie friends."

Amanda began to sob. Her body leaned into Faye as they sat on the short bench. A wave of hysteria enveloped her mind; some saliva escaped from the side of her mouth.

Alarmed, Faye held her close hoping to calm her. Finally, she was pleased when Amanda blinked and forced a smile.

"I just had an unsettling experience," she said slowly as if measuring her words. "It had to do with a possible evil spell; not sure yet."

Trying to distract the distraught girl, Faye relaxed back with one arm around her waist. "The weird ancestor was here earlier."

Amanda felt goose bumps cover her naked arm. "Yes, I know."

"You saw him? What did he say?"

"I didn't see him. I only was the butt of his evilness. He put a Lucifer spell on my door. I was shocked."

"How did you know it was him? What kind of spell?"

"The worst of the bunch. An article of clothing belonging to a dear one was attached to my door. I know what that means; it is big trouble."

Faye tightened her hold. "Stay here with me tonight, will you? I don't think you should be alone right now."

Amanda nodded 'yes' and used one finger to wipe the tears away from her face.

“All right; I think you are right. Also, if my specter from the past shows up again, let me know. I want to talk to him, her, it, whatever.” She started to cry again, softly but controlled.

With the gentleness of Amanda’s grandmere, Faye remained close while Amanda put on a fresh pair of short pajamas with a loose top. She settled on the bed and tried to relax. Faye kissed her gently.

“You are safe here,” she said whispering in Amanda’s ear. “I’ll be with you all through this trial of yours. Right now I have to take care of my business. I’m thankful for my group of devoted helpers.” She tucked the comforter in around Amanda’s shoulders.

Amanda dozed but awoke abruptly when she felt the weight of someone’s body near her on the bedside. “Oh, I guess I fell asleep.” She blinked her eyes in the gloom defined by a small lamp across the room. “Who is it?”

“Faye sent me to stay with you while she tends to some errands or such.”

“Oh, all right. Thanks.”

It was the cute barmaid. She had a lock of Amanda’s hair tied with thread and pinned to her blouse. “You said I would have good luck and here I am with you. Couldn’t have been nicer. Are you all right? Did something happen?”

“Closer to a bad dream,” Amanda answered. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Probably not; can I lay with you?”

“Yes, of course. But, Faye told me what you like, uh, the reason you are working here.”

The girl smiled. "Oh? What was that?" She seemed gracious as she slipped beneath the covers.

"Not important, really. She told me what you like from other girls."

"She ought to know; whenever she is upset for any reason, she is able to get calmed down by performing cunnilingus on me. I hate to be clinical but that is the pure truth of the matter."

"I hope you are not suggesting that I... well, are you?"

The girl's giggle tinkled in her throat. "If not now, perhaps one day. You have an exquisite mouth."

"Thank you, I think. Look, I don't want to be rude, you are truly a great friend but I am more in the mood for what you want than I am to provide it. Do you mind?" She lifted the covers so the girl could get out. She watched her dress and leave without a word.

Later, she was awakened by a commotion in the room. She sensed a subtle and unfamiliar perfume scent. She opened her eyes to see a woman standing by her bed. She spoke in a high-pitched squeaky voice.

Amanda recognized her at once. "Danny Guice! How in the world? Oh, I'm so happy to see you. I have so much to tell you but I was waiting until tomorrow. Did they let you out?"

Danny kissed her. "Faye bribed the night nurse with some largesse and a promise to have me back by the end of her shift. She helped me dress and when we walked out, nobody was the wiser. Do you like my outfit? Some hand-me-downs from the nurses."

“Danny, hang up your dress over on the armoire door. Get in next to me; I need to tell you what happened this evening.”

Danny snuggled close to her. “First you need to tell me what you want from me. The barmaid was vague. She only said you refused her. Well, that did not surprise me. We are an item.”

Amanda accepted his french kiss. “I need you to go down on me. You get to explore all the delights you have yearned for since the fifth grade. I got the idea from Faye. It is what she needs when she is upset or stressed out. Do you mind terribly?”

“Darling, you know I’ve never done this before. How do you know it is what you need? Have you had it before?”

“Faye seduced me when I was so upset over what happened to you. I was so afraid you would pull away from me. I felt devastated with guilt. That was when she gave me the catalogue and thus a glimmer of hope.”

Danny kissed her again and nudged her lips with his tongue. When he cupped her breast, he moved one hand onto her naked thighs. “Amanda, you are so beautiful.”

“You are so willing,” she said coyly. She felt him shove the light fabric away from her sexual center. His finger found her private places. “That feels so good; your hand is strong.”

Another french kiss and he moved to take her breast in his mouth. Her nipple sprang to life. “This is all I ever dreamed of, darling,” he whispered.

“All this and no lock of my hair.”

“What does that mean?”

“Oh, not important. I’ll tell you later. Don’t stop now; your finger has a life of its own.”

He settled between her legs and gently probed with his tongue to part the copious bush of pubic hair. The gentle lapping of his tongue, top to bottom and tenderly on her clit, sent her into ecstasy.

When she awoke, morning had sent a shaft of light onto her bed. Danny had apparently left without waking her which she appreciated.

“Darling, are you feeling better? I escorted your intended back to his hospital room. He said it was now like his jail cell because he didn’t want to leave you.”

“He gave me what I needed. It was marvelous. I owe you one.”

Faye laughed. “Don’t worry; I’ll collect one of these days when I need some special treatment. Life is not always easy.”

“I think I was rude to our barmaid earlier. I hope she is not feeling hurt.”

“Unlike the rest of us, she handles rejection well.”

Amanda sat up and realized her pajama top was still open. Her pert breasts made an unexpected appearance. “Oh, sorry, it is not my social nature to be so common.”

“With that body, you are unveiling a work of Mother Nature’s art. Don’t apologize.”

“I need to go home. Grandmere will be worried. I’ve decided to tell her all the details. She is so wise in these matters. Anyone else would think I’ve lost my

mind. Nobody claims to believe in the occult but everybody respects it. Strange.”

IX.

Noranda was waiting for her on the front porch. The afternoon sun warmed her body.

Amanda saw her grandmother and broke into a paced run until she reached the porch steps. When they next embraced, Noranda smiled.

“What is that all about?”

“Sharing good news with you is all. Danny had his first oral experience and it was terrific for both of us.”

Noranda grinned. “He will make a useful partner for you. It took him long enough to come around to the reality. I credit most of his change in attitude to the power in the *Eye Of The Lotus*.” She patted Amanda’s hand. “I have a message from the ‘other side.’ Vodun wants to see us.”

Amanda was briefly taken aback. “Us? You said he never talked to you over all these years. It must be critical.”

“I don’t know for certain but, being a priest, it is likely he will want something belonging to both of us. We need to find out what that is and why.”

Later, walking down the bayou path, both women had on full-length skirts that brushed the ground. From a distance, they appeared as twins.

Amanda responded to a growing excitement. “Do you think this has anything to do with Daphne Delphine?”

“Your sister has not been a player in our lives for these many years. It would be well to finally put it all to rest, gain closure.”

“What else could such an influential man want from us both if not to inform us about some activity in the group?”

Noranda launched the narrow boat and Amanda jumped to secure it when they reached the far shore.

At the temple side area where they always met to spread out the icons as they contemplated their concerns, they found Vodun waiting for them. His face was stern and there was no clue in the darkness of his eyes.

“What is it?” Noranda asked crisply.

Vodun glanced around to be confident there were no others in their space. “Several days past I was contacted by Andala, Zombie Princess. It was one of few highlights in my life as your priest. Andala always appears as a specter, like a ghost, but she can be very physical as well. She told me to send a hireling on a mission to please the powers. Of course, I did as asked.”

“Tell us about this operative and why it involves us?” Amanda said in a firm voice.

“You already know of him or so I understand,” Vodun said slowly choosing his words. “Have you had a visit?”

Amanda leaned forward. “Visit? Let me tell you, Vodun. He has made several stops at my job place. In addition he falsified my perceptions with a vision of Grandmere that did not exist. Next he stirred up our small group. Finally, he left the warning nailed to my door.”

A tense silence enveloped the threesome. "I see," Vodun said finally. "I shall report this to Andala. Now, you have the power so tell me if you believe."

"At first, early on, I scoffed at the stories circulating ever since I can remember. Constantly entreating the mystic powers to grant me security with my fiancé seemed to connect nicely. I now accept as true that some alien authority can affect my destiny. I want to know what to expect and hope you can explain."

Noranda was deep in thought and when she arrived to the inescapable conclusion she looked up and smiled. "Tell us what has so enthralled Andala," she said with a stern look.

Vodun frowned. "I had to avoid this matter due to my lofty station here which is why I pressed this operative into service. Even so, I am on very dangerous footing to attempt this transfer." He paused and stroked his beard. "Andala could do nothing until Amanda had her initiation. Now, the truth is revealed. She wants the *Eye Of The Lotus* for her collection of charms."

Noranda straightened her back. "No! There may or may not be some threat but either way, I object. That talisman has been in our family for centuries. What gives Andala the right? Granted she is the jungle princess and all that but you are breaking protocol, Vodun."

Vodun was pensive. "Was it not Icarus who was destroyed for flying too close to the sun? I personally feel the heat of the fires of damnation but have no option except to please the highest order of the deity. You may give me the amulet now."

Amanda glanced at Noranda, then stared at Vodun with an unyielding set of her chin. "Give? No! Negoti-

ate? Perhaps! If all this rigmarole ended in a voodoo threat in the essence of Danny's glove, then we do not sacrifice until assured the evil spell has been lifted." She was pleased to see Noranda nod approval.

Vodun sighed. "I will inform you of Andala's decision. Be aware that you are indeed playing with fire here. If you displease Andala, she will appear and punish you."

Noranda's voice was a mere whisper. "There are forces here we do not understand. Amanda is correct in perceiving that Andala is forcing us to give up the transitory power of this valuable jewel. It is apparent our ancestral deity in the form of Andala haunts this temple and has more than one design on our combined destiny. We plead mercy and ask for an alternative."

"So noted," Vodun said. He turned his back, took a deep breath and soon disappeared into the wet jungle of his domain.

"Wow! That took nerve," Amanda said softly and put her arm around Noranda's shoulders.

"There are rumors," her grandmother related. "Andala is a visceral specter constantly in our lives contemplating and directing like a master marionette. It is possible she will toy with your newfound emotions. We shall see. In either event, to steal the amulet would be to invoke outrage. Nevertheless, we have the right to remove it from our stash and keep it safe."

"I am very nervous about this," Amanda said. "Yet, if we keep what is ours, it seems the right thing to do. Maybe Princess Andala witnessed the initiation. It would answer the question of my calling, wouldn't it?"

Noranda sighed, opened the personal pouch and slipped the *Eye Of The Lotus* into a pocket in her skirt.

“Somehow, I feel all this has to do with your physical beauty. I’ve heard Andala is a jealous spirit in many ways.”

As they walked toward the boat landing, Amanda was deep in thought. “You just said I possess something amazing in addition to our amulet. I’m getting the message.”

“Yes,” Noranda said in a tone laced with emotion. “It all points to the element of control. In your case, sex.”

#

Faye Sienna looked up from her desk to see a striking woman standing in the doorway. “I’m Dani Guice,” she said.

Faye caught on and hurried to extend her hand in greeting. “Glad to know you, young lady” she said with a grin. “You are looking more mod every day.”

“Is Amanda here?” Danny asked.

“Did you check at your patio apartment? She left a note that she had an errand and that I might expect you to visit. I’m supposed to put you to work in her place today.”

“Oh, all right; she probably went home for some reason. I am aware we owe our jobs and the apartment to you. Amanda explained it all to me. I am able to get back and forth to rehab. Much better than the long commute and the doctors tell me I should get back into society and quit whining.”

Faye smiled. “And rightly you should. You hold a special place in our little group here. In addition to be-

ing Missus Delphine, just joking, you are our only involuntary transgender. I think you are a great person to accept it all so graciously."

"Thanks," he answered looking around. "I'm having difficulty deciding on who is what in this place. Amanda told me about you but I can't be comfortable with the rest of the clan here."

She laughed. "Relax, Dani Guice, go with the flow. It might be helpful to learn the passions of the different people you see. You probably already know mine since your fiancée and I are so similar."

"She explained there seems to be this one sensual act to relieve tension. I suspect you two have more than just that to bond you."

Faye motioned to Dani Guice to sit with her on the small sofa. "We need to talk," she said and took Dani's hand. "You are a very attractive girl and, no surprise, you have an erotic turn to your lips. You can work on that by practicing with your tongue. Do that and any girl you fancy will respond; if she blushes and appears smitten, she is ready for your bedroom."

Dani crossed her legs. "You are generous, boss," she said speculating on the meaning Faye was trying to get out. "Are you coming onto me?"

"Maybe; are you considering it? Might be good for both of us to clear the air."

Dani was flustered. "I think I am complimented, thank you. Uh, I have to confess, I've never, ah, done that, I mean, as feminine as you are, I know you are a guy."

She smiled and moved one hand onto Dani's knee. "This is it, young lady. You are young and pretty; desirable in many eyes without doubt. You will be asked

by guys to perform fellatio for them. When you were a guy, did that ever happen to you? Did you like it?"

"Even out in our favorite fishing haunts with my friends, it was not only taboo but a reason for ridicule. I believe the oral and the anal are matters to consider in such situations."

Faye sparkled and giggled, pleased with Dani's answer. "What is your schedule today? We will have a quick rush around lunchtime. Many of our regular customers drink a two-martini lunch." She chuckled. "With Amanda off someplace, we need an extra hand."

"I have an appointment at the rehabilitation clinic but that isn't until later. I can help with the drinks and clear tables, clean up; I'm not totally without experience."

Faye stood up and pulled Dani to her feet. She kissed Dani lightly on the lips. "Think over what I said. You will learn eventually it is best to stay on my good side because the other side is so awful."

Dani excused herself, saying, "Come get me when you wish. Among other of life's activity, I know a good thing when I have it."

Later, as Dani was clearing the tables and washing glasses, two well-dressed men came in and asked for Faye Sienna. Dani directed them to the small office at the end of the bar. She noticed when the men went in, that within a minute, the privacy curtains were in place. It was curious but there seemed nothing was amiss.

When the men came out, Faye stood in the doorway; they shook hands and Faye swiftly closed the door in retreat.

“What was that all about?” Dani asked when Faye summoned her to the office.

“Two hustlers with money; the worst kind. They want to buy me out. Their offer would fill my TG fund but if I did that, I would have nowhere to go after the operation. They were ‘all business’ as the saying goes but one of them mentioned the pretty girl at the bar. That is you, of course. You see? Already it is happening; men are seeking you for favors.”

Dani sat awkwardly on the high back chair. “Did they say why they were making such a generous offer?”

“That’s what closed the meeting; they said ‘distribution’ which, translated, means drugs to me. I backed off real fast.”

“Yes, it’s that or spending all your TG money for bail one of these days.”

Faye looked strained, tense. “The buyout option was substantial; it was very tempting. I hope I never see their kind again; my resolve will weaken. Can we continue this discussion in my living room?”

Sitting on the double-wide sofa, Dani kicked off her shoes and put one foot on the coffee table. “This is elegant,” she said of Faye’s living quarters.

“Amanda promised me a tourist tour of the bayou country one of these days. What should I see when I get there?” She plunked down next to Dani, leaned forward and filled the two wine glasses.

“If you like quiet swamps teeming with wildlife, you can get enamored of Bayou Teche early on. Our folks grew up on the backwater. The untamed wilds fed us, clothed us and sheltered us. We lived off the water like Indians lived off the land.” Once again, he

watched warily as Faye's hand crept onto his thigh.
"You like my legs?"

"Very much," she answered. She touched Dani's lips with one finger and pressed. Dani parted to let the fingertip in. "Give me your hand, lovely girl," she said and guided Dani's nervous fingers onto her breasts.
"Do you like doing that to a girl?"

Dani's sheepish smile charmed her. "Yes, of course. Shall I?" She unbuttoned Faye's blouse and parted the fabric to admire the burgeoning breast line. "Amazing, especially with the knowledge you are a guy even if you are soon to have the gender reassignment."

Faye slid down on the sofa and tugged Dani until her near-naked breast was ready for her mouth. She smiled when Danny unhooked the straining bra. "Go ahead; I know you want to do it. Put the nipple between your lips and lick it."

"Is this what the girls do for each other? Seems reasonable to me."

Faye giggled. "Yes; once you learn your partner's erogenous zones, she will be bouncing on the mattress."

Finally, at Faye's urging, Dani slid down onto the floor on her knees. She toyed with the lace trim at the top of Faye's stockings. When her firm fingers found Faye's stiff cock, she looked up as if confused. Faye was watching, eyes wide open, waiting anxiously. "I'm ready," Dani whispered, her voice tinged with emotion.

"Use both hands, Dani," Faye pleaded. "That's right; now put it in your mouth and suck. It is time."

Dani moved into position and lowered his head until the purple corona rubbed her lips. "I know I must,"

she said softly as if trying to garner an extra ounce of conviction.

“Yes; why are you waiting? You’re driving me up the drape.”

Dani slid to one side and sighed. “I can’t do this; in all you are a guy and down deep inside me, I am also. Can I have some time?”

Faye shoved the forlorn girl away. “You can get out of here, that’s what you can do. Split!”

Dani took a moment to straighten her dress and run her fingers through her hair. Realizing there was nothing she could say for having caused the disaster, she let herself out and headed for the front door.

Dani was thoughtful as she moved slowly down the worn sidewalks thinking over the aborted action. ‘Amanda told me I was under an evil spell. I have to be careful not to give in to whatever it is. This is so creepy.’ She mumbled to herself and kept walking. Crossing a street named for the dauphin, Crown Prince of France, the buildings were older, close together. The shadows were lengthening as she hurried to her appointment at the hospital. She didn’t get there.

She was startled to suddenly have her path blocked. The two wealthy visitors from Moses Bar & Lounge stood leering at her. “You are right,” one of them said. “She is cute.”

“Bet she gives good head if she works in that place,” the other said.

Dani was on alert. “Hey guys; you got me wrong. I’m partially an invalid from a car accident and have to get to rehab while they try to put me back together. I have no connection of any importance with the bar.”

The older of the two spoke up. "We want to give your boss a message which might make her reconsider our offer."

"I don't take dictation," Dani said obstinately.

The two men reacted at once. They pulled her into a long passage boarded on one side between two buildings. Dani screamed but realized it did no good.

In the back yard of an apparently deserted old home, Dani was shoved onto her knees. "You can take good care of us now. More than we can say for your boss. What a bitch."

"Please, fellows. There isn't much I can do for you. I'm a guy."

"Like hell you are unless all those fancy clothes make you out a pansy of some kind. Take it out and put it in your mouth."

Dani fumbled with the belt and zipper. Unaccustomed to being on her knees and frightened nearly out of her wits, she finally was able to reach in and release a growing erection. She took too long getting into position.

The second man smashed his fist against the back of her head. The man impatiently waited for Dani to perform, and slapped her with a roundhouse blow that knocked her aside. She gasped and felt a warm rivulet of blood dripping on her chin.

Another punch and she knew she would nurse a swollen eye before the day was out. "Take it easy," she pleaded. "I'll do it; I'll suck you."

After putting all her energy into pleasing the two thugs, Dani took several more punches and fell on the garden path. Some birds chirped. The flutter of wings

was briefly comforting. She passed out. When she woke, the men were gone. She struggled to stand and with a heroic try for strength, made her way back to the bar. She collapsed at the doorway.

Amanda arrived in time to see the EMT packing Dani off in the public ambulance. 'It's the evil spell,' she thought immediately. 'What has happened to my unfortunate boyfriend?' She rushed in to find Faye wiping tears from her face.

"Amanda, Dani was mugged in the next block. She looked terrible but the emergency guys didn't seem concerned."

"I guess not!" Amanda said indignantly. Dani wasn't their intended lover."

"Come in, darling. I'll tell you what I think happened."

Amanda winced. "I already know more than you do. Dani is under a wicked spell. I've spent most of today trying to get the zombie lover you told me about to lift the spell. No luck as you can see. There will be more trouble until I can get this resolved."

Faye shook her head 'no.' "Two guys came in to buy me out. I refused so they took it out on poor Dani. We all have to be very careful not to be alone. I've a feeling they will be back with a more urgent message than the one Dani handled."

"That doesn't sound like the evil I might expect. It will take a potion and a skilled operative to lift the spell. Right now, I have to go to Dani and stay with her to assure her safety. I'm so sorry this happened. Is there anything I can do?"

"Go to her, darling. She needs some comfort after such an awful display of inhuman abuse."

X.

After staying with Dani Guice at the emergency hospital, Amanda went to her apartment. She was despondent and, in her peculiar state of mind, blamed herself for Dani's trouble. Yet, she considered, Dani seemed more happy lately than ever before. It was going together for both of them. She disciplined herself to stop crying.

There was a rap at her door. That was surprising because only a few people knew the gate codes to get in. Thinking it was one of the neighbors who helped her before she threw the door wide open. She wasn't ready for the shock.

Her nemesis, the carrier of evil tidings from Barataria, stood leering at her. He was dressed all in black and his tight trousers fit so close she could easily see the bulge in his crotch. He said nothing as he threw his cap into the room.

In spite of what she said in the past about wanting to speak to this specter from hell, she wanted to stop him. It was not to be. He came in and paused briefly to scan the small rooms. He nodded and sat on the sofa.

The silence was deafening. Amanda hustled to bring him a gin and tonic left from earlier in the day. The ice cubes made music on the thin glass.

"I was told you wish to speak to me," he said with an amused sing-song in his voice she took for impudence.

Amanda gathered her courage. "Vodun asked if you visited here. I told him you put the spell on Danny Guice which was totally improper. I also told him you

intimidated people at my work with your stops there on several occasions. How you managed to change the painting of a marsh into my grandmere, I've no clue. Also, Danny Guice's glove for the left hand was in safe-keeping at the temple. Mysteriously, it showed up tacked to my door. I was not born yesterday. What do you want?"

He slugged down the drink and handed her the empty glass. "If Vodun told you the reason for these, ah, transgressions, then I've no need to elaborate."

Amanda folded her arms in front of her and hugged her elbows. "The answer is 'no' and you are foolish to go to so much difficulty."

He raised one eyebrow in question. That was when she saw the nasty red scar over one eye that disappeared beneath his tousled brow.

"You are pretty as well as smart. Don't tell me you have assumed this muddled sequence of events is entirely my doing. Put me down as a lowly worker in the uncivil service." He chuckled and was disappointed she did not appreciate his humor.

Amanda was on the verge of yet another panic attack. "And this latest caper of yours; did you get Dani mugged, thinking I would not understand the sinister plan behind it? My employer thinks the incidents are unrelated. Of course, I knew better right away."

He crossed his legs. "Of course," he repeated with a sarcastic note. "As much as I enjoy being next to such beauty, I need to ask you this one question."

Amanda's impatience was growing. "Don't get too comfortable; you are decidedly not welcome here. What's the question? I thought you knew it all."

He grinned showing a smile with some rotted teeth. "I am told you took it with you hoping for safekeeping. Do you have it here?"

Amanda knew she needed to stall for time so she could try to resolve the sudden feeling of dread creeping over her brain. "Have what?"

"*The Eye Of The Lotus*," he answered simply.

"It is not here."

"Then please inform me where it is hidden so I can return it to the rightful owner."

That called for righteous indignation. "I beg your pardon, Mister Lucifer, that talisman has been in my family for more generations than you can count. It most emphatically does not belong to anyone else."

He was obviously enjoying himself. Her physical beauty enticed him and he began to hope she would be more disagreeable so he could partake of the flesh so unwilling and so ready.

Amanda sensed his interest and shuddered. She told herself she had no cause to be angry; that the man was only a courier on a mission. She tried to stare him down but had to avoid his fervent gaze.

"You are indeed lovely," he said with the same crooked smile. "I can understand if you are having difficulty working your way through this anguish. May I remind you, sexy lady, that it was your beauty that set the stage for this skit from hell? It will continue until you surrender the amulet into Andala's care. There is no avoiding it, no matter how undaunted you are."

Her voice was guttural in a mix of fear, anger and embarrassment. "I am waiting for Vodun to tell me you

have been relieved and the spells canceled. Until then, your inept games are for naught."

For the first time since entering, he moved closer to her. Her feminine scent tantalized him. "I have many more such games to use to make you come to your senses," he said with a sly look. "Perhaps you would like me to be your star boarder while we await Vodun's mandate."

Her voice was pitched up a decibel. "No way! Does it not occur to you that I can report you for such blatant conduct? No; keep your hands off me. I am not a Play-mate this month."

He patted her leg through the thin fabric of her skirt. "This uncivil service I joked about has many advantages when it comes to exploiting you. I will return after I speak to your grandmother. I have special insight in a matter of concern to you both. The name is Daphne Delphine; you need closure, I can provide it."

"Omigod! How in the name of Hades has Andala allowed the likes of you to represent her interests?"

"You didn't answer me so I will wait. You have a hiding place for what I want. I have a similar cache of information for what you want. We should be able to get this together, shouldn't we?"

He again brushed her thigh with his calloused hand. "Be sensible, pretty girl. Where in this wide world is the most logical place to look for your twin sister? Think on that. The answer will surprise you."

Her voice quivered. "I think you should go. I do not believe you know anything about my sister. I'm beginning to doubt everything you have told me, right or wrong."

He smiled again. "Do you wonder how I gained entry here with so little difficulty? The gate is tall and has security locks. Yet, here I am. Until you are able to resolve this little riddle in your life, be aware that I can come and go as I wish. Your bedroom might be off-limits to your suitors but not to me." He stood up and when she tried to do the same, he pushed her back where she had been sitting.



"You are indeed a man of mystery. If you can make all these things happen, I seriously doubt it would do you much good to visit my bed. I have the right of person ever since my initiation in the group at Barataria Temple. You already know that; it will do you no good to push me into a situation without my consent."

He gleefully agreed. "Very well then. Since I am in your debt, so to speak, I need to repay your diligence with my modest offering. Each day I will venture close to you. And, as each day wanes, I shall be happy to sample your many charms." He finished the gin drink and turned to go. "Don't get up; I know my way out, and in as well." He winked and left.

Amanda threw herself on the bed, face into the pillow and wailed her lament. In due time, she wandered out to the kitchen and sampled the half-empty gin bottle. 'Need to get some rest,' she told herself. 'That monster is going to pester me until Grandmere figures all this out.' She sighed and went back to bed but sleep was elusive in the midst of her jumbled emotions.

Sometime in the middle hours before the arrival of dawn, a vivid dream descended on Amanda. Mister Lucifer stood in the center of her bedroom and beckoned to her. As if a witness to an abandoned soul, she stood aside and watched her figure move on him like she was a robot. It was so real, it awakened her. She slammed her open palm on the empty bed space next to her. 'Crap! Is this the next game?'

She slipped on her robe and stumbled on the throw rug on her way to the kitchen. She methodically put on the coffee water and ground some beans for the French press. Sitting at the kitchen table with her head in her hands, she went over what she remembered of the vivid dream, thinking there might be some event or

other that might explain her anxiety. There was nothing; only the indelible message he had wordlessly conveyed directing her to satisfy his desires.

Sipping the strong black brew she cupped in her hands, Amanda sighed and went over each and every nuance of trouble, real or imagined, that had torn her life since Noranda first took her to the Barataria Temple.

From the guilt about the auto crash that crippled her fiancé, to the Moses Bar & Lounge escapade, to the sexual coming of age, all the way down to the glove tacked to her door; it all came crashing down, crushing, nagging, demanding. Next she was in the midst of a threat on her very existence if she did not donate her ancestral icon to Andala, Jungle Princess.

She mused on each issue. 'Noranda said it best,' she thought, trying to form words for her brain committee, 'Andala controls the present which means she controls the past and, spirits help us all, who controls the past controls the future.' She broke down crying again, finished her coffee and stepped into the shower bracing herself for the new day.

XI.

Amanda began searching to see if her grandmother was waiting for her on the open porch. As she approached, Hattie, faithful neighbor of many years, came out to meet her.

Hattie's eyes reflected a mix of fear and anguish.

Amanda understood immediately another evil had fallen into her life. Added personal injuries she had un-

wittingly come to realize somehow were connected to her presence on this sacred land.

"She died peacefully in her sleep," Hattie said and stood aside, winking away tears as she disciplined herself to accept the breakdown she knew was coming.

Amanda sank to her knees and as Hattie moved a step closer, she wrapped her arms about the lady's legs and held on until her moans of grief turned to screams fed on despair. "She was all I had," she said finally.

Hattie touched her head with nervous fingers. "We have seen the passing of a grand lady of our time," she said. "Come in, darling girl. I'll fix you something to eat."

Knowing it was the tradition to prepare food for the many visitors, Amanda followed dutifully into the kitchen. "I have to call the sheriff, Hattie," she said.

"They are on their way now. Boudreaux asked me not to touch anything until later."

"I understand," Amanda said and sank into the kitchen chair. She was no longer the vivacious youngster with a floppy pony tail that sent screeches of laughter into the wetlands. "This is big trouble, Hattie. It is well Grandmere is where she is protected from harm." She frowned as the next thought hit her. "Did the emergency line people say why we were not to touch anything? Do you think they suspect foul play when the lady had to be at least a hundred years old?"

Hattie stopped for a moment and glanced at Amanda. "Perhaps, but you can answer that best," she said with a mysterious tone of voice. "The drums will sound on the bayou tonight."

The implication made Amanda shudder in fear. "I will speak to Vodun," she said tersely.

#

Next evening, as Amanda paddled across to the familiar landing, her eyes were still shedding tears. She made her way in a daze to the Barataria Temple.

“You have come, daughter,” Vodun said to her as she entered the space that at the moment belonged to her alone. “You wish to talk? Did you bring the *Eye Of The Lotus*?” He wrinkled his brow over unyielding, unsympathetic eyes.

Amanda took a deep breath and exhaled as she said, “No, Vodun. I need some assurance from you.”

He moved closer to her. “And why, dear girl is my assurance so important to you? What has entered your adorable person that I can ease?”

“Vodun, listen! I had food prepared for the many friends of my grandmother. One came; Hattie, our next door neighbor. She said it was her duty to say goodbye because she found Grandmere slumped over the kitchen chair.”

Vodun displayed a tolerant smile. “And how did she know to go there at that moment, that hour, of all things? She did not normally visit on impulse.”

“Hattie is a good friend but she feels strongly about her place in our backward society. Something told her to seek my grandmother. She only said she felt it.”

“I see; what is that you are clutching in your hand? Or, maybe you are nervous about the future.”

She handed him her notes for the tombstone. It listed the usual information but ended with a quote from the past. She didn't know why she felt Vodun

should be given the option to accept it but she was hopeful.

Gather ye Rosebuds while ye may,

Old times are flying and this same flower

That smiled yesterday now lies dying.

Vodun glanced at it. "Eloquent; did you compose this?"

She tried a sheepish smile. "Spirits know I was fortunate to recall the lines with any accuracy. Grandmere was very fond of it. When I sort her legacy, I'll probably find it. I'm not up to doing that quite yet."

Vodun cleared his throat as if getting ready for a long speech. "I sent an operative to warn you of difficulties in life if you did not give the amulet to Andala."

"Yes, I couldn't miss the impact he has had on my life. It included so much mischief I was beginning to doubt my sanity. I have named him Lucifer."

"Do not be harsh with him. He is in the thrall of Andala as all of us are."

"He tried to give me that malarkey but it didn't work. You haven't received the talisman yet because I don't have your assurance of safe passage in the future."

Vodun was meditative. "You have had a dose of Andala's mercy. She indicated to me, in private of course, that she might have to meet with you personally. I am not sure you will survive such a meeting emotionally. I told her you were not equipped for such a touching reprieve."

Amanda's eyes blazed with a new light. "Perhaps it is best. What was her answer? I may as well fall under

the deified spell if my life is going to continue to be so raucous. Was possession of the *Eye Of The Lotus* important enough to make so many people weather the storm of emotional protest she has sent down? That Lucifer chap gets a boner just looking at me; I know what to expect but that doesn't help. You have removed Grandmere from my life; I just know it. Don't give me the old saw about the ravages of age."

"I have no guilt in this matter. As for your misfortunes, may I suggest this sequence of events began with the conflict between you and Danny Guice? You did not show your soul at the Barataria Temple until you came to plead for mercy. We need the talisman to continue."

"Dani Guice lies in the emergency clinic as we speak. You have wronged him, Vodun, admit it or not. I will not forgive you or your cohorts."

He smiled. "You are not only headstrong, you are beautiful. This pattern of which you complain will only continue to get more serious. You now have the option: Return the amulet to its rightful owner or continue to reap disaster on yourself, your future husband, and the tight little band of friends. Take your choice."

"Are you giving me the assurance I seek? I do not wish to prolong the perverse stand Andala has taken. I must be missing the intent of all this, I don't know." She stood up to go. "I am going to remove Grandmere's pouch now. I will return it when you give me an answer and ample proof of Andala's grace."

Vodun frowned. "I know this is an emotional time for you. In such a state, you are hardly qualified to make important decisions. But, if you persist, I want you to return here this evening after the funeral ser-

vices. I too will be pleased to be done with the entire affair.”

Amanda fought to control her anger. “The pantheon of peace you have sworn to promote has given comfort and guidance to many people over the ages. You are clearly not following the tenets set down for us all.”

Vodun accompanied the distraught girl to the edge of the glade hiding the path back to the boat dock. He put one arm across her back. “The future is in your hands, not mine and not Andala’s. Keep in mind it is much more disheartening to have to cause you these difficulties than it is for you to cope with them.”

“Well said. Please call off your watch dog, Lucifer. He really bugs me.”

“He is well within the sphere of his assignment. You mentioned his involuntary admiration for you. I can do nothing about that. You are at his mercy. Personally, I envy his position. Had I been given the mission, sex with you would have already been *un fait accompli*. Good day. See you after the memorial to the fine lady.”

#

Crestfallen as she faced the last of her dear grandmother, Amanda wandered idly back to the house which had so many loving moments to remember.

At the door, she scented dinner simmering in the kitchen.

“Come, Miss Amanda,” Hattie said softly. “You will feel better when you’ve had something to eat.”

Amanda sat and smiled when Hattie poured the coffee. "You didn't have to do this," she said softly. "I know you have family needing your care. It's just that I'm so disappointed in so few people at the service. Grandmere had many more friends, some very close, than that."

"Don't blame them, Miss Amanda," Hattie said. "The drums say it all. They are frightened like lost children in the swamp."

"I know you are right but there are mysteries, as you well know. To this day, I won't shoo away a spider on my doorstep for fear of a devastating storm. It is not logical but it is there; we were born with it." She frowned.

"What are your plans?" Hattie asked as she dipped the étouffée into a bowl.

Amanda toyed with the spoon and sipped the spicy liquid. "This is wonderful, Hattie. Now, who took the time to teach you?"

Hattie smiled. "You know very well. A wonderful Cajun cook that used to live in this house."

"I am going to try to talk sense into Vodun's thick brain. Next, I think it will be best to get back to my place in the city and my job, if I still have one."

"I see," Hattie said on a thoughtful note. "Will you close up the house?"

"I don't know yet. It's probably best but I can't bear the thought of not having this home to return to when I need a retreat. Time will tell all, my Grandmere used to say."

"If there is anything I can do, please ask," she said as she cleared the dishes.

Amanda immediately flashed on the family pouch she had retrieved from the temple. In addition, she considered the valuable amulet known as the *Eye Of The Lotus*. She gathered some mementos, photos and the pouch to put in her overnight bag. "Hattie, I'm entrusting these personal things to keep for me. Please put them in a safe place and don't let the children play with them. I'm told there are charms and magic in such ordinary looking items."

A wave of fear covered Hattie's face. "I don't know, Miss Amanda," she said. Her hands were trembling.

"Oh, of course you have no way of knowing about them. I apologize. I'll take them with me to my place in the city."

Hattie had a sincere look on her face. "I am grateful," she said.

#

Before visiting the Barataria Temple as promised, Amanda brought her overnight bag to the outside shed. Noranda had kept an old metal-lined tub along with the crab nets. Amanda's bag fit in the tub and she closed it firmly. Next she hid it behind some tools Noranda had used for her garden.

Amanda knew there was little need for such super security because anyone connected with the temple would not violate her privacy. But, considering what had been happening to her since the initiation, she began to doubt her link with Vodun and, ultimately, Princess Andala.

As she trudged down the winding path to the boat house, she reflected on where her life was going and, of

special interest, in Dani Guice as Dani began to adjust to being a girl in a man's world. It was, after all, Dani's world until recent events turned his sexuality around.

"So you've kept your promise," Vodun said smiling. She noted the friendly inflection in his voice she had not heard before. It was a signal to go on the alert.

"Yes, of course; I said I would be here. Have you talked to Lucifer? Maybe he will avoid being so unpleasant if you counsel him."

"He was here and, yes, I told him to leave you alone. He just laughed. He came to report he had not made any headway in his mission. After that, we reviewed some plans for your future which he will undoubtedly relish."

"What about Princess Andala? Has she been approached? It seems to me reasonable that I can be left in peace. If the mystics can cause so much tomfoolery in my life, they can certainly return me to a simple sanity."

He approached her and put his hands on her shoulders. "I've nothing to report so it appears you've made this trip for naught."

Amanda straightened her torso and looked Vodun directly in his eyes. "Sir, in my discussion with Lucifer, he told me he had factual info regarding my sister, Daphne Delphine. Can you substantiate that?"

Vodun looked mildly shocked. "Our operative you call Lucifer had no call to divulge temple secrets. Of course, I understand his motive. Yet, the rulings stand as a guideline. He can do with you what he wishes but that does not include bartering with file items of which he has little knowledge. Andala will be most unhappy if I report this."

Amanda stood firmly on both feet like a prize fighter ready to swing. "Then by all means, tell her. Maybe she will get the creep out of my hair."

He smiled at the irony. "It is not your hair he wants but a more erotic part of your anatomy. I may report to Andala but not until this issue is resolved and the *Eye Of The Lotus* is secure. He needs encouragement, not degradation of his efforts."

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Amanda said hesitantly. "The *Eye Of The Lotus* has been in our family since the middle passage was the mainline to freedom or slavery. Nobody knows, I understand, where the valued talisman came from. For all I know, it is a tempered stone that was spit out by Mount Kilimanjaro about a million years ago. Possession is nine points of the law. Please convey to your leader that I am willing to surrender my property in return for assurance that my life will continue without the sequence of disasters."

Vodun folded his arms in front of his chest. "Think of that," he said with a wan smile, "a sexual sequence of disasters. You are a tempting morsel; no more deals from me. If you come back here one more time, prepare to add yet one more sexual escapade to your memoirs." He quickly brought both hands onto Amanda's breasts. It was so swift, the action caught her completely off guard.

She spun around and walked stiffly away. "It is goodbye, then, Vodun."

#

Amanda punched the elevator button at the emergency clinic at the Touro Infirmary. She met Dani Guice walking toward her at the elevator landing. They

embraced. "Well?" she asked. "Why is a pretty girl like you wandering around the wicked city without an escort?"

Dani smiled. "The way I've been treated here, so elegant, I need a chaperone. You qualify." They embraced again and kissed.

"I'll be your tour guide as well. Where to, my noble mistress?"

"This is getting monotonous; one hospital to another. I'm behind on my rehab because of this mishap. I can meet you at Moses' later."

Outside they waited beneath the overhang for a taxi. Amanda was pensive. "Dani, I have reason to believe what happened to you with those thugs was not entirely in the interest of Faye Sienna. They say they want to take over her business for uses of their own. Yet, so much has happened that I have to believe the mystics at the Barataria Temple are somehow involved."

"That's ridiculous!" Dani said quickly. "It makes no sense. What did Noranda say about your theory?"

"Oh Dani, I've been so distraught lately, I forgot you didn't know. Noranda died this week. They said it was old age. I believe otherwise."

Dani stopped and stared at her. "Darling, I am so sorry. I loved her too, you know."

"Yes, I know. Oh, here's a taxi."

The taxi went up the ramp to let Dani out to the closest elevators. They embraced again and Amanda gave the Chartres Street address.

As she entered the gate codes, she saw him lurking in the shadows a few doors away. In any other event, a

girl would have been nervous. As Amanda stared at him, she was aware she was expecting him and, adding to that, was actually relieved he was there. 'Sure', she considered, 'it's his threat routine to intimidate me but I'm really sick of his routines. What a freak!' She pretended to ignore him and closed the gate behind her.

She waited until she saw him come out of the shadows and approach the gate. At that, she opened it and stepped aside to wordlessly invite him in. Once in the studio, she hurried to fix him the required gin and tonic which he took in one gulp.

"I learned today that you ratted on me to Vodun. He is my leader. I hate rats, even pretty ones."

Amanda sat wearily on the sofa. "I asked Vodun to tell you to get off my case. The issue at hand is above you now since Princess Andala approaches. I believe my request is justified."

He sneered at her and handed her the empty glass. When she stood up to go to the kitchen, he shoved her back as he had done before. Her skirt flared; she was quick to cover up. "Pretty legs," he commented. "Who gets to first base with you? Me or Vodun?"

"Neither, I hope. Let me up and I'll get you another drink. I am not offering anything else."

He watched her move. She had the lithe form of a wood sprite. He had learned earlier that he was truly outclassed by his leader and the swamp princess, Andala. Since he might be dismissed earlier than expected, he decided to act.

"Did you bring the amulet? If you did, I can redeem myself in the eyes of Princess Andala. If you did not, I shall have to report my failure and remand you to the higher authority as it would be."

“Look, Lucifer. I’ve had it with you. These past few days have been a nightmare. I don’t need you to push me around. Vodun is getting the answer I need to my security question. That lets you out in the cold, so to speak.”

He sipped the drink and speculated. His eyes roamed her stunning body. “Since you have survived all that we contrived and still are not willing to hand over our property, I have a double barrel shot for you.”

She tugged her skirt to cover as much of her legs as possible but remained seated with a dignified bearing. “Double shot sounds like you spend too much time at the bar. What is this all about?”

He ran both hands under her skirt and grasped her thigh. There was no denying his strength. “I have an offer. One, I’ll leave here and bother you no more. Astonished, are you? Secondly, I’ll provide the factual data about your sister that I came across while perusing your file. I will make it available to you when Vodun takes me off the case. I expect that to be soon from what you’ve said and the comments today.”

“Agreed; what do you want in return as if I didn’t know?”

He moved the two wandering hands to her hips and whistled, showing his admiration. “I said I would leave here but didn’t say when. That part is up to you.”

“I see; this might be awkward. Dani Guice, only one of your victims, plans to meet me at Moses Bar & Lounge when he leaves the hospital later tonight. If I am not there, he will come here thinking I’m napping or some such.”

“Ah, opportunity knocks but once or so I’ve noticed. We have the makings of a genuine *ménage à trois*, I do believe.”

Amanda’s eyes flashed in anger. “I’m sorry this didn’t work out for you. The events you masterminded fell on deaf ears. I’m trying to pick up the pieces. You are detestable in the extreme.”

He took a generous gulp of his drink and set the glass aside. “What you think of me is none of my concern. Do we have an agreement?”

Tears tumbled down her cheeks. “I had a vision some time ago which I inadvertently thought was my own reflection. It was my twin sister. It was the spirit world’s way of telling me she is alive. Without this image in my mind, I would have dismissed your offer as mere bravado. With Grandmere gone from my life, finding Daphne is so much more important.”

As she rambled on voicing her thoughts, he continued caressing her body. The long dazzling legs with the shapely turns were splayed for him. He licked his lips and knelt to use his sinewy shoulders to keep her legs apart. He looked up to see her eyes closed and a grim set of his lips.

An involuntary moan escaped when she felt his firm tongue probing her pubic patch. She endured and the notion blared in her brain that, indeed, after this night, she would no longer have her virtue. With Dani Guice, such a circumstance was not a factor. Somehow that comforted her. Her mind was working at frantic speed. ‘Encourage him, coddle and stimulate him, appeal to his masculinity,’ she thought. ‘If I can make him climax, he will have no energy left for further intrusions on my physical body.’ She threw her arms down and held his head in place. Thrashing her hips, she

urged him to continue the lapping and sucking giving him so much pleasure.

“Um,” he said, relishing the change in her attitude. “So, a busy tongue can loosen you up. The cake of ice turns to steam.” He went back to lapping with strong strokes of the flat of his tongue.

Abruptly, he stopped and moved onto her tummy. Wet kisses made a pathway there. His stubby fingers tore at her blouse until her breasts were bare, inviting, tantalizing, and ready. He used both hands and his lips to toy with her pert breasts. She realized he was in a special haven of his own making. It was a small jump in the poignant event when Faye’s erotic adventure with her came to mind. Many times she had recalled the strong cock pulsing in her mouth. Yet, she considered, this ugly man between her legs brought all her experience down with a crush. ‘This is not good for a girl’s ego,’ she turned the words over in her head. ‘Dani was more exciting because Dani brought a storm of affection with every touch.’

“Why did you stop?” She tried to turn away from him but his strength made it impossible.

He smiled with grand indulgence. “Do not turn a simple caress into a battle of wills and wit.”

“Do not go back on your word.”

He ran his fingers through her hair, along her brow and touched her lips. “Gorgeous; guess I’m being impatient, I want that mouth so much.”

In the throes of passion, Lucifer lost his hat and the scar from his eyebrow into his hairline was blood red. “You have to understand I’ve very little experience in this escapade you are on. You have taught me a valu-

able lesson, however, no more men for me; I like girls only."

He ran one finger along the ridge of her mons. "You can get lots of head from girls, as well. You are a walking sex magnet."

"Dani Guice will be the one to take care of that."

He stood quickly and watched her stare as if she did not comprehend what was happening. He let the ends of his wide belt hang loose. "On your knees, pretty Amanda Delphine. I've earned this whether you believe it or not."

That was the moment time stood still for the hapless girl. She moved slowly as if in a stupor, coming close enough to tug at his zipper. The folds of his black denim jeans parted easily. She grasped his erection and looked up at him.

"This is new to me. My fiancé doesn't have this any more so I don't need lessons." She closed her eyes when she felt both of his hands on the sides of her head. She yielded, pursed as for a kiss and accepted the engorged corona between her lips. He pushed and pulled until the huge cock worked into her mouth.

The sight of her kneeling in front of him, breasts bobbing with the body moves, was a panorama of delicious flesh. Her firm lips were drenched in saliva and she swallowed to keep her throat clear. When she moved both hands onto his cock to keep the pressure, it was a moment so wrought with ecstasy, he was unable to hide his growing awe. "Go, darling girl; that's perfect," he called out. His hips gyrated and he continued guiding her head by lacing his fingers through her hair.

She broke off and slid sideways to rest her head on the sofa cushion. "I tried but you didn't come; I expected it."

In a rare moment, his voice was gentle as if he cared about her concern. "Come with me, please," he said and pulled her to her feet.

In the cozy bedroom, he carefully removed all her clothing and pushed her onto the narrow bunk. On top of her, he shoved her legs apart, held his ready cock still wet with saliva, and set it between the outer vaginal lips. She angled her hips to receive him and squealed when he rammed her in a fit of rapture.

"Oh, no!" she called out but it might have as well been the wind. His final invasion lasted longer than she had imagined and she feared for the ejaculation to come. Without any protection from disease or pregnancy, she screamed in panic. "Get off me, you horny monster." He kept plunging, grunting and heaving until he captured her hips with strong arms and snuggled his face in her neck. She felt the pulsing warmth and knew it was over.

"Not only are you beautiful, you have a talent; marvelous," he said and withdrew. "No man can resist you now; you will wear your veteran status like a badge. You can get one of those flowery tattoos on your tummy with a heart."

She shoved him away and ran for the bathroom. When she came back, he was gone. It was over.

XII.

"If you did not bring the *Eye Of The Lotus*, why are you here?" Vodun boomed in a voice loud enough to

alert the undead. He looked Amanda and Dani Guice up and down. "And who is this pleasant girl?"

Amanda pointed her toes together which she sometimes did when nervous. "This is Dani Guice, my fiancé," she said as if breaking thin ice that sometimes forms on chilly mornings on the bayou. "You don't remember Danny or, perhaps, he was not of interest."

"Fiancé, indeed!" His mouth was trim. "You can't marry a girl; not on my temple agenda."

Amanda relaxed and smiled. Dani frowned and again wondered why Amanda had dragged him on such a journey.

"We have it planned. Dani has male identification. He only needs to dress as a guy; nobody at the Justice of the Peace will ask him to drop his trousers for inspection."

Vodun squinted. "I see. Again, dear lady of the shadows, why are you here?"

"For your sanction, of course."

Vodun stomped one shoe on the decaying vegetation. "You absolutely astonish me. I told you not to return here without the talisman. Now here you are with a lover. The man you have named Lucifer has been released from his mission so I claim credit for that part of my agreement with you. It will be in effect when the *Eye Of The Lotus* is ours." He was impatient and kept looking aside for someone else he expected.

Amanda spoke up with a firm voice. "Then, are we to await the final word from Princess Andala? Can one ratify a verbal agreement?"

Vodun sneered at them. "Get out! Any further security agreements are for the princess to decide. I'm sick

of your nagging innuendo. It is obvious the liberties Lucifer took with your nubile body are of no concern to your fiancé. Good day!"

They both hurried to the boat landing. "Wow!" Dani said, taking her hand as they walked. "What is Vodun pissed about?"

"They have been playing hell with my life and have vowed to continue unless I give them the family jewel. It is a call for bribery, pure and simple, but I don't need any more difficulty. Even the fear of the unknown is daunting."

Dani sighed. "First you blame yourself for my wrecked car and more damaged body. Next, a couple of the local hoods work me over, sending me to Touro Infirmary. You are convinced these zombie lovers are somehow complicit in Noranda's passing. A spirit named Lucifer has terrorized the staff at Moses Bar & Lounge and raped you, leaving blood stains on the sheets of our pad. Do you honestly think Princess Andala gives a rat's ass about any of this? You have the message; why not give them the *Eye Of The Lotus*? It is obviously of more value to them than us."

Amanda stopped and they embraced. She welcomed Dani's kiss. "I read somewhere that fighting men continue pressing a lost cause in fear they are not respecting their fallen comrades. I must do this, Dani, for our future. Very few of the temple membership have ever seen Princess Andala and conversation with her is restricted to the nobility. You are correct, the icon is held in high regard. In Grandmere's memory and so we can move ahead with confidence, I want assurance. Is that so difficult to understand?"

Dani hugged her again and they were soon at the home Amanda always referred to as 'Grandmere's'.

Amanda showed Dani where the pouch of charms and powerful fetish symbols was hidden.

Sitting on the front wrap-around porch, they held hands and watched the last warmth of the day disappear into the shadows on the bayou trail. As if on a magic mystical clock, the drums slowly began their off-beat cadence. It was so familiar to them, the incident went without notice. That was when Hattie came around the corner of the house.

“Miss Amanda,” she said, her voice slightly trembling. “It is time.”

Amanda had learned many years ago not to doubt Hattie’s special line to the occult. Grandmere had explained Hattie’s loyalty protected her in life’s trials. Considering that, Amanda had to agree. She nodded and watched Hattie leave.

“I have to go,” Amanda said. “Hattie will fix supper. Do not wait up for me but put a reminder light in the window so ‘they’ will know I have the message.”

Again, as it had happened that once before, the wind whipped unseasonable white caps on the usually placid back-waters of Bayou Teche. Amanda did not fight the determined current and soon found herself and pirogue on the far shore of an island she did not remember.

A twilight moon winked through the branches as the evening gusts played with the boughs. Finding a narrow path along the riparian shore, she followed it until it turned into the wetlands. She hesitated, uncertain if she should continue. Moving slowly, some briars pulled at her skirt as she found her way.

Some movement on either side of the path alerted her to the fact she was being followed. Persisting, she

came on a clearing with a backdrop of cypress and pine. That was when she saw a figure waiting for her.

Having never seen the famous princess, she didn't know who it was. She was dressed in a flowing robe tacked with black ribbon at the shoulders. There were two slats of black velvet sprinkled with sequins that rolled neatly over her slender hips. A jeweled hairpiece highlighted her face.

Amanda stepped closer. The gathering darkness made it difficult. "I have reason to believe I have been summoned by the princess Andala. Could you direct me, please? I have urgent business with her."

The breathtaking woman, the most beautiful Amanda had ever seen, motioned to her. She dutifully followed but kept looking to the area for anyone or anything that might identify this as royal ground.

At a turn in the path they came upon a stairway that led to a dimly lighted chamber of white stone open to the sky. Amanda acknowledged she was more nervous than she had ever been. Considering what this celestial woman had put her through, her past faded to the present.

"You are welcome here, Amanda Delphine. I am Princess Andala; this is my home."

Amanda gulped. She had seen pictures of court officials in the presence of the king and queen but still did not know if she should genuflect or remain standing for instruction. She waited. "As I said, Princess Andala, I have an urgent issue that needs resolution."

Andala smiled, showing sparkling white teeth, full lips and dark lustrous eyes. "I know about the *Eye Of The Lotus*. As well, I am familiar with your recent trials

so designed to force you to surrender the talisman. What fear?"

Amanda swallowed. "Your strength is demonstrated, a support to your credibility. I will do as you wish with the ancestral jewel in return for safe passage for me and my intended in the future. Briefly, Princess Andala, if there was a battle raging between us, you have clearly vanquished me. Your priest and his operative consistently have told me the jewel is not mine. I believe otherwise but there seems no reason to prolong a life of sham and tribulation for the sake of it."

Andala smiled. "Come, sit next to me." She offered her hand as she settled on a leather covered bench against one wall. "This altercation has gone too far and is blown out of proportion. My reports have been accurate, no doubt, and include descriptions of how ravishing you are. I must say, those comments are understated. Curiosity between two women that covet their appearance is not the domain; I hope you understand."

"You went to all this trouble to meet me? That is flattering. Uh, your royal person, um, I mean, whatever, what is your title?"

Andala laughed. "Please, dear girl; just Andala will do. I have been in this lofty position for far too long to stand on ceremony."

"Then you agree to allow my freedom in return for the *Eye Of The Lotus*? Is that all you wish of me?" She looked down when Andala took her hand and fondled it with her thumb.

"You are apparently unaware that the *Eye Of The Lotus* has an unusual mystic power. Mere possession is not confined in any way. If, as you contend, the jewel

belongs to you, it is very possible the magical power will follow you all of your life. It is an ancestral gift with enormous potential. I want it!"

"Uh, Andala, please hear me out. I wish your nod for my marriage to Dani Guice. I feel that would be a most memorable gift."

"You do not love this cripple. Why are you throwing your life away on a lover so restricted?"

"He has taken up living as a modern woman to adjust to his infirmity. I am somewhat responsible for his condition because he responded irrationally to my behavior toward him. Since this is the case, I am resigned to my fate."

"I see; to another matter. I did not allow the man you call Lucifer to rape you which is what he did. Had he asked for permission in order to strengthen our cause, I would have denied it. Though we have power, we are few in number. He will no longer enjoy the fruits of assignments with us."

Amanda smiled wondering if it was all right to be consoled. "Thank you; with your act, I can be comforted he will not be able to coerce other comely victims in the future."

"Are you surprised I know so much about you?"

"No, not surprised but our meeting has filled me with newfound respect for your station. If there is nothing more, I petition to leave. I will deliver the talisman to Vodun at first opportunity."

"Not so fast," Andala said still holding Amanda's hand firmly in both of

hers. "Meeting you has verified your beauty like a routine stamp of approval. It has been a long time since

I've had this opportunity. I am asking; take this as a friendly request, you should remain here with me. You have that singular attraction I find irresistible."

Amanda blinked and called on her special brain committee. 'Omigod; this gorgeous creature is coming-on to me. She already knows she can have anything she wants. Maybe she enjoys the game, cat-and-mouse. Which is the winner here?' She took a deep breath and forged ahead.

"I am at your service, Andala," she said with a nervous stutter.

"Good; you are already experienced in this singular matter. Come with me." She led Amanda through some draperies to a lower level and into a well-appointed apartment.

Andala's kiss was a study in the art of seduction. They sank onto a wide bed together. More kisses lighted a fire in Amanda's loins. "Please, Andala, I am smitten. What do you believe gives me the edge with some special experience? Where are you taking me?"

"Oral sex," the comely princess whispered like it was erotic lightning.

"You are correct, Princess. Only on a few occasions has anyone rested between my legs."

"Oh? I have a note that you had an early-on affair with Faye Sienna. Is that not correct?"

Amanda felt dizzy with the anticipated delights. "Please; Faye Sienna is a transgender candidate. I was only asked to use my mouth."

"Precisely what I desire of you," the astonishing woman said firmly.

"What, exactly?" Amanda asked.

Andala kissed her again and fondled the budding nubile breasts. "It is the final touch of the carnal relationship, darling. I want your mouth."

Amanda later emerged from the island royal house. She basked in the intense feelings.

Amanda reached the shore just as dawn was breaking. Of all the movement on her arrival the evening before, being watched and monitored, nobody showed up to guide her. She was lost in a torrent of feeling much more burdensome than a hangover but immensely satisfied. Having spent hours catering to the whims of the adorable princess, she was slowly being enveloped with a cloud of exhaustion. She had so many orgasms she was beyond counting them and harbored no doubt that her intense sexual forays on the comely princess had a like effect.

She released the mooring rope and was grateful for a gathering breeze at her back. At home she slumped into bed and was soon in the arms of Morpheus.

That evening, she was rummaging around in the shed collecting her pouch and the talisman. Dani Guice was standing in the doorway grinning.

"How was the meeting?" Dani asked.

Amanda looked up and wiped a strand of hair from her face. "We are home free," she answered. "You'll never believe what happened."

"Try me," he said still smiling.

"I got laid, as is the saying. It was marvelous."

"I'm proud of you. Shall I go with you to the temple? We need to return the pouch and deliver the amulet thingy."

“Yes; Hattie fixed me a delicious meal but I’m still not up to a repeat of last night. That royal woman is a sexual dynamo.”

They wandered along the bayou path lugging the items to be returned to their space in the temple. Vodun was gracious and obviously anxious to view the elusive jewel that caused so much commotion.

“It is stunning,” he said.

“Where to now, lovely lady?” Dani asked.

“I owe Faye Sienna an explanation so she won’t be so paranoid. It isn’t likely she will believe me at first but, upon honest reflection, she might see the light. I really need that job so we have to be on our best behavior.”

Dani Guice dropped her off at Moses Bar & Lounge on his way to the studio apartment. Later, he stood up when Amanda came in. “This came for you a few minutes ago. Personal courier, yet. I had to sign for it.”

Amanda saw the letter was addressed to her so she read it. “It is the release Lucifer promised. Nice of him; actually, I cost him his job so I would think he would be angry. I guess he feels ashamed for the way he treated me. Oh well, it’s over now.” She re-read one of the paragraphs. “Look here; there is a bank letter of credit attached. He says we are to take the money and follow this map he enclosed.”

Dani peered over her shoulder. “So melodramatic. A treasure map. Call on the pirate, Jean Lafitte. What do you think it means?”

Amanda sighed. “Not sure but he did promise something like this. I didn’t believe him then and I can’t get excited now. Yet, a substantial sum of money does speak eloquently, you must agree.”

“That bank is just across Canal Street on Baronne Street. Let’s go.”

XIII.

With more money than either of them had ever seen, they stopped to inquire at the travel desk in the Monteleone Hotel lobby.

The travel agent booked them on a flight to Antigua with a boat connection on a sixty-eight foot sailing schooner, the Shanghai Joe. They had a schedule and took a few days to prepare.

“I understand that sailboat schedule is not reliable,” Dani Guice said. “Maybe we will have to wait for it. I can think of nothing better than to get you all to myself in some tropical hotel.”

Amanda grinned. “My lecherous friend, you are appreciated. Were you concerned about Faye Sienna? She really is a special friend even if her life goals are weird in most people’s eyes.”

Dani was thoughtful. “With what she has between those pretty legs, I can be properly envious. Why in the world she wants to get that pole chopped off is beyond me. It seems she has the best of both worlds as she now stands.”

Amanda chuckled. “It’s her body, after all. She has the choice which is entirely her affair, I should think. I have to admire your even temper. You have emerged from a bundle of trouble to be my wonderful lover. I’d not have it any other way.”

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"This is no ordinary sailboat," Dani said, admiring the lines of the old schooner. "The harbor master told me it is used to wander from port to port carrying passengers, cargo, uh, like that. What a good life."

They were greeted at the boarding ramp by the captain and a crewman with a clipboard. Their luggage was hustled to their stateroom.

The captain looked at the two of them. "Um, two girls on an adventure, I see. I would think you would be destined for the Middlesex Clinic on Martinique. Many, uh, transgender people go there. It is hard to tell which of you might be a candidate for a sex change."

Dani smiled after he recovered from the captain's forward remarks. "I'm the one in recovery," Dani said. "I was in an auto wreck; spent months in surgery followed up by rehab. This pretty girl is my fiancée. We are taking this leisure cruise to get over some difficult times in life."

"Not unusual from my view," the captain said. He glanced at Amanda. "You are a fortunate one, for certain. Perhaps we can get acquainted later. We will be at Admiralty Bay in a day or so. The English are there in force; very hospitable."

"Thank you, Captain," Amanda said and took Dani's arm. She didn't miss the leering demeanor. It made her uncomfortable. "We can get settled in now."

Several days in the open air, fresh as the seasons, did both Amanda and Dani a world of good.

They awoke early one morning when first light was coloring the ocean. They were fascinated by the efficiency on deck to berth the large boat.

After going ashore and showing their passports to customs, they were directed to a transfer taxi, called a 'publico,' to go to the town of Mindelo down the coast.

"Noranda told me some years ago that her great-grandparents came through here on their way north. She said her past was hers alone, a secret and I should not delve into matters lost to the ancients."

"Does Noranda's secret have anything to do with why we are here?" Dani asked.

"Probably but she wouldn't say anything about these islands. It was as if there was some threat but that's pretty silly."

The taxi lurched around a corner and they came on their first view of their destination. "This is Mindelo," the driver said. "The rise over there is Monte Cara Mountain. It is known for the vast deposits of precious and semi-precious stones."

Dani and Amanda exchanged glances.

Arriving at the hotel, the registration clerk welcomed them to the Cape Verde Islands.

They were approached in the lobby by a striking girl, so smartly dressed and friendly that they assumed she was a hostess of some kind. Yet, Amanda saw right away how much the 'hostess' resembled her. She caught her breath.

The attractive woman smiled and offered her hand in greeting.

"I am Daphne Delphine," she said.

The End