

# Jack's Pack



# Monica James



An "Adult Tv" Novel



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# Jack's Pack

by **Monica James**

“So, welcome back to our world,” Jack said, leaning over Bren’s limp form on the bunk.

Bren started to get up by pushing on his elbows. “Worst headache ever,” he said and fell back on the pillow. With effort he was able to focus on Jack and the gloomy room. He winced when he felt the older man touch the bruise on his head. The damp cloth did little to stop the throbbing. “How did I get here?”

“We found you asleep or passed out, in the alcove,” Jack said softly. “We surmised you had been in a fight, maybe rolled, whatever.”

“Yes, I remember now. I had stopped after work for a frozen globe of beer. Some guys were shooting pool. They were drinking, I think, because they were excited about the game.” He sighed and was able to sit up. “I work at the Global Store; just a sales clerk. Nothing earth shattering about that.” He patted his trouser pockets and realized his wallet was gone.

Jack rinsed the cloth in a bowl on the floor. "This is Basin Street," he said with a grin. "You better rest here unless you want to go to the clinic. They patch up unfortunates like you," he chuckled. "So, did you have a lot of cash with you? Is that what prompted all this?"

"I cashed my weekend commission check. I don't usually but I wanted to have some cash for a guy I know. He is a transvestite and needed to get something for his fancy costume before going out to a party, French Quarter style."

Jack spread a light coverlet over Bren. "You are a good friend, no doubt about that. Is your friend gay or just sporting an adventurous nature?"

Bren managed a smile. "We worked together for the holiday season but they let him go when the sales were over. He never indicated his preference and I didn't ask."

"New Orleans French Quarter is an enchanted place. All kinds of human creatures and types. You seem to place enough value on him to trust him. Maybe he wants to get to know you better, uh, in an intimate way." Jack wrung out the cloth and set it aside. "You are a 'looker' as the Brits say. Glad you didn't spend the entire night with a bloody face. We brought you here for now."

"I'm expected at work around noon," Bren whispered casually. "If I'm too messed up, I'll have to call in. I need to tell my floor supervisor what happened. Do you think I need stitches?"

Jack brushed a chock of unruly hair off Bren's forehead. "The bleeding has stopped and there is more of a bruise than a break. I think you'll be OK if you just rest. Are you hungry? I'm the cook on Saturdays."

"No, thanks. I feel a bit nauseous; I guess that's to be expected. You have been great to take me in like this. I owe you."

“I’ll help you into the bath if you like,” Jack said. “From there, it’s off to bed after you make your call.” He lifted Bren. Later he was pleased when he heard the water running. He started the water for the French Press and plopped some bread slices into the toaster. He looked up when Bren came limping into the room.

“Coffee smells always get my attention.” He sat down at the table and sniffed the steaming brew. “I’d like to pay you for your trouble. Do you live alone?”

“There are four bunks here. We have one vacancy because that guy ran off to Europe to test the biking trails or some such nonsense.” He chuckled. “You can have the vacancy if you want to stay awhile. As for the expense; forget it. You would do the same for any of us.”

Bren smiled. “For sure. I walk to-and-from my job every day. This is the first time I’ve had any trouble. As for that, I don’t remember much after the first punch.” He again made an effort to smile at the irony.

Jack helped him to the empty bunk. He replaced the torn shirt with a fresh tee, puffed up the pillow and gently guided Bren down. He tucked the covers around the youth and was happy to watch Bren fall immediately asleep. After folding the blanket around Bren’s feet, he took off the shoes and socks. He ran one hand along Bren’s hips, along his thighs and again covered his feet.

In the kitchen, Jack looked up to see Bren in the doorway. He was supporting himself by holding onto the frame. “I thought I could do better,” he said and wobbled to the chair Jack held for him. “Can I ask a question?”

“You just did,” Jack said smiling. “Sorry; bad joke. What?”

Bren sipped a fresh cup of coffee. “My fly was open when I woke up. What’s that all about?”

“Are you offended? Let me explain,” Jack said after a slight hesitation. “I went in to check on you and noticed you had a raging erection. From that I assumed you were having an erotic dream. Do you recall?”

“No but I sometimes do,” Bren whispered more to himself than to Jack. “After all, I’m mature enough for an early twenty-something.” He grinned. “Just not experienced.”

“Did you think I took my way with you? I wouldn’t do that; not my style.”

“Explain that. What is your style, exactly?”

Jack leaned closer, elbows on the table, and stared at Bren for a long, quiet moment. “I hate to answer a question with a question but, well, did your transvestite friend hit on you?”

“Maybe a few times but I just laughed it off. I’ve never had sex, any kind or any gender. You probably can’t understand that.”

“Oh, but I can. It was all part of growing up in the years ‘way back when.’ I was about twelve when a couple friends held me down and pulled off my pants. I was angry, of course, but after lots of thought I didn’t stay mad at them.”

Bren looked shocked. “Those were your friends? You didn’t need enemies at that age.”

“I know this is silly. Looking back on those adolescent escapades, I’m glad it happened the way it did.”

Bren frowned. “Which way was that?”

Jack poured more coffee for himself and refreshed the mug Bren was holding. “Those kids were just all talk. It was a substitute for the reality, I suppose. Later, we had ‘jacking-off sessions.’ It was the fun and fantasy. We had pin-up girls, all, uh, like that. I kept the juices flowing. If you’re laughing at this, you are correct. It was childish.”

“Yes; I’ve seen the videos. Is this your ‘style’ you were telling me about? How does that work?”

Jack exhaled as if he was keeping a lung full of secrets. “More than just oral satisfaction doing what your transvestite friend had in mind, which is probably why you resisted. Do you like this guy? I mean, well, you did loan him money, right?”

“Yes—he is the kind of friend you can trust to help when you may need it. I try to be that kind, as well. Physically, you are better looking but we haven’t had time to get to know each other. His name is Steve and he has told me about some of the parties on Orleans Street close to the cathedral. I only suggest he enjoy and that I don’t want to join in.”

Jack stood up. He fastidiously put his chair back. “Which brings us to our big Saturday Night. There will be lots of food and drink. Also, the location is a few blocks from here. It’s a private hall on Decatur Street. Want to go?”

“No; not this time. I’m not in good enough shape to concentrate on socializing. I am curious about what you and Steve want from me.” His eyes shone bright at the thought and, in that brief minute, wondered why all of a sudden he was interested. “We are about the same size. Do you crossdress like Steve does?”

Jack chuckled and walked to the sink. He put the breakfast dishes in the drain rack. “It’s fun. Not many chances to be a completely different person for a little while. You can be a cowboy, bar girl, waiter, anything that appeals to you. Of course, it always ends as expected.”

Bren shook his head ‘no’. “I want to try but give me a little time, OK?”

“Sure,” Jack answered quickly and turned away from the sink. He approached Bren from behind and let both hands rest on Bren’s shoulders. His strong fingers massaged the tight muscles around Bren’s neck and onto his back. “Do you like me doing this?”

"I guess. What costume do you have for me? Do you pretend as a masseuse? You sure went right to the core of my headache."

"You catch on quick. A masseuse is a woman who practices massage. A guy would be a masseur, to keep the terms." He reached over and slid one hand beneath Bren's tee, then just as quickly withdrew it. "Come on, guy. You can barely stay conscious even though you might be just a tad excited. Let me see you to your bunk. You can observe us before we leave for the party. It has to be a sight you won't forget." He laughed and turned back the covers on Bren's bunk. "You can use my phone if you want to check in with Steve. He might be concerned for your safety about now."

Bren sighed and accepted the phone. Jack left the room and, when he did, Bren felt a gnawing in his stomach like regret or disappointment. How, he asked himself, can I miss being with an almost complete stranger?

"Steve, this is Bren. Sorry about the delay. I was rolled after I left work yesterday. I lost my wallet, phone, cash, cards, all of it." He sobbed, "I know you plan to go out tonight but can you go by my place and get the numbers so I can report lost credit and debit cards? Here; jot down this address."

Later, Steve showed up at Jack's door. He was dressed for the party. "Come in; we have some fresh coffee," Jack said waving him to the kitchen. "Bren is asleep which is probably good. You look terrific."

Steve was dressed in a faux embroidered tunic, open from the neck to the waist. His white, brushed linen slacks were tight riding on his hips but flared to 'bell bottoms' below the calves. He had shown restraint in makeup with light rouge cheeks, faintly colored lips that matched similar eye shadow.

"How bad is it?" he asked glancing toward the bedroom. "I've warned him more than once to avoid that



walk at night. For some reason I'll never understand. His pad, though very modest, is not in the best locale."

Jack frowned. "Well, he's in bad shape now. He can stay here to see how he recovers. No problem." He was thoughtful. "It's easy for us to surmise how all this happened. He had cash money which he tells me is for you to make some purchase. Also, he is, ah, handsome but in a vulnerable way, May I say 'hot'?"

"Agreed! He hasn't sorted out all the feelings yet. I'm not the only one who would like to be around when he does attach a name and action to his lifestyle. Do you think he should see a medic? He has an insurance for it at his work. Concussion can be very subtle sometimes. Maybe he just received a few punches but watching his recovery, as you suggest, seems right to me. It can be as simple as a few aches and pain from bruises."

Jack smiled, showing even, capped teeth. "When I grow up I would be very happy to have a friend like you." He chuckled.

"You look grown-up to me," Steve said. They laughed together until Steve glanced at his watch. He slapped his knee and stood up. "I'll be on my way after I look in on your patient. Please let me know if there is anything that needs to be done or whatever." He approached Bren's bunk and, seeing him awake, sat next to him.

Bren tried to sit up but whimpered and lay back down. "Thanks for coming. Also, thanks for not saying it."

Steve frowned and then asked, "Saying what?"

"I told you so." He closed his eyes and shook slightly as if in pain. "My head is in a fog right now. Sorry I'm not better company. I'll be able to pay for my keep here and they are very hospitable."

Steve turned at the door. "I'll check up on you later. Jack knows to get in touch if I'm needed. Take care." He closed the door gently behind him.

"Enjoy your party," Bren said wistfully. Then he sank back down, closed his eyes and was asleep.

## I.

Bren awakened to some commotion in the hall. Darkness at the window told him it was yet the early hours. The city embraced the coming dawn with shadows.

Jack sat on the edge of the bunk. "Hey, young invalid," he said cheerfully. He gently slapped Bren's cheek and giggled. "Did you rest?"

Bren smiled. "What did you put in that coffee besides chicory? I didn't know anything until just now. How was the party?"

"Fun. But there was a girl from the clinic there. She dresses as a guy and surprises the rest of us by packing."

"Packing?" Bren asked, "Like for a trip?"

Jack burst out laughing. He guffawed. "Neat, guy; no. When a gal cross-dresses she shows others what she has in mind by wearing an oversize strap-on dildo. It's all in fun, of course." He touched Bren's lips with one finger and next pressed his forehead. "No fever; you must be improving. Anyhow, the reason I mentioned my cross-dressing friend from the clinic, she had some pointers on your recovery. First, she suggested you come in for a checkup as there is always a possibility some real damage was done. Since you seem to be improving, she urged bed rest and

slow activity to see if it makes you dizzy, nauseated or whatever.”

Bren frowned and sat up. “Maybe the activity includes something to eat. Do I catch the scent of sizzling bacon?”

Jack laughed. “Our life is turned around, certainly. You get breakfast to start your day. The rest of us sail into the sack to mark the close of another day of debauchery. Can you come to the table?”

“Yes but you have to promise to let me pay for all this marvelous attention.”

Jack helped him to the breakfast nook. “Do not worry; we’ll think of something. The important item on the agenda is getting you well.”

Later that same day, Bren woke when he felt the weight on his bed. Steve had come to visit.

“Hey! I’m told you’re doing better. I brought four po’boy dressed for everyone.” He laughed. “Of course, you get to pay for it.” He touched Bren’s forehead. “Umm; no fever.” He gently pressed Bren’s lips.

“That tickles,” Bren said. He quickly touched with the tip of his tongue and smiled. He parted when Steve put one finger in far enough to be felt.

“Have any of these guys ‘hit’ on you? You must be a rousing temptation. That is, uh, handsome young boy so vulnerable.”

“No but I’m aware of the tension sometimes; Jack keeps close watch.”

“No doubt keeping you for himself. How do you feel about that?”

Bren was pensive. “Isn’t that what you are doing right now? Do you think I’m a sex object? You have never shown me that side of yourself.”

Steve sighed. “There have been overwhelming times, of course. But, most important is our friendship. I don’t want to put any distance between us that neither can handle. Does that make sense? Am I correct in assuming you’ve not had sex with a guy?”

“Well, yes. Also, never with a girl. I’ve often thought I’d welcome some physical attention, boy or girl, but I have an egg shell for protection. Easily cracked but most difficult to undo.”

Steve let one hand drop onto Bren’s lap and pressured the slight bulge in his pajamas. “If you stay here in this permissive atmosphere, it is a matter of time. The saying is that if you hang around the barber shop, you’ll probably get a haircut. Sooner-or-later, that is. So, may I ask now?”

“Ask what? Yes.”

Steve stammered, nervous. “I’m not as experienced as some of these guys here. No doubt. To make your situation clear, I’m asking that you let me be first. How do you feel about that?”

“Can I think about it? There is no rush, is there? You are right about the interest here; seems pervasive. If I need to, I can say I am promised to you and need some respect. Is that what you had in mind?”

Steve stood tall next to the bed. “I’ll visit again soon. Listen, little friend, if something does happen, be assured I’ll not change my mind. Regret can throw a shadow of guilt over us both but only if we let it.” He quickly leaned close and kissed Bren on the forehead. In a brief moment he was gone.

Bren chose to join the conviviality at the Sunday dinner table. The girl from the clinic had arrived in a flourish with two bottles of Napa Valley wine. She immediately gained Bren’s permission for a quick checkup. When he agreed, she swiftly opened her leather bag and went to work.

“Temperature; OK.” She smiled happily. “Blood pressure; OK.” Asked to tilt his head back, he blinked when she went through the routine. “Pupils OK.” She bounced in the straight back kitchen chair. “Checkup complete. Let’s eat.” They all laughed and there was a round of soft applause.

Later, the clatter was reduced as the party wound down. Jack came into the room and sat next to Bren.

“You are our celebrity,” he began with a drawl. “Just by your presence here you remind us all to be careful of body and soul when out in the blacktop jungle behind these doors.”

Bren moved to get up. “That was a fun party, good food and guests. You have to keep track of the costs as I intend to repay you for your kindness.”

“Well, yes; sure. But, worry not. You are family.” He touched Bren’s shoulder and pressed in a brief but knowing gesture. “You’ve made us all happy, don’t forget.”

Refreshed after a shower and shave, Bren returned to his bunk. Though he felt only slightly tired, he had a brief flash of dizziness but it soon passed. He fell instantly to sleep.

The kitchen clock registered midnight when Bren awakened to footsteps next to his bunk. Jack pulled up a chair and sat heavily. “Just checking on you,” he said softly. “The kitchen is ready for another day; chores all done.” The scent of soap and cleaning detergent clung to him.

“Oh, I’m OK. Must be because I’m dreaming again. Haha, Childish, I know.”

“Not at all. Just a pleasant fantasy might be all you need for the moment. We all indulge, I do believe.” He pulled the covers aside and tucked him in. “What is your latest captivating thought?”

“Does this surprise you? Sex!” He chuckled self-consciously. “The suggestion, the innuendo maybe, has impressed me. For one, why the emphasis on cross-dressing? Are you hiding, maybe escaping, from a mundane life? Does it work for everyone?”

Jack leaned back in his chair and sighed. “To a degree, yes. Some get satisfaction from the protection, like an alter ego, as the best path to self-expression. Seduction in any form, no matter the gender, is exciting. Have you thought about it? You spend a lot of time in here all alone while the world goes whirling past. Maybe you crave some attention. At the same time, all the action is lusting for your neat body. Do you get hard thinking about any of us? Me? Your friend, Steve?” He moved to get up. “Think about it, handsome boy. You are likely to leave this place as a better man. It is up to us to see that your trip here is not a bitter one, as well.” He walked away in short steps, sadly.

Before inviting a return to sleep, Bren touched his lips with one finger. He opened and let it slide inside. He added another finger and closed. Simulating fellatio, he practiced an in-and-out motion. The other hand stroked tenderly. He knew he was getting an erection and was confused as to why he was excited. He thought about Jack and then turned quickly to Steve; both caring friends. But, why? Steve had been honest in his declaration. Jack was on a different approach. At the dinner table, one chap about Bren’s size offered to dress him for the outing the next weekend. They all laughed at that but Bren knew it was serious. He did not feel he needed to escape from any part of himself. Why did they think that of him? It was something to ponder.

He closed his eyes to sleep but his fantasy kept him alert. Why this yearning? This need? Was it security or social acceptance? What? And this emphasis on being first, like Steve had said with such importance, what was that all about? What would the sensation feel like if Steve or Jack went down on him? It was difficult to imagine. Should he take them up on

their offer and live there? It was only a few steps from the store. That was important protection. Well, he considered further, there was one way to find out and that would be experience. Then the thought hit him. A new realization. He knew the whole package, cross-dressing and gay sex, had a hidden goal. It was not to satisfy him but for him to eventually offer to reciprocate. The thought sobered him. Can I do it?

## II.

The following day, Bren felt well enough to help Jack in the kitchen. He raided the pantry and came up with some Idaho potatoes which he sliced and diced for French Fries. He topped that bowl with sautéed onions, garlic chunks in olive oil. He forced some cash on Jack to order in two large pizzas which arrived just in time as the hungry band of gypsies sat at the table. One late arrival apologized by carefully opening two bottlers of rosé wine. The atmosphere was cheerful.

After the table was cleared, Jack started to clean up. Bren offered to assist but was told that he had done enough and he should get back on the mattress which is what he did. "Get your hot frame into that bed," Jack ordered. Later he came in to thank Bren for the help and praise his cooking. He sat in the chair pulled next to the bed.

Bren had hiked up to rest his back against the bed board. He smiled. "That was fun," he said with a twinkle in his eyes. "It's such a relief to be able to get around enough to help out."

Jack nodded. "I talked briefly with Steve when he visited you last. Did you two discuss the issue?"

Bren closed his eyes and after inhaling let out a deep breath. "And by 'issue', you mean what exactly?"

“Like we talked about before. You growing up.” Jack turned his wan smile. “As if you didn’t know.” He felt Bren’s hip and drew a gentle line lower. “Sex.”

“I do not want to seem ungrateful and I have decided to accept your offer to live here. But, as to an open-door policy to my bedroom, I’m not so sure. Did Steve say anything to you?”

“Yes but I want to hear it from you or to at least confirm.”

“We have a personal agreement,” Bren answered slowly, with conviction. “We are committed until either of us doesn’t want a relationship any longer. Can you accept that? I know it is not what you wanted to hear.”

“I can be honest. I like having you here and, really, like everyone else, we want you to be well and happy. Also,” he hesitated and showed his wide grin. “You have a good job. We live better.”

“Thanks. It seems getting mugged and rolled turned out better than those thugs intended.”

Jack relaxed but his eyes blazed with feeling. “Why did they attack you? Did you say or do anything to cause it?”

“Nothing. I was taking my usual path toward my place when one of them ran up behind me and grabbed my behind. I turned to protect myself and he hit me hard enough in the stomach to make me double over. I felt his hand forcing my crotch. It was a violation and I was angry. That was when the other two jumped me. I woke up here.”

“Well, it’s over now. You are handsome but more than that, you have a fetching way in your demeanor, walk and posture. In a word you are ‘hot’; a commodity if there is such a circumstance. We all see it and, truth be told, we all want a piece of you, so to speak. But I hope you’ve noticed, none will force you to find personal satisfaction. This is not like the old days not

far from here when gentlemen of note took to dueling to settle their differences.” He kept fondling Bren’s knee. “Please, give us some thought, I respect your fit with Steve; he’s a right kind of guy.”

Bren watched his savior stand and slowly leave the room as if weighed down with a burden. He began to think over what had transpired and the regret turned to shame like Steve had mentioned. The affectionate handling on his knees was missed as he pulled the covers up to his chin. ‘What,’ he asked himself, ‘if I had accepted him instead of running him off?’ What if? What if? Next he was asleep in tune with a renewed sensual dream.

Later in the week, Bren returned from work to find a very feminine outfit hanging on his door. He smiled at the indulgence. There was a white-on-white vest with silver buttons wrapped over a blue blouse with lighter blue polka dots. The skirt was full with a broad hem colored in Italian hues and phrases. Unsure about the ankle boots, he found they fit perfectly.

“It’s your outfit for Saturday night,” Jack said. He was smiling widely as he leaned against the door frame. “Relax, guy. If you get a hard-on, some enterprising guest will want to see if you are packing.” He laughed. “I’ll be with you—just in case.”

After dinner, Bren proudly displayed his ‘costume’ for Steve when he arrived. He offered to try it on, like a fitting room at his store, but Steve declined. Not his thing, Bren decided.

Friday evening, Bren came in too late to support dinner chores. “I was helping with the inventory,” he explained but nobody seemed to mind. Tired to the core, he showered and was soon in shorty pajamas and between the welcome sheets.

In the small hours before dawn he awoke to noises in his room. One person tested his forehead and remarked he seemed slightly feverish. Bren recognized

Jack's voice. A second person left the room for a cool cloth.

"Hey, guys," Bren complained. "It's a bit warm in here is all. I'll be OK in the morning. Go make some coffee or something." He closed his eyes and dozed off.

"Move over; you're hogging the bed," Jack said as he stretched out next to Bren and pulled the thin blanket over them both.

"I hope you respect our last discussion. You did make your needs known but I thought I carried my own as well."

Without answer, Jack put one arm across Bren's back and began cruising the inviting torso with his fingertips. Next he leaned close and kissed the flowing flesh of Bren's neck and shoulder. "You were talking in your sleep. We came in to check on you. The cool cloth should be refreshing. Here..." He dabbed Bren's fevered brow and wiped away some perspiration. As Bren seemed to accept the special attention, he leaned back and Jack slid one leg between Bren's muscular thighs. "How nice, pretty boy; real nice."

"Please, Jack. Don't," Bren complained. "I did not ask for this and you know it." Then his eyes shot open at the sudden sensation of Jack's hard cock pressing his stomach. "Ulp! What next? Yes, I feel it. Tell me what you want; anything to avoid a scene."

"Let's talk," Jack said softly still pressing Bren's youthful body. "You have to be aware that this was going to happen to you sooner or later. Be it sooner, you may not be able to plead innocence after tonight."

"I know and, yes, I've thought about it. How could I not? You can feel me if you want."

Jack's agile hand sped lower to first rub, then fondle, Bren's genitals through the thin fabric. "I'm glad you're hard. It tells me you really want some sensual

attention. If I give you a hand job, can you cum for me? Does that work for you?"

"Yes, if you wish," Bren said in garbled voice. "I think I need this." He shifted his hips and raised up so Jack could remove his shorty pajamas. He gasped when Jack wrapped firm fingers around his shank to begin a tantalizing motion, up-and-down, over and back. Instinctively, he grasped Jack's strong shoulders to hold on to the moment.

"I know you have thought about it. You want to know how it feels when I go down on you. You can admit it. Perhaps you have Steve in mind but I never believed that story about commitment. You have an impatient way—you want it now." He continued stroking Bren's hard cock. "Answer me!" Jack demanded.

"Yes! I want it," Bren shrieked as if in grief. "If I owe you for all you've done, does this pay my debt? Omigod; don't stop. Not now."

As if on cue, Jack did exact that. He stopped and shifted his weight away from Bren's tremorous body. "Yes and no, to answer your comment. This can well be more than enough payment. Give me your hand."

Slowly, Bren raised his arm until Jack took his hand. He resisted. "Don't fight me," Jack whispered but the joy in his words gave away his need. "Take it in your hand. That's right. Think about it. One day, soon I hope, you will feel me take your sensual mouth. Lips and tongue are perfect for what I have in mind. Now you must do as I ask. It's too late to back out now."

Bren blinked tears away from his eyes. "OK," he answered and tightened his hold. "Take me."

"It is time, then. It's a beginning." Again holding Bren's cock, he positioned his body by hiking down to rest between Bren's outstretched legs. "Um," he said and slipped Bren's quivering cock into his mouth. His tongue gave no relief and he sucked until Bren

threw his labored hips in the air and pumped an orgasm he would remember for years to come.

### III.

All of Jack's household and cadre of friends turned out for the Saturday Night revelry. Competition for most sensational costume was acute, It was the weekly transvestite ball.

The group merged with others as they made their way across dusty, antique French Quarter streets. Bren was flanked on either side: Jack on one side dressed as a cavalier complete with dangling sword, Steve on the other arm dressed in a very feminine tuxedo.

They heard the music as the Artesian Hall was approached. Bren felt a surge of excitement and they climbed the stairs to the second floor ballroom. Jack, one of the most popular to arrive was quickly swamped with friends vying for his favor on the dance floor. The tobacco smoke mixed with a sweet smelling pot smoldering. Steve took Bren with the lead and they were on the wide floor hip-hop while a circle formed around them clapping the rhythm. They lost track of Jack who was busy with a new flame.

"Did you explain our agreement to Jack?" Steve asked as they stepped to a slow tune. "I fear I've left you to the vagaries of Dante's Inferno."

Bren giggled, "To be sure but there is always hope." They danced together for several numbers as they became closer. Bren could sense Steve's erection on some dance steps as they twirled and turned. He was unsure how much to tell him and still be honest.

"I am aware Jack can be very aggressive. How did you handle that? We can join forces and take a place together. Do you want to stay at Jack's pad?"

"I told him I wanted to stay. He has been a friend in need, as you know. Also, there is a special protection being so close to my work. Maybe I'm sensitive since the attack. If that one guy had been less forward in knocking me down I'd likely be suffering a sore tail in addition to a mild concussion. What did you have in mind?"

"Sore tail? Yes, I suppose that can happen to anyone, guy or gal." He spun Bren around and led into a dip as the music paused for a change. They went hand-in-hand to the bar. Bren tried to hide near the row of potted plants while Steve went for drinks. As he returned, Bren was in spirited conversation with an eager transvestite dressed as a nurse medic. "I leave you for one instant and find you practically on your knees to some medic type." He laughed.

"Seemed a decent sort," Bren answered. "What did you buy me?"

Steve handed him a tall Scotch, well iced down. "I saw a loft advertised near your Bourbon Street exit to the store. It is partially furnished with a rent we could easily afford on our combined income. Want to see it?"

Bren was attracted to the idea of a less complicated life as compared to living with Jack and friends. Yet, he hesitated. "I need to think it over," he said, finally.

A knot formed in Steve's throat like a frog. He croaked, "It's Jack, isn't it? Did he get to you? Are you no longer a virgin?" He studied Bren's face as he waited.

Finally, "Nothing happened that would violate our agreement but, yes, he is very aggressive."

"He go down on you? Blow job?"

“Yes; I liked it but I thought of you. That’s why I want to think this over. It’s about our future, isn’t it?”

Steve’s face showed the hurt. “I want to think it over, too.” He forwarded his hand, “Friends, then?”

Bren immediately pleaded: “Steve; please, It isn’t the end of the world. We can get through this. I did not let him use my mouth. I am saving that for you.”

“Bullshit!” Steve spun on his heels and headed toward the door. “Here; you can have my drink, as well. It seems that’s all I’m good for these days.” In a skinny minute, Steve was gone and Bren had serious doubt he would ever recover his relationship.

That was when the ‘medic’ stepped up. He had been standing nearby and overheard the heated exchange. He reached for Bren and pulled him onto the dance floor. Saying nothing, Bren felt guided like an emotionless marionette. He was trying his best to avoid breaking into sobs. True to his assigned calling, the ‘Medic’ led Bren out onto the patio. They took a table close to the bar and sat quietly. About then Jack noticed them and came by to spread good cheer. He bought them a drink but did not mention Steve’s obvious missing person. “I’ll stay with him,” the ‘medic’ said. “I’m afraid there has been a lover’s quarrel. It did not go well.”

Jack just shrugged and left them.

“I’m Dolan,” the ‘medic’ said as they walked arm-in-arm toward Jack’s place. “It’s OK if you don’t want to tell me your name. I understand if you want to be alone. Believe me; I’ve been through it, too. Not easy, I know.”

“You are very kind, I thank you. I guess I’m very possessive about friends. They call me Bren. The sensitive ex-lover was Steve. You now have an almost complete roster.”

“I know Jack. That is, I’ve seen him around, He is very popular, isn’t he?” He kept step with Bren but

held his arm firmly. "Would you like to come with me to my place for a while? It's close by and I won't put a move on you. It's just that I wish, well, that I had known someone when it happened to me. No offense."

They turned the corner and went down a long alley to a modest cottage at the end with a patio. "Here we are," Dolan said and threw the entrance wide open. "Come in; make yourself comfy. I have been saving a special bottle for an occasion just like this."

Bren managed a smile and sat down. "I appreciate what you've said. Thanks again. It's true I did not want to be alone. Jack did not come to my rescue but you did."

"Is Jack your lover? It didn't seem that way according to the way he acted. Or, oh-my, do I get it! He perhaps seduced you to his satisfaction and wants to sever any responsibility. That's gross. You seem much better than such treatment if you've been intimate. I'm prying, aren't I? Please forgive me."

Bren accepted a Texas jigger of B&B over crushed ice. He sipped it and smiled approval. "I'm not into alcohol but tonight is a new emotional edge. That's twice I thank you."

Dolan sat next to Bren and put one arm around his waist. "I live alone here," Dolan began. "I like the company. You can stay with me for a while if you wish. I already feel a bond with you. A lesser person would not have been so deeply hurt to lose an important relationship."

Bren turned head and shoulders to face Dolan. "I'd like to stay, How big is it?"

Dolan looked shocked. "Ulp! How big is what?"

Bren broke into a wide grin. "Your bed," he answered.

They both laughed and settled in comfort snuggled and relaxed, in the bed. Bren had carefully folded his blouse and skirt to wear later. He thought he would be embarrassed getting into bed with a stranger dressed only in panties and a bra stuffed with tissue. He was relieved to realize Dolan was amused. They slept like that until first light which served to wake Bren.

He slipped quietly from the bed and dressed. Being careful not to disturb his new friend, he was soon out and down the block to Jack's place. He shuddered as he passed the short foyer that had only a few days earlier had seen him left in a pool of blood. True, he reasoned, He needed a safe haven and Jack provided it no matter the cost.

When Jack woke up to the scent of fresh brewed coffee, Bren had dressed and was already mixing the pancake batter. Jack sat heavily at the table and smiled as Bren served a steaming mug of coffee. "Café au lait, my lord and master," he said teasing. "Hang over?"

Jack barked at him. "Where did you disappear to last night? I looked for you but the one guy said he would see to you. Did you get laid? Should I be jealous?"

"Don't ask," Bren said with a smile. "Steve guessed that we had been, ah, intimate. He was totally wiggled out, threw a turmoil in public and left in a huff. I think that means he will no longer be considered a factor in my being with you, living here. Is that agreeable?"

"I'm sorry if it ended badly. If it was a jealous rage, well, he'll be around eventually trying to get into your BVDs." He sighed and nodded his head as Bren poured another mug of coffee,

Bren left a generous platter of pancakes for the late risers. He turned his back on Jack and headed for the bed. "We will always have Paris," he whispered.

That night, Bren tidied up the kitchen, covered the leftovers and accepted an invite from one of the tenants to go for a walk in the early evening. "It's a gorgeous evening," he said. "Thanks for the company, After my previous experience walking alone, well, I think it better to have a buddy system. N'est pas?"

"Agreed. What is Jack so grumpy about? Did you two have a fight?"

"No; I can't say that. He left me at the Artesian Room last night but I made it to safety all right. I'm not angry. I realize he has his special needs as he goes carousing about the French Quarter. It is likely he is finished with me but thankful to have a cook assistant." He laughed, "And, I need a safe place until I get over a serious bump on the skull."

Bren led the way down the long alley to Dolan's patio pad. He rapped on the door but realized Dolan was out. He picked a long stem flower and pressed it through the slot next to the welcome mat. He was confident Dolan would get the message. They turned and walked back. In answer to his hiking partner's query, he said, "That was Paris."

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Having no news from Steve, Bren integrated socially with the group he called 'Jack's Pack'.

Each payday saw him adding an article of clothing to display when he went as his 'new' person with the rest of the crowd. He gradually took over the kitchen duties and, at the same time, made certain each member shared in the expense. Jack was delighted to be relieved of the responsibility. He was especially solicitous to keep Bren happy.

Each work week added events at Bren's duty-filled job at the store. He was gradually aware of the reduced interest in his sex life at Jack's Pack. As long as the meals were tasty and timely, all members went

easy on Bren's increasing isolation. Often reflecting on his lifestyle, Bren concluded he was happy in his security and comfort level. He saw no need to change.

About the third month since the attack he looked up from some stockroom work to see Steve standing close by. He was staring at Bren and had a quizzical look on his face.

Bren felt he had been punched in the stomach seeing Steve after so much time. It brought back memories of those early days which, to him, meant serious failure. He squared his shoulders and walked straight to Steve. "It wasn't my fault," he declared without hesitation. "You just made it worse by blowing me away like you did."

Steve diverted his gaze, looked at the floor and back to see Bren standing a few yards away as if ready to start a fist fight. "I've watched for you at the TV gatherings. I was vigilant during the Carnival Parades, hoping to see you."

"Confusion doesn't look well on you," Bren said. "You know fully well where to find me, I'm happy there, uh, to a point."

"And that point is sex, I take it."

"I've made some friends, thankfully, and each friend knows what happened between us. I get respect because I acted in a fair way. It became ancient history soon enough but, when the word was out, nobody asked for a date or whatever. I'm a social outcast; again for no fault of mine. In a word, weird."

Steve looked stressed. "I don't want to make a scene at your work. Meet me at the café? When?"

"Yes, OK. But for no other reason than to show you I harbor no bad feelings toward you. Had you not felt so strongly about me, you would not have hung yourself out to dry. As time went by, the popular closet didn't seem to matter anymore."

Steve nodded and turned to leave. "Five, then?"

Bren was late to the meeting because he walked slowly. He was unhurried, slow stepping, as he tried to put his thoughts about Steve together. He was encouraged by the opportunity to put the ill feelings aside.

Steve stood up with arm raised to get Bren's attention when he went in from the busy street. They shook hands.

"Thanks for meeting me," Bren said softly, eyes moist. "Maybe we both needed to play our cards."

Steve frowned. "It's not what you think. Remember, a long time ago, I suggested we go together on a loft? It's over on Dumaine Street; we moved in about a month since."

Without knowing why, Bren was shocked. "We?" he asked,

"Yes, it's the reason I wanted you to know how the world is treating me. I hope, sincerely, you are happy where you are." He hesitated and sipped the froth off a glass of draught beer. "Living now is not the way I envisioned it. I try in vain to see what traits my partner has that remind me of you. When I plan an outing, get a new TV outfit, all the stuff of life, you are always there. Always! It is infuriating. All because of your weakness in taking Jack into your bed. How many times? How much allowance? Who else is there? Is Jack your pimp? Is that the way it is? I have to know."

Bren wanted to burst out in sobs but made a heroic effort to remain calm. "That night we went to the Artesian Hall was our beginning and end, Jack did not come forward to care for me. This even with the knowledge I had recently been attacked and perhaps attempted raped. I met a friend, Dolan, who dresses as a 'medic' when he goes out. Dolan took me to his place that night. We slept together but did not, repeat

did not, indulge. I left him early in the morning. Haven't seen him since. He is a decent sort."

"So you want me to believe Jack has been your one and only. How romantic! Hard to believe because we discussed it in our own time. I realize you owe him for taking you in. That does not mean you get to play frantic sex games. It seems reasonable to me that he would pimp you out to any of the gang there. Once he has had your nice body for a plaything, it would be off to another conquest, I know the type."

Bren wanted to get up and leave. The discussion was turning rancid and totally unnecessary. "You probably didn't notice the few times you were there, Jack took care of the kitchen, meals, shopping, all like that. I do that now so he leaves me alone, thinking I'm happy. Not entirely true but I've bonded with some other guys. But, get this and don't forget it, bonding does not demand sex. It's OK to have a few trusted pals. Could I have counted on you? Where is your heart, old friend?"

Steve looked crushed. "So, you would have me believe you only do cross-dressing a few times a month. Why do you enjoy that? You don't need to hide from the rest of the world. TV parties are a grand venue for pickups. Is that you? You tell me not."

"Your imagination is working overtime," Bren said, feeling more uneasy. He wished he had passed on Steve's suggested meeting but, in reality, he fought a jealous urge to flee before there might be a fight. The finality reached him like a falling star. "You are still attractive to me," he said after a pensive moment, "I hope your partner is loyal and competent. When I saw you at the store, that old feeling was rearing its best emotion. I want us to be friends and I am willing to prove my loyalty to you. Something you couldn't accept before."

Abruptly, Steve stood up. He threw some bills on the table, mumbling some thought about it being by his invitation. "OK, you're right, I know where to find

you. Don't be surprised if I show up one day for a drink and a chat. That won't be until I get over this one." He turned to go and noted Bren's blanched face as the grief of parting was showing. "We, you and me, grew into this TV lifestyle just one step at a time. I realize now the bare truth. I want you, There are other issues to resolve." He was swiftly gone.

Bren walked in the shadow of sadness back to fix the evening meal for Jack's Pack. Steve's performance, the thoughts and the confessions, had upset him. At the kitchen table, after the wine was open, news was that one of the regulars had left to be with an old friend. A new face, round and innocent, looked up expectantly when Bren started the cooking.

Jack entered in a flash of exuberance. "Listen up, fellow idle thinkers, this is Ernie. He is newly arrived from the wilds of Mississippi. His parents have left him in our care, prepaid of course, to give him a taste of the gypsy life." He laughed. "I shudder to admit that this innocent lad is a virgin thrust into our midst. More so, who has an extra transvestite outfit that will fit him? We have a social debut in our future."

There was a round of polite applause but most were more interested in the large pot roast that emerged as if in a miracle from the crock pot. Bren scooped up some limp veggies, potato patties and sauces onto the platters. He let each gypsy at the table pick and choose his preferred cut as he tried to merge with the convivial bunch. Still thinking of Steve, it was an effort to appear his usual self.

Later, as he packed the dishwasher, Bren smiled when Ernie approached. "Thank you for the nice meal," Ernie said with a nervous stutter. "Do you do this all the time? I'd like to help."

Bren grinned. "Saints be praised; a legitimate helpmate in our midst." He shook Ernie's hand, hit him on the shoulder like his baseball coach would do and sat him down at the table. "There is a tiny tad of

wine left, most unusual, but we can pretend it is an after dinner aperitif.” He saw the look of relief on Ernie’s face when the lad realized he had been accepted in the small cadre of vagabonds. “I don’t want to know why your parents dumped you in this place. It may seem to you as foreign as the Black Hole of Calcutta. Please let me know if you want to talk, I’m a bona fide listener.” He chuckled, finished the last of the wine and headed for the shower.

With clothes set aside for the morning rush, Bren pulled on his night time shorty pajamas and turned back the covers. Jack came in and closed the door. “Bren, you are a marvel, Thank you for taking Ernie under your wing but, let me remind you, I get first dibs on newcomers.” He giggled.

“He seems to be making the effort to fit in, It’s puzzling, however. What of his past? Is he going to murder us all in our sleep?”

Jack looked serious for a minute and then laughed. “He is here to come to terms with the real world. He has been in the care of a psychologist who knew of us through recommendation. It seems young Ernie has a sister, Emma, a few years older. When the parents caught on that their prize son was more interested in Emma’s undies than he was in school sports, well, they carted him off to the counselor for evaluation. Unfortunately, Ernie has been severely disciplined for sniffing girl’s lingerie which left him with a traumatic lesion. I’m pleased he spoke to you because you are best qualified here to help him adjust to the harsh treatment he has received.”

“Well, yes; thanks. I’ll try but, as you say, you get first dibs on his body. You’re not joking, are you?” He turned to face Jack. “It is well that you make that clear. Otherwise, it seems to me, there would be a free for all. No exploitation, control, I respect that. Uh, Jack, why are you coming onto me?”

Jack ran his hands over Bren's shoulders, along his arms, to rest on his waist. "Have you been lonely or don't you remember that special time?"

"I remember and, no, I'm not lonely. It's been a long time; why the delay? Did you perhaps not enjoy me or, like, what?"

Jack circled Bren's hips and went lower to gently stroke him. "Every day I admire the way you have, you taking charge of whatever. Was I your first? Last?"

Bren sank back against him. The expected stimulation could not be ignored. "First and last, if you must know. So, you want to take me again or perhaps have another idea?"

"I know you want it. But I'll let you decide. Take your choice, then."

Bren gulped. He was nervous as well as surprised by his fast response. "I remember every nuance of feeling you gave me that time. I'll leave the moment to your expertise. Oh, I do like what you are doing."

Jack opened Bren's fly and took the burgeoning cock in hand. He grasped and worked the shank with practiced fingers. All the while he kept mumbling phrases to show his appreciation for Bren's ready body. He shoved Bren the few steps to his bunk. "I want you in my mouth," he said like it was a confession of lust. At the same time, with Bren sitting, feet on the floor, he knelt between open knees. "You want it; I know you do, Tell me!" he demanded as he came closer.

"Yes, do it," Bren said and placed one hand at the back of Jack's neck. "Oh, yes," he moaned. "I didn't know how much I needed it. Do it. I want it."

Jack began the erotic moves. He was kissing, sucking, stroking and forcing his hand along Bren's lower cleavage. He gently touched the pink-star sphincter with his finger tip. Taking a break, feeling

fatigue in his jaw and shoulders, he whispered, "Have you thought about this?" To pose his question, he pressed his anus more forcefully. He only released his hold when Bren pushed him away.

"No, I've not thought about that happening to me. From the discussions I've overheard, I know I will probably add that to my experiences. Not now. Don't force me. I'll have to beg off until I'm ready. Don't be offended."

"No offense. Listen up; when you realized what I intend, you did not object, you only said 'OK later.' You know me to be patient in important matters." Saying nothing more, Jack slid down and angled his head to lay on Bren's stomach, facing down. He fondled gently for long moments like a child with a new toy. Bren realized Jack was fascinated by the sensual response.

"You are teasing me; I like it but admit I do not have the patience to endure it very long. Why are you doing this? I told you what I want. I believe you need to do it as well."

Jack grinned but still continued his quest. "In your special party outfit you are outrageously desirable. Not just to me; lots of guys and gals. You perhaps are enjoying celebrity status. Now that you are begging me to satisfy you, which of our mutual friends would you prefer to take you? Tell me."

"No; not an alien fantasy. I have learned that I'm a different person when I'm dressed for the dance. Often, dancing with a casual friend, I feel the stirring in his trousers and have to discipline myself to keep from pushing against it, teasing it, wishing for it, like you are doing to me right now. Is that what you are asking?"

Without answer, Jack stretched out and reached his hand to touch Bren's foot. Next he fondled the nubile nakedness pressing the flesh, touching higher,

pulling the knee aside, over the thighs to capture Bren's straining erection. "Ready now?"

Bren threw his hips up and, at the same time, embraced Jack's shoulders. "You are driving me crazy," he whispered. "Don't do this; it isn't fair."

Jack stabbed with his tongue tip. Bren jumped as if burned. "I'll tell you what is unfair," he said, slowly choosing his words. "It is when you plead for me to do it to you but have no intention of giving me what I want. That is unfair."

"If there is such an issue as emotional blackmail, you just did it. I can't stand this."

Jack moved into position, glanced up at Bren's fevered face and came closer. "Then promise me you will cooperate."

"Yes; whatever I can, I want you to tell me."

"I'll demand your mouth to satisfy me. Later I'll demand your lusty derriere, high on all fours, taking me in. And I'll demand you accept whatever friend I may name to enjoy your charms. I need it; I must have control over you, Nothing less." Not waiting for a reply, Jack plunged Bren's quivering tool into his mouth and brought a new energy to the task. Bren shook and called out, "Yes; I'll do it, only just don't leave me like this."

In a moment it was over.

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Bren, tired from a busy day at work, trudged up the lane. He was looking forward to a hot shower and, with luck, a moment to soak his tired feet. Jack met him at the door.

"There is a young girl here waiting to meet you," Jack said.

“This has to be one of your gross jokes,” Bren said, shaking his head.

Jack laughed. “You have a suspicious nature. She is here to see her brother, Ernie. Her name is Emma and I told her you would show her around a bit. She wants to talk about Ernie and, truthfully, you know him better than I. He follows you around like a puppy dog.”

That was when Emma stood in the doorway. She wore a Catholic School uniform, short pleated skirt, naked legs and Oxford black mid-heel shoes. The vest had the school logo and buttoned in the center to show the white blouse. She smiled, showing even teeth, “I’m Emma,” she said extending her hand. “I’m Ernie’s older sister. Mister Jack told me you and my brother work together often. Can you tell me how he is getting on?”

By this time Jack had disappeared. Bren frowned, then chuckled. “Well, sure, Emma. Your little brother speaks of you not less than a dozen times a day. Coffee?”

“Yes, good. I hope you don’t mind. I have better manners than to show up unannounced.”

They walked toward the square fronted by the St. Louis Cathedral. “You can tell me about those manners, Emma. I confess I’m not, what do they say? Reared right.”

She took his arm and they headed for a coffee stand Bren had visited occasionally. “This is the ‘Morning Call’. They call it that but you can get a good cuppa any time of the day.” They sat facing each other at a small table. “So, tell me; what is the occasion?”

“Oh, how could you know? Silly me. We sometimes visit as part of our ‘reaching out’ program. It gives students a chance to get oriented in the travel mode. It’s nice of you to see me.”

“Next time you can bring one of your friends to keep us company. Contrary to public opinion, I like girls.” He knew he really meant ‘complete innocence’ but thought it best not to tell too much.

Emma grinned and crossed her legs. “I want to talk about Ernie. I am his best friend and confidante. I really care about him. But, I fear he is entering a twilight world. He will no doubt have times when adjusting is difficult. Why did the guy you call Jack not want to talk to me?”

“Up-front, then,” Bren said. “Ernie has not said anything to me about being attracted to same sex types. Jack did tell me you have a large supply of lingerie to keep him happy. I’m being sarcastic; I apologize.”

Emma laughed aloud, glanced around and covered her mouth, an unconscious gesture. “Have you, uh, may I ask? Do you have flings with guys as well as girls? Have you and Ernie been intimate?”

“Not yet. He has told me he admires some racy types at his school. But, he also admits, acting overtly can be socially dangerous. At that point, it is well he is here to learn what he can about himself. We are mostly transvestites. Are you aware of people who crossdress?”

She smiled again. “It’s hard for me to imagine you and Ernie dressed as girls. But, if you will, tell me why you do it? What is the attraction?”

“Like many of life’s choices, it is different with others; busy strokes for some folks, so to speak. So far, Ernie has been to only one dance attended by both boys and girls, all or most dressed as the opposite sex. There is a certain freedom in that for most of us. We feel less inhibited by day-to-day convention. One of these days, some pirate or cavalier will take a fancy to your brother. If he agrees, then sex will follow that. Are you curious about what guys in erotic mode do?”

Have you been with a woman you perhaps admire—a student, teacher or casual well-met type?”

Emma blushed. “I can only admit to an attraction but not to doing, uh, that with a girl. Or boy either, for that matter.”

“Well then, you and Ernie are well suited at the moment. He is in a daily living atmosphere that exudes sexual innuendo. For the most part, guys he meets at Jack’s Pack are not aggressive but if Ernie indicates his willingness to engage in boy-on-boy sex, he’ll have no difficulty getting suitors. If you would prefer that I be more graphic, I can. I don’t want to embarrass you.”

“A dear friend, my dorm roommate at school, has often mentioned she likes my looks. That’s about all at this point. It may happen but what, exactly, I’m not sure.”

Bren took Emma’s hand, turned it over and pressed her palm, then her wrist. “She wants to go down on you. Why not? You are not only personable but attractive. That’s to say ‘hot’ to keep it in the vernacular. Have you and Ernie talked about having same-sex? Do you think Ernie would be vulnerable if he dresses like a girl? Then there is the obsession with your underwear. What is that all about? Why was it necessary to punish him? That’s cruel.”

Emma waved a paper plate to get some air. “Stuffy in here, sorry, I don’t mean a distraction. You are on precisely the same issue that I need to be less anxious about my brother. Could I impose on you to keep me informed about his cross-dressing, sexual opportunities, like that? Do you mind terribly? I know you’ve no call to be my friend.”

Bren sighed as if in relief. “OK, I agree but I will not say or do anything I think might hinder his education which is why you and your folks have put him in our care. Are you ready now to tell me the whole story?”

Emma blinked in confusion. “Story? What are you asking?”

“I put the loose ends together. You go to an expensive school, dress smartly, travel with your class, put brother in available rooms to learn the ways of the world. All this costs money. That’s what I’m asking.”

“Still confused,” Emma answered. “Our grandparents left us fairly well off. The counselor showed some face cards that Ernie turned over. Ernie feels he is a girl trapped in a man’s body. If the best scenario comes to pass, a transition surgically might be indicated; boy to girl. He can afford it.”

“So crossdressing becomes a chance to act out a sex change. Weird but understood. When the times comes that, dressed in girl’s apparel, Ernie goes down on a guy he fancies, the desired result will get locked in. Are your parents aware of this? It’s kind of scary in a way.”

Emma grinned happily. “Thank you; it has taken this long to get to the very core of Ernie’s issues. I’m grateful and feel I owe you. I know my folks are going to single you out for more discussion because of the emotional overtones. I’m confident you can point the way as you see it. Nobody is asking more of you.” She looked away and stuffed a few leftover bites of her donut in her mouth. She turned beet red in a blush. “Pardon me but I just had a thought. If this all happens when Ernie is dressed as a girl, does the same apply to you? The difference would be, of course, that I’m a girl.”

Bren chuckled. “I noticed!”

She laughed aloud and hit him on the shoulder with her tiny fist. “Oh,” she guffawed, ‘you are awful.”

They were silent during most of the walk back to Jack’s Pack domicile/ Finally, Bren opened to his thoughts. “Emma; this has been a delightful outing and I sincerely hope it will help Ernie in the long run. But your thoughts coincided with mine. I have to ad-



mit, I've never been with a girl. I know I want to but feel, oh, inadequate. Yet, when I see your mouth, I become that struck-dumb adventurer you were blushing about. No! Say nothing now, Think it over."

"Omigod, Bren," Emma exclaimed. "I'm through thinking it over. I want to do it but my question is, will you do it for me? It would be that simple act my school roommate desires of me."

Bren took her hand in his and they slowed their step. "OK, it's settled, You have until we meet again to change your mind or, perhaps, to ask more questions. You can tell me how that friend of yours makes you feel when she puts her hand beneath your skirt."

Emma realized at once that he was teasing. Again, she hit him, "Shut up!" she said.

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Walking to the next transvestite ball, Jack took the center, Bren on the left, Ernie on the right. Their spirits were high, having been fortified by an extra Cabernet at dinner,

Ernie was excited. He was confident in the company of Jack and Bren. He wore hip-hugging slacks tailored tight over his buttocks and tapered down to white dance slippers. His cowboy blouse, caught at the neck with rawhide laces, gave him a cowgirl appearance. The white, ten-gallon style hat was fastened by oversize pins near each ear.

"You look great, Ernie," Jack said. Ernie stepped lively and they quickly joined the line to get in the hall.

Bren had twofold reasons to attend that evening. First, as always he was watching for Steve and his common sense betrayed him if Steve would be present or not. Yet, there was that feeling made stronger

by Jack's sensual attention. Secondly, he made an immediate hit.

Spotting Dolan whom he knew by the 'medic' costume, he excused himself from Jack and Ernie to rush behind Dolan and grasp his hips in a vice grip so he couldn't easily turn around. He whispered in his ear, "Gotcha! And, where have you been?"

They laughed at each other's antics. "As if you didn't know where to find me."

"Well, I left a flower at your door each time I was searching so you would know."

Dolan grinned. "I know; I knew all along it was you. Sorry but my social secretary has been out with the flu so I missed at least a dozen qualified suitors such as you."

"You wish! Dance?"

They easily folded into each other's arms, took a position on the line dance and, later, swooned and swayed to slow, romantic, selections. "Are you with Jack? I don't see him, Oh, sorry; yes, There he is but is that a new face?"

"His name is Ernie. He follows me like a puppy dog. He comes equipped with an attractive older sister named Emma but, as luck would have it, she punched me out when I tried to seduce her."

Dolan laughed. "Do tell. Any other fantasies?"

Bren shrugged. "Just her mouth."

"You are badass for sure. My social calendar has a vacant spot for you if you want to escape baby-sitting duties. I can't promise I'll be as easy as I was the last time. Which reminds me. Any luck with the broken-heart lad who runs off for no legitimate reason?"

"His name is Steve. He knows where I work and did stop by once since that disastrous night. We went for

a cold beer after the store closed to have a chat. As you can understand, I desperately wanted to make things right between us but, another turn of the cards, no joker, he has taken a flat with a partner that is uninspiring. Well, that's according to him. The old flame with the strange sounding name, if you remember those lyrics."

"I'm sorry for your loss but also impressed. That you can feel so strongly about a ruptured relationship, tells me you have an honest emotion. If you cared nothing for what you and Steve once had, you wouldn't even remember his name, Want to cancel my invitation for the night?"

"How could I when you know I might slide into default? If you can risk it, we're good."

It turned out Dolan was as popular with the transvestite crowd as Jack. Bren searched for Ernie but kept a wary eye on Dolan as he slipped from one partner to another. He finally located Ernie sitting alone near the entrance to the dance floor.

"Hey, guy," Bren said sitting next to him. "Jack leave you? No evil bad between you two, I hope."

"Oh, no, but thanks. I think he met someone more interesting than me."

Bren pressed him above the knee. "Not personal; remember it is his nature to be constantly looking for a special someone he hasn't yet met. Might even be you. It's possible. You certainly are a nice looking cowgirl."

Ernie forced a smile. "Can we go home now? I think I've been abandoned."

"Not by me, Wait a sec, I am in line to dance with that 'medic' over there, I'll tell 'him' we are leaving."

Walking back to Jack's Pack, Ernie was dizzy a few times and drifted onto the street. Bren was alert and caught him in a strong embrace. "Whew! Guess I

drank too much. I'm not really into drinking like the rest of you guys."

"No problem. Let me tell you how I came to meet Jack and his fellow gypsies." He went into the sordid details of the attack, the concussion and the recovery. "They found me unconscious in the doorway. Not very pretty but it worked out well. You can see that."

Ernie called a halt and leaned against a wrought iron fence. "Sorry," he whimpered. "Give me a chance to catch my breath." He slid down to sit against the gate frame. Bren sat next to him and put his arm around him. In a short time, he was feeling better. "Do you have sex with the others at the gypsy den as you've called it?"

Bren smiled at the irony. "Not often; have you been with a guy? I know about smelling your sister's underwear. She is very pretty, by the way."

"Oh, I agree. Besides, we are best bud. I've not had the experience, guy or gal. I get all worked up and they run away. I know you and Emma talked about me. In a way I'm flattered you think enough of me to spend the extra time. My concern, I know. "

"Of all the people you've met since your folks dumped you here, which would you like to get to know better?"

Ernie moved to get to his feet but fell back down, still sitting next to Bren. "Easy question even if I am a little drunk. I think you are exciting as a guy on the make. Have you ever thought about being a real girl? It's my dream but I'm not ready yet."

"If you mean the surgical procedure, there are problems you have to face. One of the issues you already know; your self-esteem. You've no reason to feel you are 'lesser than', especially as sexy-racy as you are. True, a girl that knows how to satisfy with her mouth will always be in demand by the horny set. You can learn that easy enough. Just wait until a guy comes along you fancy."

Ernie hiccupped. "You are very good to take me in like you do. Are you hard thinking about me?"

"Not yet, lad, but stay with it. Jack is the only guy that has gone down on me. Consider yourself fortunate if he decides to blow you. It opens up a whole new world."

"Do the other guys shun you when they learn Jack wants you and not them?"

"You are a born politician; no doubt. I suggest you take care of you first before you worry about any others. I've heard it said that it is not any of your concern what anyone else thinks of you."

"That's kind of complicated but I'll think on it."

Bren reached over and stroked Ernie's crotch. He had a raging erection. "Some enterprising guy might take advantage of that by moving into your head without paying rent. Be selective."

Ernie sighed and stretched his legs. "Feel me again," he said, "I like it."

"Don't be troubled but I have a confession. I'd like the attention you can give me with your mouth. Like I said, you're sexy. Would it upset you if I get Emma to go down on me?"

There was a long pause for enough deep breathing to hyperventilate. "Wow, what a bomb. How did you know? That's what I want from her."

"Does she know that? What are your chances? After your transgender procedure, you can be Emma's girlfriend. I have reason to believe she would be delighted. But there is a sense of urgency in your relations with Emma. She is growing away from you now that there is so much distance. She is ripe for cunnilingus and, unless I get her comment wrong, there is a hot girl in the picture." He tightened his hold of Ernie's body. "You need to act on my suggestion to improve your outlook. But one first step would

be to tell her how important it would be with her. What do you think?"

Ernie struggled to his feet by holding onto the fence post. "You have opened my eyes," he said with a slight cough. "I'm going to improve; I promise. Do I get this? Are you going to help me, be my coach?"

"Yes, we've already started, don't you think? Now, what would be a reasonable goal to work toward? It's up to you."

"I'm afraid to admit it but I guess I must. I'll be first to swallow. You will need me for that."

Bren pulled the lad up and they continued their walk back. "Sometimes, my friend, you amaze me."

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It was near dawn before Bren finally arrived at the long passageway. He stood outside, one foot on the lower step, and rapped gently on Dolan's door. Knowing his friend had such a successful evening at the TV ball, it seemed prudent to be certain he was not interrupting a special session the 'medic' may have arranged. He waited.

Finally, he was alerted to a rustling sound inside. Dolan peeked by holding the window curtain aside. "I know you didn't get lost," he said opening the door. They embraced like friends rather than lovers.

Bren grinned. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Domestic chores, you know. Uh, I was afraid you might start without me."

"You are bad," Dolan said as he closed the door and threw the bolt. "Come in and take off your shoes. It's the 'medic' healing trick for sore feet."

The conversation was spirited, impromptu information for the lonely in their crowd, until Dolan touched on the one topic of interest to both of them,

though for different reasons. If anyone can be present without physical flesh, that was the moment for Steven. "Have you seen him since that time you stopped for beer after work?" Dolan asked. "I'm not telling you any other healing tricks until you consider a crusade to 'forgive and forget' the affair. Really, Bren, I understand the attraction. Well, I feel it just sitting next to you like this in the middle of the night. Like a magnet, I guess, It works with two people but not only one."

"You are my favorite medic," Bren answered after a long pause. "We were good together in all ways except sex, I've no doubt now that it would have come to that eventually. I still don't understand why he reacted the way he did. He freaked out over what Jack did, a satisfaction he wanted for himself or so he said. Did he lack courage or was he building up some fantasy in his genitals?"

Bren relaxed back, resting his head on the back of the sofa.

"And now?" Dolan asked.

"I want it. Jack probably sensed I had the needy mode he evoked in so many before me, and uh, well, since, no doubt, I have to admire his strength. There has to be some attraction he sees in me because he occasionally comes in for an extra helping like I am his apple pie. Tasty, perhaps."

Saying nothing, Dolan slid one hand inside Bren's slim blouse. "Maybe one day you will find that other magnet. Until you do, is it sensible to keep your 'life and limb' at the ready? Look at me, If I thought for one minute I had to live like Jack does in order to survive, I would shoot myself. The result is that in the past several months, for example, I've only been under the spell of that magnet with one guy though I've admired many more." He tugged Bren's vest off his shoulders. "Would you like to know I'm here for you whenever you need me? I can live like that, be your

sexual savior, so to speak. But, what then will be the commit?"

When Dolan shifted his weight on the sofa, the lower folds of his robe fell open displaying a generous field of interesting thigh. "Can I?"

"We have both waited too long. It is not likely our mutual libidos will shrink up from age but, yet, what of the morning?"

"Yes," Bren whispered with choked voice. "I don't owe Steven though he thinks I do. I don't like being Jack's plaything and feel exploited sometimes. Yes, I like your proposal and I do not fear it."

"Fear? What could that possibly be?"

"Regret."

## IV.

Jack poked his head in as Bren was dressing for the TV dance. "Hey, guy, You ready or what? We are leaving."

"Thanks, not quite. I have some makeup that needs attention and just need to iron my skirt." Bren smiled, "Steve is coming by. We will see you later."

"Oh, OK, about time you brought this flame around to let us get a look at him when he is dressed for action."

Bren reached for a shoe to throw at him but Jack just laughed and closed the door.

Later, when Steve finally arrived, Bren was at the kitchen table sipping sherry wine. A turn in the weather was warm enough for a short skirt with ankle boots and over-the-calf socks. Steve wore white-on-white Bermuda shorts, leather moccasins suitable for dancing, a bulky tee and a stylish long

scarf knotted at the throat with the extra fabric thrown over one shoulder.

“Any longer and cooking sherry would be gone. Woe is me,” he said, He offered Steve a tumbler half filled.

Steve took the advantage and gently pulled Bren to his feet. They embraced and, holding tight, Steve looked longingly in Bren’s eyes. “This is a dream come true,” he said still holding him. “Nothing seemed to be going together for us. Are you OK?” He smiled and touched Bren’s lips with one finger.

Bren sighed, “Should I be jealous of the missing partner? What’s that all about?”

“Lots of issues. Most important is that you should know we live together but, well, more like

brothers. There have been a few abortive attempts at intimacy but he pretty much keeps to himself. I forced the issue some months ago and he told me to go find someone else. As you know, I’m not one to be running loose about the Quarter streets.”

“Did you tell your resident iceberg about me? About us?”

“Just this evening, as I was getting ready to go out. I merely mentioned that I was going to pick you up for the dance. He acted like I was imposing by telling him so I reminded him about your concussion and recovery. He went back to his book without comment. Really, when I consider how warm and accepting you are, there is only this dismal comparison.”

“Can we delay a bit?” Bren asked. “It’s not often we get a chance to be alone.” He led Steve into the bedroom and closed the door. Steve sat gingerly on the vanity stool. Bren was on the easy chair. “You look great. Does it annoy you that I’ve admired you ever since we met at the store? I really did not dream our working together would bloom into this but I don’t feel awkward here. Maybe, earlier when all your

friends were on alert with me being the stranger, but not now.”

“Have you had many paramours? I would like to know,” Bren asked.

Steve chuckled and put one ankle over his knee, smiled friendly and looked at ease. “To add substance to my fantasy about you, I went to the clinic today and had a mini-checkup. Clean bill. It might be an invitation to bareback but not entirely. That would be a mutual, wouldn’t it?”

“Now you are the Parish Priest and I am in the confessional. I’ve had a few outlandish adventures with Jack here, nothing heavy duty. By that I mean, you should understand I’ve been laid but not all the way.” He pointed profoundly at his mouth. “Ever since Ernie arrived, Jack has spent all his time seducing the lad. We’ve had some domestic disturbance but survived. Also, I met Ernie’s sister, Emma. I like her and feel strongly she will be joining in to cross-dress as a gender innocent of some kind.”

“And that’s all? You pass on them all, leave Ernie to run interference and think about licking the older sister? You know what? This is bizarre.” He swiftly sprang from the bench and sat on the floor next to Bren’s legs. He moved one hand over his knees. “Are you afraid of me?”

“No; I’m afraid of me. I simply cannot imagine doing it with anyone else. We’ve been on easy, trusting, terms. I feel comfortable enough to be with you but nobody else.”

“Oh? Is Emma going to go down on you? What if she wants you to satisfy her? Lots of TV guys seem amenable to cunnilingus but I would suspect there has to be a degree of affection or at least admiration. Where are you in all this?”

“I can’t say, All I know now is that I’m happy to be here with you. I’m willing and that’s a big step for me.”

Steve pulled him off the chair and onto the carpet. Flat on his back, Bren felt Steve mount him, hunching and pulling in a tribadism action. "Open your legs to me," Steve said in a ragged voice. "There, feel this." He rolled his hips side-by-side until his steel-hard erection was against Bren's crotch. The response was near electric and Bren threw all his strength into improving the contact.

"Oh, Steve; yes, I feel it."

Steve rolled away and pulled Bren to his feet. They embraced and he settled a deeper, wet kiss on Bren's lips. He immediately cupped Bren's genitals and worked in a molding motion with his hand. "More?" he asked.

On the bed, Steve quickly opened his Bermuda shorts and led Bren's hand lower until the touch became a tantalizing, tingling desire. "Yes; you are bigger than I expected. But, I have thought about what it would be like to do this."

Steve straddled him, knees at each hip, and watching Bren closely, he pulled the tee up and over Bren's head. He left the scarf in place. "Um, you have a neat bod, lad. No, don't let go of my cock. You two need to get acquainted." He chuckled, "Come on; let's roll over. You on top." Bren came nearer. "That's it, you feel great the way you handle me. Work with your hand, move close. Show me your tongue."

"I've never felt like this before," Bren said. His face was flush and he was perspiring,

"Then it's your time," Steve whispered and reversed positions. He aligned his hips with Bren's and waited for Bren to take the initiative. A gentle pull encouraged Bren to readiness.

"Feel me with your lips; yes. Now your tongue. Think about it! You want it in your mouth, you know you do. Not nice to make me beg when I have a load of desire ready and waiting. Don't be afraid."

“I need to do this,” Bren said. As Steve’s firm cock sped toward his lips, he stared at the small droplet of cum on the tip. He wrapped his fingers around the shank and moved closer. As if losing patience, Steve caught the back of Bren’s neck and forced his crown along the parted lips in a tickling motion. “Um, ulp!” Bren stabbed with tongue tip and, tilting sideways, ran the flat of his tongue along the hot cock. Next he accepted it between his lips and encircled it with his tongue.

Steve was in ecstasy. “Wonderful, Bren. Suck it; in and suck it. Go, go, go.”

## V.

Several weeks later, on the eve of the annual competition for “Best Dressed Transvestite”, Bren helped everyone with their various costumes plus skit plan, participants and makeup. The festivities at Jack’s Pack turned into a hilarious fashion show.

Earlier, Bren had informed Jack of his liaison with Dolan without revealing name or place. Not even the ‘medic’ description. Jack was a little touchy but adjusted by bedding down young Ernie. Both of them seemed happy with the arrangement.

Relaxing in his bunk and dozing with an open book on his chest, Bren was shocked awake by screaming in the hallway, then the kitchen. He rushed to see what could be done and saw Ernie’s dad in the center of the room, weaving, obviously drunk and calling for his son.

Bewildered, Ernie came out of his room, finishing dressing as he came. His dad’s appearance came as no surprise to him. He went to him immediately and put one arm around him. He tried to lead him to the kitchen table but his dad would have no part of it. He stomped his foot.

“Now you’ve done it!” Dad screamed. “Your mom and sister are downstairs in the walkway, afraid to

come in here. But, not me; I'm not afraid. I've come to take you home. You have to toss out this way of life. You are wrecking your family."

"Dad; what are you saying? You brought me here to find myself. Let's go out and find Mom and Emma." He tried to urge Dad to the door.

Bren scoped the situation immediately. He knew there was more in the deep-run family feelings than he could fathom. But, upon hearing Emma's name, he hurried outside to find Emma and her mom embraced, crying, trembling.

When Dad finally came out after serious urging by Ernie and Jack, Bren remained with Mom and Emma having brought them across the narrow alleyway, a safe distance.

"What set him off?" Bren asked in a sincere effort to learn what might be done to avoid a future disaster. He held Emma close to him, Ernie's mom ran to comfort Dad when they came out. Emma was choking with tears.

"This has been building ever since we brought Ernie here. So far, it seems Ernie is adapting well but at the family's expense. Ernie has been writing, texting, occasionally. The tone of his messages is, oh, how do I say it? Romantic. Somehow he has in his mind he and I will one day be sisters. That was all well until Dad caught on; not sure how. Maybe Ernie's text carried the same idea. I have no clue how and why."

The import struck Bren like a slap in the face. "Emma; please, I can throw some light on this. Several weeks ago, at the Artesian Room ball, Ernie sort of lost control and took to the bottle which, we now know, leaves him out on a drunken limb. I was with him and, in the middle of the night, we sat with our backs to the cornstalk ornamented fence while he unloaded his emotional ideas. In short, he is like a loose cannon. He professed interest in sex for the

sake of sex. I appealed to his better nature to take fewer steps and to keep his goal in focus. He constantly brought up the comfort he feels in relationship with you. The next step ties in with your text messages received. He somehow got the idea that having sex with you would help his failing self-esteem. I tried my best to side-track that but was only marginally successful as he and Jack have been acting out their relations since.”

“Omigod, Bren; you told him what we talked about at the coffee shop? I can’t believe you would betray the one factor important enough to destroy my parents. I can handle it all and, as you’ve indicated, so can Ernie but Dad freaked. To make matters worse, one afternoon the roommate I told you about visited. Dad walked in on us in my room to find us kissing. He blew up. He kept screaming about grandchildren, all that.”

“I wish there was something I could do to resolve the hurt. Difficult when it is trauma Dad acted out on his own. Why he can’t come to terms to accept that both his children are young adults living their own lives. His role is no longer a part of your life.”

Bren turned quickly to see both Dad and Mom, hand-in-hand, walking together heading back to the hotel. Dad turned and looked at Bren and Emma, shook his head sadly and kept a steady step ahead. Apparently the crisis was over.

“Of all the players here today, there is only one that Dad seemed to take to. Ernie’s ostensible connection with Jack was an eye-opener. My loyalty to both our parents was a refreshing strength, I think. He will listen to you, Bren. Will you help?”

“If I can. What did you have in mind? The guillotine is outmoded now and dueling, as well.” He chuckled, “I can offer you a late lunch. Will that help?”

Emma laughed. “OK, maybe some Cajun food will settle my drowning ego in Mississippi mud.”

Bren led the way and, he reflected, he could not remember having felt so good in the company of a pretty girl. He envisioned her involvement in the transvestite cult and how that might play out/ Of most import, he had to admit to himself, he wanted her mouth. 'How,' he thought idly, 'will I tell Dolan about this?' He beamed happily when he felt her tuck her arm in his as they headed for a restaurant.

They sat at a corner table with wide window to watch the people hurrying past with their intentions, needs and distant thoughts. "That's Antoine's," Bren said in a solid tone as he pointed out the line forming outside a restaurant across the street. "It's somewhat exclusive."

She giggled. "And by exclusive you mean expensive."

"Well, you might be impressed if I took you there. I would translate the menu for you; it's in French."

"And I would embarrass you because I know a few words, well, phrases. Perhaps more."

He selected from the wine list. "You are handling extremely well considering the difficulty you endured today. You are disciplined."

"Maybe but to be true, these rages are not new. My dad is too often taken by a jug of some kind and giving thought to his failures and regrets, starts screaming on one subject or another. Whatever. This time he knew he was losing control; his wife is afraid of him, his son whom he expected a wholesome adjustment has gone further astray and, well, how about this? His sweet daughter once tested gathering lust. She is still experimenting with feelings of erotic flight. Interested?"

"Very. Don't make your story too short. You allowed the roommate you once detested some special liberties with your neat bod. I can dig that. You can begin by explaining how you felt about the escapade

and if she was responsive in a way that intrigued you. Umm?”

Emma chuckled and nodded when the waiter poured the white wine. “Yes, Zinfandel; you have good taste.”

“Unfair; you changed the subject.”

“I’m aware I was more than serious when we last talked. I’ve learned a few moves since. You amaze me. You intervene in the midst of a family riot and escape unscathed. As if it was nothing, now you’ve brought me to a confessional of sorts, a romantic evening. We are both wondering how this will end. I’ve looked forward to this but not in the way you think. I was frank in our previous discussion. I am amenable to your suggestion. That’s the amazing part.” She hesitated, looked out the window and seemed to be studying the passing stream of early evening humanity. “It isn’t fair to say that girl seduced me. It was the other way around. I wanted to learn, find the mystery so-to-speak, which is the topic of so many concerns these days. I was disappointed.”

“She wanted you but you jumped before she was ready. Is that it?”

“You know about it?” Emma raised her eyebrow in question.

“Locker room lingo, nothing more. I’m missing the obvious.”

“Which is, uh, what, exactly?”

“Can I observe, from what you’ve said, that your heart was not in it? Well, maybe a weak libido?”

At that disruptive moment, while Emma sat with the dawn expression emerging on her face, the waiter showed up with menus and an expectant look. Bren glanced at it and ordered a platter of appetizers. He waved him away.

Her wan smile intrigued him. She was slow to speak. "Tell me what it is you have had on your mind since our last meeting. Is it only seduction of the innocent, like me as the victim of circumstance?"

"I've been honest with you. It's true I've no experience with a girl and actually very little with my same gender. The oral response fascinates me but, since our meeting, I've daily considered what it would be like to go down on you. You have it all – cute figure, mystery eyes, breast line, legs, a complete package of beauty and brains. Add to that your courage and you can't hide from me."

She giggled, "Should I want to hide from you?"

"And that brings us to the reason for this special chat. Will you go with me to the crossdressers dance?"

"If you answer my questions, OK? I know you and Ernie are involved in dressing as girls. It has to be more than hiding behind the girly costume. We are not ready for a crash course in genetics one-oh-one. What gives?"

Bren looked up from studying the menu. He couldn't hide the light blush, slightly embarrassed. "This may be childish but we need to be on the same wide field of thought. I've known my entire life growing up that there is something different about my outlook. At first I put my fascination with men's bodies down as the usual sports hero worship. It was holiday season when my store hired some part-time help. We were very busy which is good for the commission checks but, under it all, was a guy named Steve. It's a long involved story with a violent escapade at the hands of some thugs who for some odd reason were interested in my body. I resisted and they beat hell out of me and left me for someone else to pick up the pieces, That someone was Jack; the place is known as Jack's Pack and, as fortune would have it, exactly where your parents dumped Ernie to make his way in the erotic world of fellatio. I've never had him but he

is singing the praises of his adventures. At the moment, with you and your parents here, he is a loose cannon. Anything can happen. Am I getting too far ahead of my story?"

Emma smiled and settled her chin on clasped hands, elbows on the table. She sipped the wine, smacked her lips in appreciation and seemed lost in thought. "Thank you for all that; it helps me to come to terms myself. You probably think we are weird with the parental shenanigans but, really, it is routine. I am certain you considered putting us down as erratic when you saw we all could easily handle the emotional onslaught." She chuckled and moved her body forward enough to touch Bren's hand. "I don't want to hurt you through all this but for some reason, I want you to understand."

Bren smiled, lifted her hand and kissed the palm. "Don't stop now," he said softly, eyes slightly moist. "I want to know." He grinned. "You've agreed to go to the dance with me. Next, I believe you've agreed to spend some private time together. Yet, you're holding back part of your adventure. I'm not digging, relax."

She accepted the menu from the waiter and opened it. "Let's order something to eat. I've a feeling we will need the strength." She giggled. On the way to her parent's hotel, she took his arm possessively. Once in the family suite all she found was an envelope taped to the bathroom mirror. Her parents had checked out. The message included a credit card and some large denomination bills. "We've been abandoned," she said with a lilting voice. "We have this pad to ourselves; paid until the end of the week."

"That's all?" He was astonished.

"Yes, just one thought in my mom's hand. 'Take care of Ernie.' Of course, how can anybody do more than he's getting at Jack's Pack? Shall we relax here; drinks are in that funky box over there. What time should we leave for the dance?"

Bren crossed his legs and enjoyed the moment. In one swift move they were on the sofa together. Emma had opened the bar and portioned the ice cubes. "We will see your brother in action later this evening. It's the kind of social event where it's not possible to be late." He laughed and put one arm around her. "So; tell me what you had on your mind at the restaurant."

Her mid-calf length skirt had crept up to show a liberal field of flesh. She made no effort to cover her shapely legs. "Most of this you can piece together yourself. I respect your feelings. You told me about your friend, Steve. It helps to know you can act on your impulses and be a loyal friend at the same time. It's a huge plus, over and above most of the 'friends' so called in my life." She covered his hand with her hand when he began fondling the tantalizing raised flesh just above the knee.

"Sorry; couldn't resist it," he said with the expected frog in his throat giving away the depth of his lust.

She was charmed. "Then tell me, why are you feeling my legs when you really want my mouth?"

He withdrew his hand. "OK, I'm distracting you; unfair, I know. What did you want to tell me?"

"I was a student in high school. I came home one Friday evening, lugging the week's paperwork. Mom was in the kitchen merrily humming a tune she likes. Dad was passed out, drunk, on the sofa with the TV blaring sports results. I went to my room and, from habit, closed the door and threw the bolt. Ernie and his girlfriend jumped up off the bed, quickly tried to hide their hands, all the expected. Now it is amusing to remember the panic on their faces. Not so, then."

She laughed and quickly pulled her skirt down to further hide from Bren's groping hands. "Anyhow, we three settled down, elated by the situation. I stepped to stand beside Ernie who was in the middle. He



turned his head and kissed the girl on the cheek. She was real cute. Next he kissed me on the cheek, not making any effort to hide his feelings. He accepted her kiss on his lips. Then she waited while I kissed him the same way. It was a big moment upon us before we knew it. Ernie tightened his grip around our shoulders and brought us all together—head to head. Startled, I opened my eyes to see the cute little chick, eyes open, staring at me in her world of wonder. That first kiss with a girl was the most natural ever. She dropped her hand onto my derriere and gathered the material hugging my hips until she could press my upper thigh with her fingers. It turned me on.”

Bren sighed and took another drink. “I can finish that episode, I think. All the habitual Victorian rules came into play and the moment was over. We can only hope the little girl eventually found a satisfactory role in life.

“Um, yes, thank you. Now that we both have a clean slate, what are your thoughts?” Bren asked.

She looked aslant, then playful. “I told you about my first experience with a girl. Well, not all of it. The cute little gf turned me on in a way I’d never experienced. So, was Steve your first?”

He considered what to say next. “It’s a bit complicated but, well, yes-and-no. As with the betrothed we agreed to keep our lustful interest secret and silent. Jack would hear none of it. He caught me semi-dressed on my bunk and took his leisure in seducing me. I felt awful afterward, not that I didn’t enjoy the event but because I had somehow let Steve down. It eventually served to put a wedge between us. We both lost emotionally; Jack was ‘on a roll’ and went ahead to subjugate your brother, Ernie. It was a matter of control; all parties happy.”

Emma sighed, “If asked ahead of time, I wouldn’t have given Ernie a hearty hail in chances of survival but, after all, it was what our dad wanted. That is;

Dad saw no future for Ernie following a path of the domestic clan—mortgage, pregnant, wife, diapers, etc. Do you dig?

“Yes, it’s mind blowing. Never have I heard of such love from parents. What does Dad say about your romantic entanglements?”

“He would be astonished at our conversations, the dance tonight, my interest in cross-dressing and curiosity about the girl-on-girl issue. Maybe I haven’t yet met the right girl.”

“With your looks, it won’t be long,” he said, laughing. “Did you have a change of clothes here? And, how about Ernie? Did he leave some stuff? More important, will you fit in his outfit? You get his clothes and, ready for this?, I’ll try on your fashions I saw you wear yesterday? Want to try?”

Emma was off the sofa with a bounce, “Groovy! Let’s do it.”

## VI.

The fun accompanied by drinks from the hotel ‘keep’, was a light-hearted romp as both lovers formed a bond for the evening. Emma doubled over with laughter when Bren tried on her dressy caftan. It was small for him and, due to the difference in height, was three-quarter length stopping mid-calf.

“You need to borrow my razor if you’re going like that,” she said chuckling. “I don’t mind.”

He looked in the mirror. “Well, it’s a start. Let’s go back to Jack’s Pack. I’ll see what I can find to match up my outfit. You might have too much room in my slack suit but it should work. Are you game?”

At the dance, Bren introduced Emma. She accepted the revelry with her dashing enthusiasm. Bren was happy to see her fit in, proud to introduce

her and admired her magnetism. After one 'shag' number, she sat for a moment to catch her breath.

Steve approached and sat next to her. "I'm Steve in case you've forgotten." He rustled his voluminous skirt in a show of feminine wiles which amused her. The skull cap completely covered with decorated pins, ties, and trinkets added to his outlandish show.

"Yes; I remember. Bren told me about you so I knew right away you are someone important."

Steve crossed his legs and the white mesh stockings swished. He leaned closer to speak to her in confidence though the noise level reached bedlam level in the room "You are certainly a nice-looking guy in that outfit. Now, about that tie. I believe I gave it to Bren as a gift. Should I be offended?"

She laughed and, in an affected gesture, straightened the knot at her throat. "You can have it back but not here; we don't need a riot."

Steve chuckled. "I heard about that. I'm very sorry it happened but happy Bren was there to assist. He is a rock." He paused, staring at her.

"What are you looking at? What is it; perhaps my costume needs some attention? Your slip is showing but I won't tell." She laughed and looked across the dance floor. Bren and Ernie were partners in the moment, more talking, little dancing,

Steve sighed. "Hope you are more tolerant than most girls would be in this situation you find yourself. I have special interests, uh, like a fetish I suppose. You are a cute girl, more so in that outfit. I'm fascinated by you on two counts; your hair and your lips. You don't mind?"

She gave him a withering look. "You are either very brave or very stupid. What in the world makes you think I could possibly act on what you are about to suggest? Wait! I know you and Bren had a gay affair. I

didn't come here to reform anybody. My great grandmother was a suffragette."

Steve wriggled on the bench. He cleared his throat with a nervous cough. "I want us to be friends," he said after a long pause.

"Pardon my reaction; I accept your offer of friendship. I believe Bren will be pleased. Get this straight; as much as you fantasize about me giving you head, forget it. I won't go down on you and, more to the point, I won't allow you a similar stance. Do we understand each other? I'm not at all experienced in even a small fraction of those in your crowd of cronies."

"Thank you. I apologize. I offer my respect." He pressed her hand gently, stood up and walked across the dance floor to the bar,

Bren approached. "Hey! What did you say to Steve? He looks crestfallen."

She giggled. "I fear I damaged his ego somewhat. He will survive. He said he likes me. I told

him 'no'."

He sat down and took her hand. "I see the crowd is thinning out. It will come as no surprise to

you that we did not win the door prize."

She grinned. "I see Ernie has disappeared with his new friends. Do we need to stay? I'm tired from all the activity."

As they walked onto the street, passersby looked askance at them but said nothing. "I know a coffee shop down this way."

They were lucky to find a table under the awning. The busy shop was tucked against the slope of the levee. Ships passing in the night signaled with fog horns.

Bren ordered coffee and a platter of custom donuts called beignets. "Are you concerned that your brief chat with Steve might damage us in some way? Not likely."

"If you are OK, I am OK. I'm so excited about this new lifestyle I see in you all. I want to learn more. The idea of going back home disturbs me, It would mean abandoning Ernie and, of course, dealing with a drunk passed out on the sofa. Odd but I feel much more at ease here. Am I coming on to you? I don't want to complicate 'us' having just met." She sighed and sampled the donut festooned with confectioner's sugar. "Um; very good, You know some stuff!" She laughed.

Several crossdressed friends from the dance hall came in off the street, waved to them and hurriedly grabbed a table while an attractive oriental girl cleared the prior dishes.

"Do you realize they are staring at you?" Bren asked, his voice sly. "You have a patch of sugar on that adorable nose." They both laughed. She tapped her nose with a napkin.

"All I did was exhale and there was this cloud of powdered sugar. Am I all right now?"

"Darling girl. You were very all right before you repaired the damages. Such a cute nose."

"You are bad, uh, even badass, using a word to enrich the vernacular." She winked away a random tear. "Is it OK if I ask about Jack's Pack? I really want to know, It startled me at first when there were no women there. Of course, they made up for it by dressing up as women and waving their hands at nothing."

"I am pleased you have been accepted so well. Naturally, since Ernie is the 'projet du jour' you are the celebrity sister, so to speak."

"I'm the lucky winner, all around. I understand Steve was your first. It was because of your agree-

ment, right?" She stared at him, eyebrows raised in question.

"I guess you have your reasons for asking. It was a game at first. Several team players came in to satisfy me. Usually in the middle of the night. I was probably asked to shoulder my share but didn't do it because of Steve. Jack would not hear of it. He was very firm in making his needs known. I knew what was happening and let him ravish my mouth. It was my first time. Steve forgave me but, down deep, I think he feels I betrayed him."

She winked back some tears. "Final question: you liked doing it, right?"

"From experience, I knew what it felt like; marvelous, sensual, erotic. All of the above. This wasn't romantic; it was carnal lust. Did you feel a surge of power, of control, when you had that girlfriend you told me about?"

"Well, you've convinced me. Since I first agreed to experiment with you, like we said at the Morning Call coffee stop, I've had it on my mind. The bottom line is different with me, probably. I really like you as a person. I have to have my emotions in order. That is not the same with you and Steve or, perhaps, Jack and Ernie. Am I thinking correctly?"

That was when another group from the TV dance hall came in, searching for a table. Bren swiftly paid the check and motioned them over. They were at the head of the line. As they left the coffee shop, Bren spoke up. "Let's sit over here, I don't want to spoil the mood, This is a mini-amphitheater; it gets a lot of use for special events, choir displays, like that."

She leaned into him when he circled her back with his arm. "Tell me about the assault, uh, mugging. How did it affect your relations with Jack?"

"It took some time to fix the sequence of events in my disordered mind," he said lightly, "Just kidding. Anyhow, I know now that the trauma was not so

much from being beat to a pulp but also abused sexually. What thrill any guy can get having sex with an unconscious victim is a mystery to me.”

“But, it did happen. Why clarify it now at this late date?”

“On the morning after, when I woke up, I realized my belt and fly were both open. Jack said I had an erection and that I probably was having a ‘wet dream’. Not likely, of course but I didn’t know it at the time. Looking at it objectively and with an eye to some of the devious characters around there, well, it’s obvious. I had so much discomfort from the bruises that I probably wasn’t aware I had been raped; if not orally, perhaps just minor anal insertion of intra-femoral. I was in no condition to argue.”

Emma gasped in disbelief. “Then after that they just left you alone. You are logical; they wouldn’t have left until they found whatever satisfaction they had in mind.”

“That plus the valuables—cash, credit and so on.” He stopped speaking and gazed wistfully into the evening shadows. A church across from where they were sitting was lighted like an art book illustration. He smiled at her and sighed, “I was raped. When I realized that, it became a revelation that it would have been far better to not know. The constant memory, a subtle nagging since that event has reared an ugly head; it is my emotional keeper.”

“If it is true that time heals all wounds, we can look forward to an improvement. Why, Bren, you are shaking. It can’t be the evening chill.”

His stare when he turned to face her was devastating. “Would it make sense to you if I confess I need you now? It isn’t just your stunning appearance; the captivating smile, the playful ways and wiles. I need more from you and, be it known, I deserve nothing. You were not involved in my personal violation.”

“I want to help,” she whispered in a low tone giving away the depth of her feeling. “Shall we spend this special time together?”

He felt faded like yesterday’s bouquet. “You would do that for me? I’m impressed.”

For answer she stood up and pulled him gently to walk next to her. Nothing more needed to be said as they trod the purposeful steps toward the hotel. The sidewalks glistened from the gathering humidity.

## VII.

Late afternoon when Bren returned from work, Ernie was in his room waiting for him.

“Is my sister here?” Ernie asked, somewhat bewildered. “I’ve had some news from home and I want to talk to her.”

Bren swiftly took the distraught lad in a warm embrace. “Relax; she had a job interview at the store where I work. The longer it takes for her to get here, the better the possible success about the position.”

“It’s about my dad,” Ernie blurted out. He let Bren guide him to the bed. They sat side-by-side, feet on the floor. “He called to say he was going to give me my educational fund.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad. Why the gigantic upset?”

“He said the money was a burden; he wants to give it to me because he no longer has a son. He said he was disowning me, taken me out of the will, all kinds of shit. Worse, it is credible because he was not slurring his words; he was sober for once. I want Emma to know what to expect from him.”

Bren put one arm around him. “You do right to warn her. It is different, Emma realizes her bond with your dad is keeping her together, like, sort of. Did your dad mention your sister at all? Do you think he was just venting? Ranting and raving is sort of his operating mode if I understand correctly. Perhaps it is likely he is just making noise, that nothing will happen or, think on it, he may change his mind ten times before he opens the second bottle.”

“I know you are right, What do you suggest?”

“Make up your mind. Do you want this? Nothing like a few dollars from out of the blue, but you are old enough to know. How much warning will he give you and Emma if he plans a showdown type visit to you here? He certainly knows the way.”

Ernie sobbed and sighed, “My mom has long since given up trying to influence him. She just hopes for the best and cleans closets or something.”

“I would like to think she is holding her life together to protect you and Emma. There is a heroic element in that.”

“I want us, Emma and me, to take the money and run. We need to forget all the trauma by making our own way here.”

“Oh? Are you saying you would like to have Emma care for you? That’s a reversal in roles even for a transvestite. Or, a big maybe; is there enough money to see you through the transgender surgery? Once that is done, I understand, you will have no difficulty finding gainful employ.”

Ernie leaned into him. “Jack says I’ll look great as a girl, will be able to make my way by selling my mouth and buns to the highest bidder, like that. He may be right.”

“You do need to wake up to the reality. Your youth, as with all of us, is temporary. You get older and it will become very important to fit into a situation that

lets you plan for the later years. Has Jack said anything about that?"

"Not for sure; he talks of my talent and a lot about destiny. Still, I can't imagine me in a lifelong quest to satisfy horny men and women with my mouth, my body, my will. It's like emotional slavery."

"Talk it over with Emma; be honest with her and your concerns. You at least owe her that being your sister. Don't throw her away because you are afraid of some event you can't control."

Ernie was pensive. After a long moment, he spoke up. "Jack is insistent, gently but pushing. He says I have a great future if I will just learn what needs to be done."

Bren was shocked. "I'll be damned! You rock, Ernie; really. You mean that in all this time, the many cross-dressing parties and all, you haven't been able to sum up the courage to go down on him? That's wild! Jack might be more manipulative than I thought. Tell me; if he asked you, right now, to meet the people who will take you in, transport you to a clinic, all the good pages of your future, would you do it?"

"Yes; he says I owe him."

"It is expensive; has he asked you for money?"

"Yes; he knows I have some, like, a dowry from my parents. Oh, Bren; do you think?"

"That he expects your dad to show up with money to fill his wallet? It seems obvious now; you?"

Ernie looked like a scared rabbit; wide-eyed, slight tremors of terror. "I've been so stupid," he said, finally.

"Look and listen. I wouldn't do this for anyone but you are Emma's brother. Emma cares about you and, therefore, so do I. I have been paying on a room

because of the lease, Jack doesn't know about it. All he wanted was to seduce me without thinking it through. Certainly, he doesn't consider me a candidate for a gender reassignment. I have a job, will be missed if I don't show up, like that. You, on the other hand, are alone except for Emma. You have no credentials for living except for your body. Being unwilling to do all he asks will only serve to line his own pockets. This could not end well."

"So, you are saying both of us, me and Emma, are in danger of being tracked for sex? But, Jack is so nice, It's hard to believe."

"Your only clue is his constant orienting you to be in debt to him. You can't ignore that now."

"I thought the room you mentioned was Steve's. You mean it is available? Can I stay there until this all dies down? Can Emma also?"

"Yes, of course. I wouldn't have brought it up otherwise. How close to closure with Jack are you? Think; in the past day or so, has he been more insistent than usual? With what you now know, can you see the graffiti on the board?"

"I need to get to Emma and quickly. I can pay you for your help if you will let me." Ernie smiled and the familiar twinkle in his eyes showed he was teasing,

Bren stood up and looked out the door into the kitchen. He wanted to be certain they were not overheard. "Get your stuff; what you can carry in one load. If Jack is here, tell him you are taking a room with Emma. You might also mention your dad called to cut you off from any funds. That will slow the artful dodger down. I'm going to call Emma — I know the route she is likely to take. We will wait for you at the Ol' Absinthe House, Let me know if there is a problem."

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As Ernie was hurriedly filling a shopping bag and a suitcase, he was surprised by Jack entering.

“Say, m’lad,” Jack said expansively. “Going someplace or just house cleaning?”

One glance told Ernie his supposed benefactor had been partying with his pals. Jack wore a two-tone, black-on-charcoal, jumpsuit. It was trimmed in embroidered white challis. “Nice outfit, Jack,” Ernie said looking at the man’s full height. “Looks expensive.”

Jack smiled, lurched slightly and sank into the cushions of his favorite chair. “I’m expecting some money to come my way so I charged some stuff. Glad you like it.” He pulled Ernie down onto his lap.

“Take it easy, Jack. Emma and I have decided to take a flat together, We found one just off Esplanade near the old mint.”

Jack winced. “That costs money as you well know. I’ve been in touch with your dad. He tells me he will be visiting soon to bring you some cash to help you along.”

“That’s very weird,” Ernie said softly. He wriggled to escape Jack’s hold on him. “No more than an hour ago, Dad called to say he is cutting me off. That made me realize I can’t pay you what I owe.”

Jack ran one hand along Ernie’s leg. “Worry not, my horny friend. I’ve met just today with some business associates. They are interested in you. A job offer, it seems. Run along now; leave that ridiculous packing and put on your most fetching outfit. Uh, the Scottish pattern kilt I bought you; it shows off your legs.” With that, Jack released him and Ernie headed for the bath.

“Take just a few minutes,” Ernie said. He knew Jack was watching him as he dressed so he took his

leisure. He did not feel comfortable calling Bren as long as Jack was staring like he was. 'Um,' he thought, 'cat and canary; I'm the bird.' He showered and dressed quickly. "Almost ready, There seems some misunderstanding about my dad. I'm calling him now to ask him what to expect."

Jack was out of his chair with a bounce. He slapped the phone out of Ernie's hand. "Just cool it!" he said, raising his voice. "I told you he was bringing me some money. You can pay what you owe and have some left over to finance your new job. Come on, now, Let's go."

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At the Old Absinthe House on Bourbon Street, Bren and Emma took a table by the open door so they could watch for Ernie. The longer Ernie did not show, the more time was against them.

"Darling; I don't like this," Bren said. "He should have been here by now."

"Or called," she answered. "I've had a bad feeling about Jack ever since we met. Now, what?"

Bren took a deep breath and exhaled. "It's like this, Emma," he said, watching her carefully. "While you were out paying your future on the yellow brick road, your dad called and, to make it short, disowned Ernie by saying there would be no money, now or ever."

Emma winced. "Dad has more than once said things, usually with intense conviction, then changed ten times over. Why is this any different?"

"How can I explain? I can only say I feel down deep a cloud of betrayal has befallen you and your brother. Taking the thought one step closer and I see you involved as well. You both have embraced our lifestyle with wardrobe additions. Crossdressing, revelry and what not. It is our good fortune we found each other.

Would you rather depend on me for your emotional support or your father?"

"You; these past weeks have shown me a better life. Now, not absolutely certain, I think I have a job so we both can live like normal transvestites." She laughed at her humorous jab. "Are you happy with your living at Jack's Pack?"

"No; not any longer. I'm aware he has been generous with me, letting me stay, and so on. Now, today, I put it together. I know why and I can see what is happening to so many transients Jack has befriended. Ernie is one of 'em and, scary thought, you are also."

Emma kept her gaze on the side street looking for Ernie. "Go on; don't stop there, What?"

"In a word—sex trafficking. Jack takes in the drunks, the loose-as-a-geese types, crossdressers, and so on. He feeds them and gets them somewhat acceptable. Then, poof! They disappear. He told me about the one guy who had my bunk. He assured me he wouldn't be back because he was on a bike trip through Europe. I am convinced even at this late hour that I have not yet been abducted because I'm a good cook. Scary."

"How does my dad fit in all this? You know, my dad isn't the best parent a girl could have but, well, he is the only one. My mom fears a disastrous situation if what you say is only marginally true. She has spent her life trying to protect us. Now she is about to lose both at one time. Awful."

"And the money, too, Jack expects a windfall from both the traffickers and your dad. That's my guess. Listen up!" Bren threw a keychain holding a couple darkened keys onto the table. "I have a rented pad not far from here. I've kept it all this time because of the lease. Don't look at me like that, I'm a responsible guy."

She giggled. "Is this a proposal?"

"I want you and Ernie to take this room. It is for your protection. I can handle Jack, um, I hope."

"Is there enough space for three of us?"

"Perhaps but, honestly, I really would like to get to the bottom of the mystery known as 'Jack's Pack.' If I'm correct, too many of our own life-loving kind are being shipped off to an unhappy destiny. I'm in the right place to do something about it."

"OK," she said thoughtfully. "Let's go back and see what is delaying Ernie. After that, we can take the room." She grasped the keys like they were a lifeline.

As they approached Jack's Pack, Bren saw immediately that three thugs were pushing some girl back against the doorway. She screamed when one punch hit her so hard that she fell to her knees.

"Uh-Oh!" Bren exclaimed. "Déjà vu. These could be the same assailants. The girl will wake up in a strange bed wondering what hit her/ But, the telling of the tale is obvious, whose bed?" As he came closer, the leader of the three recognized him,

Short, stocky, muscular, the leader stepped toward Bren and Emma. His attitude was menacing. They stood as if paralyzed, staring at the assault scene. He waved away the other two. "Omigod, Bren," Emma said. "Is this a re-run?"

The hoodlum had a cap embroidered "Jefé" and he motioned to them to come closer. "Take this bitch to the first bedroom on the left," he said with authority. The hapless girl was propped up against the doorway, her tight-fitting skirt pulled up to her hips.

"OK, chief; sure we will. Just give us a chance," Bren said quickly. "Quit mugging and slugging, please."

Emma hurried to gather the girl in her arms to try to offer some solace. She was only semi-conscious but was aware of the immediate danger. With effort

she allowed Emma to bring her inside. Emma tumbled the girl onto the bed, first room on the left. The girl was sobbing and clawing at her head, combing the long hair with her fingers and self-consciously tugging at the hem of her skirt. "Hey!" Emma called out. "Bren, please come here. Why would they say to put the poor girl in your room?"

There were sounds of a scuffle and next Ernie was propelled into the room. He fell on the floor and did not try to stand. "You stay," Jack said to the chief. "Dismiss your two hoodlums; no sense having more witnesses than needed. I'll take it from here." He stepped behind Bren when he entered and slammed the door shut. The bolt was in place. "Well, isn't this cozy?" he waved at the foursome. "Your tenure here just ended," he said to Bren. "Your private van is en route to convey you to fortunes unknown." He chuckled and sat down.

"Please explain," Bren said, watching Jack warily. "Why is Ernie being punished?"

"Obvious; he was trying to run away. I have far too much time and money invested in his future to allow that. I've sold the four of you into service to benefit some friends of mine." While the hostages took that in, Jack went through Tess's purse in search of credit cards, identification and cash. He stuffed some items of interest into his pockets,

When the hapless girl tried to sit up, Emma assisted her by grasping under her arms. "What happened to me?" she finally murmured. "Who are all these people? Why are my clothes torn and clinging? I haven't done anything wrong."

"Her name is Tess," Jack said as he threw the remains of Tess's purse at her feet. "Emma; please take her into the bath. Try to clean her up some. We are expecting company."

Emma looked quickly at Bren to get instruction. He nodded assent so the two girls worked their way into the bathroom.

Ernie, still sitting cross-legged on the floor, was bewildered. "Explain this, please, Jack," he whimpered.

"Just shut up!" Jack said gruffly. "Your dad is coming by to pay what's owed to me. After that, you are free of me. If you ever thought, in the past several weeks, about a transgender reassignment, you will soon learn it as reality. After that, look forward to a life of leisure as the toy of some wealthy oil barons. Nothing personal; but very serious." He looked sternly at Bren. Finally, he said, "I put in a call to your friend, Steve. I told him you are leaving on a trip and would like to see him to say goodbye." He was pensive for a long moment. "Don't give him cause for alarm, That would make another less to concern us."

"Did you have to beat up that young girl? Is it a control issue?"

Jack smiled and leaned against the back of his chair. "It was not a random abduction. We've watched for her every day. She takes this route in early evening. Police patrols only offer a false sense of security. I intend to have my way with her in a while. Emma, as well." He looked up when the girls came into the room, Tess seemed grateful to sink into the mattress to gather her thoughts. Emma was hurriedly next to her. Ernie sat dumbfounded, watching the doorway.

The tension in the room built as they waited for some development. Finally, the chief outside the door knocked gently. "A lady here says you called her."

Steve was decked out in a tropical, Hawaiian decorated shirt open at the neck. It covered the wide belt with ornament buckle. His makeup was flawless and his hair pulled to one side with a flowing ribbon. The white linen slacks looked like he had grown into them

and, except for the bulge at the crotch, they fit like a second skin. By habit and experience, he kept his face turned away from the chief to avoid identification.

“That has to be Steven,” Bren add in a stage whisper.

Jack smiled and drained his whiskey glass. He burped, hiccoughed and tapped his chest gently. “Listen up,” he said, looking at Bren intently. “I want you to thank him for coming. Tell him you and Emma are leaving on a trip. Anything to evade suspicion.” He stood at the door and looked around the room, “The rest of you, pay attention. No noise; be silent.”

Out in the hallway, the chief slid open the bolt securing the door. As he turned to step out of the way, he saw Steve raise one arm, the other holding a gleaming 38’ pistol aimed at the chief’s head. The crunch could be heard from inside the room and, at first, Jack was confused. When he heard the chief exclaim, “Hey!” he knew a new factor in his alcoholic equation was on the board. The sound of the fallen body confirmed it.

Steve did not try the door. He stood, waiting for Jack to speak, Though a matter of seconds, it seemed interminable. After a long moment, like soul searching, Jack threw the door wide open and stood blocking it. Staggering, he was obviously feeling the effects of his alcohol. One glance at the gleaming chrome of Steve’s pistol told Jack all he needed to know.

Steve stood steadfast, a threatening posture, but kept the pistol aimed at Jack. “Now, take it easy,” Jack said weakly with a wave of his hand. “You are certainly fetching in that outfit; my compliments, You didn’t have to split the chief’s cranium; we are peaceful folk here.”

Steve chuckled. “The irony does not escape me. Tell that to Bren and any number of cracked skulls that you intended a resolution by peaceful means.

The word of the day for you, Jack, is bullshit.” He stepped into the room and waved the pistol at Jack to keep him at a safe distance. “Careful,” he said warily, “my trigger finger gets itchy in the company of the likes of you.”

“OK,” Jack said as he stepped backward. “Don’t get nervous. What do you want?”

“You have pushed too far and too hard this time,” Steve said. He looked askance at Jack while he addressed the others. “Get your stuff together; sooner we get out of here, the more we will like it. If you want to stay, it’s at your own risk.”

After a long silence, Bren spoke up. “Jack’s game plan includes a visit from another mob of hoodlums. In addition, he expects Ernie’s dad to pay off the ransom. You have his two kids and is clearly confused so expect most anything from him when he gets here. In the meanwhile, we are leaving and taking Tess with us. Beware our next meeting as you may nurse a hole between your eyes.”

Jack’s demeanor brightened. Two panel vans were stopped in the alley. The doors open and closed were like an announcement. “You are too late, my sexy friend; company has arrived. I expect they too carried some ordnance. No more games. Just be kind to yourself and get out.” Arms still raised, he backed to the doorway then swiftly disappeared.

As the four captives left the safety of the room, they were led out and climbed through the sliding door into the van. Bren was alert. Steve had disappeared which gave him pause. It was his long term friend and fellow transvestite that had risked rescue. The portent made him nervous. Next he observed Jack accepting an envelope from the driver of the van. In return the driver was given a dossier on each of the four.

The driver perused the records in his hand. He seemed pleased and Bren overheard part of the con-

versation. Jack happily shook hands after a cursory check of the contents of the envelope stuffed with cash. "We are waiting for transport down river. I see you are interested in the four of 'em. If you want to visit, we're at the Creole Kitchen."

Jack boldly stepped up to the open van and motioned to Emma to approach. Emma dutifully swung her legs out while she sat on the open doorway. She glared hatred as Jack touched her lips with one finger and fondled her breasts. "I really don't want to miss this opportunity with you. Perhaps our destiny will hold cross-purposes again." Next, the door slammed shut and locked. The van swung easily, merging into the flow of traffic.

At the Creole Kitchen which faced River Road, the van drove slowly behind along a double path to stop next to a boathouse. The foursome was met by three Cajun types when the van door was open. They were led into a large room which was part of the boathouse.

Tess began whimpering again and Emma was stone-cold silent. Ernie looked anxiously around. The scene was idyllic. The aged boathouse housed a skiff and a pirogue. The large room had double doors open to the parking area and a single door onto the ramp next to the boats. The sparse furnishings showed signs of wear which meant to Bren it was a room frequently used. He was on the alert to any opportunity to escape or, at best, fight back.

The black bayou waters roiled gently when a fishing party headed for the open water. It was eerily silent; no city noises, few traffic sounds on River Road and just an occasional ship on the river using its horn to make way in the crowded channel.

Finally, the driver came in with some 'take-out' meals for them. It was a gumbo, with boiled shrimp adding to the repast.

“We have to keep ourselves together,” Bren said. “Girls, get comfortable while Ernie and I check this out.”

“I did this, didn’t I?” Ernie asked in a nervous tremor. “I was so wrapped up in my crossdressing while trying to avoid my parents as much as I could, well, sadly I missed all the little clues that my worthy self was fading fast.”

“Relax, guy. Being a normal, healthy guy is not a crime. Certainly not to the extent we now find ourselves. Stay loose and be ready when we put together a plan. Our future is uncertain at the moment. What they want with me is a mystery. I’m only a cook and have many connections in the city, at work, friends, all like that. Emma and Tess have ethereal beauty which you can see in one glance.”

Ernie turned to face Bren. He had an intense look as he stared. “Bren, you are my friend and I can see it is entirely likely you will be shipped out as extra baggage. Maybe we will only get one chance but when that comes, we have to take it.”

“Agreed,” Bren answered and walked casually over to the door leading to the boat dock. He found it open. “Hey,” he called to Ernie. “Looks like they aren’t as secure as they thought. Can you swim?”

“Yes but so can the crocodiles. I sure wouldn’t chance it.”

Once outside they could feel the wetness along with the cool comfort of early evening. The door slammed behind them. They heard the bolt sliding in place. Bren had to resist the impulse to scream and pound on the door. That was when he realized they intended to separate their young victims. Ease of control. He was rapidly becoming very tired of being defeated on every turn.

In a futile gesture, he tugged at the door knob and, finding it secure, sank slowly to his knees in a fit of despair.

In the room, the driver walked boldly up to the bunk where the two girls were seated. "Stand up, please," he said to Emma. When Emma struggled to her feet, he spun her around and promptly caught her wrists with several layers of tape. He pulled her to the dining area and positioned a straight back chair. "Sit," he said softly. "I was told you are a beauty; understatement for sure, Is the other girl your lover?"

Emma struggled against the restraints. "No; we just met today. They beat her up needlessly. She is afraid of you; I am not."

"You will be later. The tension usually wears 'em down."

"Them? How many and what did you do?"

"Not up to me," he said in an effort to appear innocent. "I just get to take slight advantage which really means opportunity for some affection. I'm not well-paid for what I do, the risks I take, so the occasional captive as pretty as you helps to keep me together." He laughed derisively and pointed at Tess, then back to Emma. He walked around her and stopped to arrange her hair which was flowing along her shoulders. Parting some at the neck, she felt him unbutton her blouse, then her bra clasp.

When Emma heard him open his belt buckle and release the zipper, she turned her head so she faced away from him.

"I'm not intimidated by your abuse," she said and raised her chin in defiance. "Whatever you fancy me for, just forget it. The answer is 'no'."

He was amused. "Just a little head, pretty girl. But, tell me, which of the two guys are family?"

"Both, if truth be told," she replied and, astonished, she saw Tess moving swiftly across the room. Her arms were raised above her head as she grasped a boat hook with both hands. Next, as she ap-

proached, she let loose a curdling scream of anger mixed with horror,

The driver turned to see what was happening. His last words were, "What the hell?" The silvery boat hook shone in the near darkness. Tess brought it down with all her strength, adrenaline pumping. It sank into his neck near the shoulder. She left the hook in as the man dropped in a clump, bleeding on the wooden floor.

Uncertain of her results, Tess kicked him and then turned to walk away. She pulled the boat hook free and dropped it to clank onto the floor.

"Quick," Emma said to Tess. "Undo these tapes holding my wrists." That complete, she went to the door, opened the bolt and let Bren and Ernie into the room.

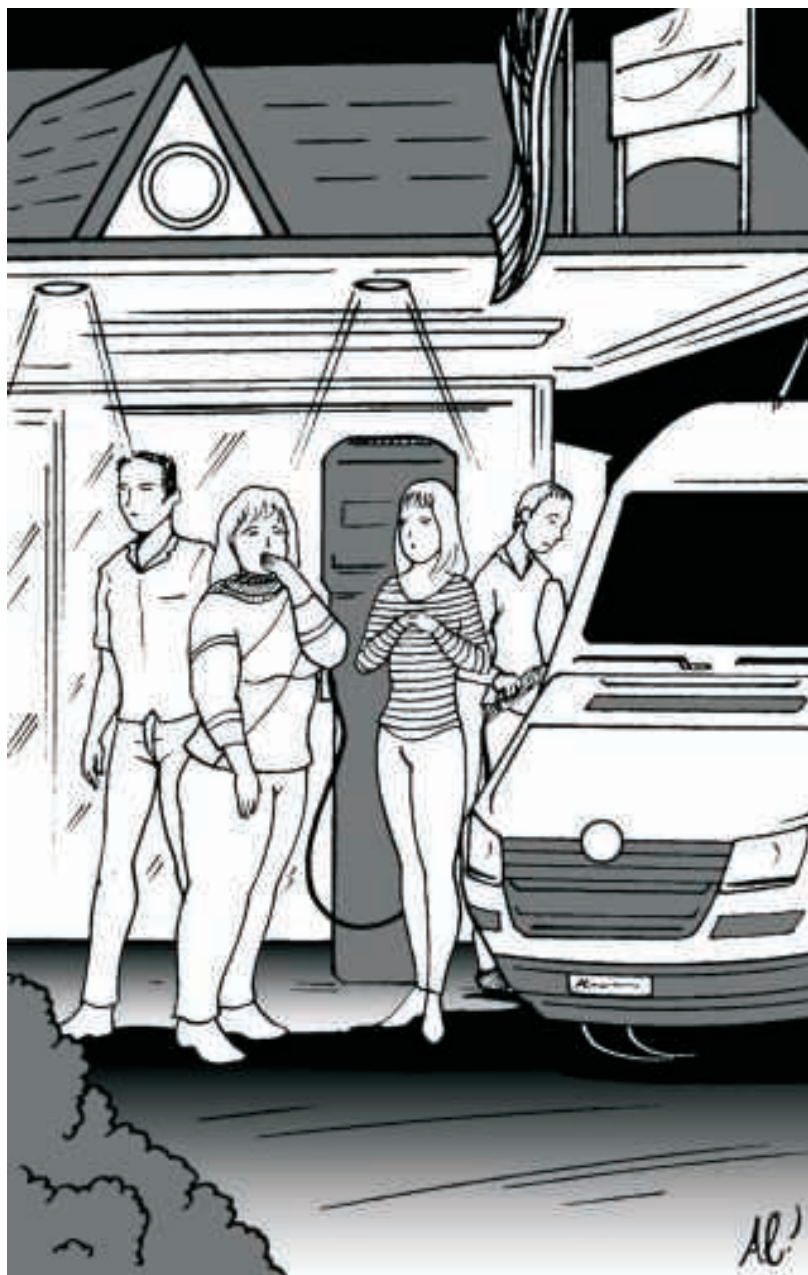
"Omigod!" Bren said. "Vendetta!"

Bren rushed to collect pistols, keys and body protection garments. He emptied the murdered man's wallet of cash and identity. Ernie quickly helped Bren tug the lifeless body out the door onto the dock. They rolled it over until the noisy splash satisfied them that all was done for their protection. An unidentified body torn up by hungry 'gators might baffle any investigation.

In the meantime, they all piled into the van after locking up the boathouse. Bren reasoned that the delay in entry by any of the drunks at the Creole Kitchen bar would give them a safe start. In a short time, the van was speeding effortlessly along River Road headed for the city.

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Emma and Tess finally gave in to exhaustion, They sat in the rear seat, holding hands and sharing moments of crying to express their joy at having escaped



a possible tragedy. Tess fit easily into the circle of Emma's arms. She sighed and snuggled her nose into Emma's neck and shoulder. Taking in a deep breath, she let out a long sigh.

"I am elated at being safe after such an escapade," Tess said slowly. "I've never dreamed of doing what I did. Even now I can't come face-to-face with the instant I knew what had to be done."

Emma patted her back and hugged her. "Easy; your quick response saved our lives. We've yet to learn for just how long. Those guys are going to invade Jack's Pack when they piece together the action behind their driver's disappearance. How much danger Jack is actually in will be a factor in our future. She spoke in short bursts. "We have to wonder what Bren and Ernie are thinking right now."

Tess let out a howl, closed her eyes and was semi-conscious. "When can I stop thinking about what I did?"

"When you realize you are our rescuing hero, which is true. If it means anything, you've won the confidence of the three of us. That might not be much to you but it adds you to our team. For myself, I'll not be happy to release you. Are you OK with this?" She turned her head and kissed Tess lightly on her forehead.

The van lurched into a cloud of dust as Bren abruptly pulled up at a rural gas station. "We need some gas," he said. He pressed some bills into Ernie's hand. "You girls get down out of sight, I may be overly cautious but 'the enemy' might have let out the word to be on the lookout for a white van with four people in it."

Emma and Tess were quick to scramble onto the floor. Stretching out, arms around each other, knees pressed their thighs as they tried frantically to hide. They were so frightened, it was difficult to breathe without making a sound. Tess started to cry again.

Finally, they heard Ernie close the gas cap cover. They were swiftly on the road again.

“Where to from here?” Ernie asked as he studied the passing scenery. “I’ve a feeling we will not ever again be welcome with Jack and his band of gypsies.”

Bren grinned, “You’re telling me you miss Jack’s hearty sex appetite,” he said. “There are any number of horny gays out there willing to accept you in their little circle. Add the transvestites to that and, wham! You have more adventurers.”

Ernie frowned and looked at Bren as the van turned onto a side street. Bren stopped and set the brake. “What now?” Ernie said in a whisper as he quickly looked around. The quiet neighborhood looked peaceful, not nearly as ominous as the latest boathouse exploit.

“OK,” Bren said as he turned around to face the two girls huddled in the back. “Conference! We

need to be in agreement so there is no argument if the field of conflict warms up. We cannot return to Jack’s Pack. It is fair to assume Jack knows by now that he might be asked to return the money. That will anger him, for sure.”

“So?” Emma asked. “Where is Steve? Do we know if he survived or not?”

Ernie spoke up next. “I picked up a pay phone at that gas station when we were there. Can we chance calling Steve? Do we even know his number?”

Impressed at Ernie’s quick grasp of their situation, Bren saw Emma’s eccentric brother in a new light. “I can call him,” he said and held out his hand for the phone.

## VIII

Pleased with the success of the afternoon, Jack carefully counted his wad of dollar bills, filled out a deposit slip and started for the door. He was surprised to find Ernie's Dad blocking the exit.

"Just cool it," Dad said in a voice barely controlled by his fury. "You aren't going anywhere until you give me my kids. They might be a tad eccentric with the transvestite nonsense but they're still mine. I want to know they are safe. Then I'll pay what we owe."

"Easy, Dad," Jack said in an even tone. "They are on a short trip right now. Should be back any moment. If you will please pay me what they owe, I can get to the bank before closing time." Jack watched him warily and came closer. When Dad turned to look at the doorway, the butt of his pistol was in plain sight. Jack backed off. "Don't do anything foolish," he said. His voice quivered, a passing tremor as he faced the offended parent.

Jack sat casually at the kitchen table. He opened a pint of booze, set a couple shell glasses in place. Looking directly at Dad, the unmistakable gleam of interest in the whiskey was obvious. "We can have a friendly drink while we wait," he said.

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Still parked in the shadows of a side street, Bren pressed Steve's cell phone number. He waited. Outside the van, the magnolia trees seemed to also be listening.

"Hello?"

"Steve! It's Bren. We are OK and wondering if you are the same."

Steve was instantly alert. "Omigod; yes, Where are you? Last I saw, you, uh, were on a trip."

“Paid and one-way,” Bren answered. “Can we meet at my room? Do you still have the key? We need to figure out what to do. This time, for a change, we have weapons and money, That’s new, aye?”

“Jack sort of made a pass at me and then told me to go. He saw my pistol. I think he intended another meeting soon. He gives me the creeps. Always did, as a matter of fact. You getting seduced by the likes of that monster gives me overly dramatic nightmares.”

Bren chuckled, “You are the one being dramatic/ What happened after we left in the van?”

“Instead of running because my skirt was too long, kidding, kidding. I waited across the alley to watch the action. Dad showed up and I could hear the strained voices but that’s about all.”

“What did he say? Ernie asked, anxious.

“He said he tried to run away but it was easier for his lover to chase with skirts up rather than his trying to escape with trousers at the ankles. He’s kidding; he is his old true self and we can meet at my room. Relax; I told you already; I’m a responsible guy.”

The girls laughed; Ernie frowned.

“We have two rooms unknown to Jack or any of his cohorts. So I called to be polite,” he said with a sly wink at Emma and Tess. I suggest we get some plan together to protect us. We don’t need the Chief to come around with his thugs.”

Bren was pensive. “Good thinking, Ernie. We’ve all heard the old adage about the weak link in the chain. It will be no surprise to confront Jack but the chief, as always, is to be considered clueless. I have a trap in mind. The chief will admit to anything to save his own skin. Loyalty among thieves might be a myth.”

“Yes, especially around that gang of cutthroats,” Emma added. “Wait a minute; I have an idea. Three

of us have fallen under the brutal shadow—Bren, at first; me though I escaped any serious harm and, also, Tess; our adorable innocent.”

Ernie was severe. He looked directly into his sister's eyes. “So, what are you saying? We all know that.”

“Well, how about some bait? I can lure the chief into a compromising situation. I'll dress as a guy and let him recognize me.” Emma spoke slowly as she put her thoughts in order. “I think he will grab me to drag me back to the Pack HQ. We can have a cop standing by to act as protector. If it comes to making charges, we then all come forward as witnesses. What do you think?”

Bren's facial expression was stark serious. “Are you willing to do this? Seems risky to me.”

Steve, who had been silent through all the discussion, spoke up. “Risky is the word, I agree. We have all noticed that Jack seems to be operating his hostage business with impunity. Police patrols don't question the bleeding and broken bodies that are hastily drawn inside. If there is a payoff to the local cops, they just might be getting nervous after so much time.”

Bren's eyes lit up in interest. “OK, yes! Emma; you are elected. It is obvious that Jack's Pack will be on the streets around dance hall time. There is a lot of money involved so they might be more reckless under the pressure.” He chuckled, “We didn't think of ourselves as a community asset before.”

Steve was still thinking. “Money? OK? By rights, we should get a big chunk of that cash for our trouble. And, oh, for Tess so efficiently thinning the opposition's ranks. Anyone add to that?” The room was silent; only the breathing gave away the intense importance of their circumstances. Finally, Steve aired his thoughts. “Well, if we are counting on Jack's

reckless response, he needs to be informed. Thus, friends, who is going to hang the bell on the cat?"

Whispering and some laughter made the mood lighter. "Next," Bren said after a long moment. "I think I'm elected because I'm better known to the Jack's Pack gang. I'll call on two points; one, we feel owed the money he has stashed in that bank. Secondly, a safety pledge."

"What's that?" Emma said sadly. "You know Jack is not good for his word. As for the chief's loyalty to the gypsy clan, he will remember the altercation with Steve and the lump on his head. That word is back, risky."

After heated discussion, the group split up; some remained in Bren's original room, others to Steve's more spacious pad.

Saturday morning, the day of the monthly transvestite dance, Bren took a deep breath, summoned some extra courage and called Jack.

"Do I know you?" Jack said, angry at having his hangover disturbed.

Bren chuckled. "Not as well as you would like. Fine way to accept a friendly call from your former cook. Now, tell me, is that job still open?"

Jack's response was controlled anxiety. "Bren! You ass; what happened to the trip on River Road? My associates say I did not deliver as promised and, ergo, they want their money back."

"Oh? Was that the agreement? Perhaps they are still looking for us. Your driver was the sole man in charge for the trip. He decided to go for a swim in the bayou; hasn't been seen since."

Jack jumped off his bunk, feet on the floor, and grasped the telephone. "So, you are all gone? It looms bankruptcy to me. Those guys play rough; just get off this phone and let me think."

“In a minute; don’t get excited. We feel you’ve abused us and the risk is yours. Thus, we want the cash you received for making us available. Also; don’t run away now that we are getting down to terms. We want a pledge of safety that you will not again involve any of us in your petty schemes, OK?”

Jack screamed into the phone. “Not OK! It’s my money; I’m the one that housed you, listened to your sad stories, fed you and provided all needs. It was of short duration but expensive. What I really need to happen is to deliver each of you back to cover their losses. What makes you think I would say anything else?”

“Only wanted to give you a chance to get out gracefully.” Bren laughed and left the phone.

Satisfied the plan was working, Steve left to meet with some of the police that had shown an interest in a sting. Their main concern was to relieve the burden of Jack’s operation from the area. It had become too public, too embarrassing to the force in general.

Emma was enthusiastic. She felt a positive result would have a benefit for others who might be caught up in Jack’s enterprise. Ernie joined her in preparing a suitable crossdressed outfit. The plan was going so well, Emma and Ernie were both apprehensive.

“How is our luscious bait?” Bren asked when he saw Ernie coming in from a brief shopping spree

to gather costume items. “Were you careful out there? We don’t need any disruption in the plan.”

Ernie carefully displayed a cowboy western outfit on the bunk. “By now, Jack should have his mob spread out looking for any of us to finger our location, I was very cautious.” Comfortable with apparel sizes for his sister, the boots, slim open-bottom slacks, vest with decorated cowhide strands and a narrow brim hat.

Bren was impressed. "With Steve missing from his clan, Jack must be covering the Orleans Street area. He knows Steve attends some TV friends there. All we need now is a go-go from Steve to see what the net will show us. This is getting as exciting as it is dangerous." He picked up the wide belt tooled leather and slid Steve's small pistol into the holster. "Thief might remember this when he sees it. More to keep him off-guard than anything."

"Did you go over a plan so the rest of us can be on standby?" Ernie asked,

Bren sat down to wait. Finally, Emma and Tess came in. They all marveled at Emma's get-up. Bren paid rapt attention as Emma dressed, Even with the intense feelings reflected in their adventures, Bren couldn't ignore the occasional flash of Emma's flesh as she dressed and asked Tess to make some adjustments.

They went over the route to be taken. Assuming Jack would be watching for any of them from the vantage point of the meeting place on Orleans Street, they agreed to be seen on Royal Street behind the church. Tess was anxious to get started. "I wonder if there is an available boat hook around here someplace?" she asked. When it became an obvious 'private joke', Steve asked to be informed.

Bren tried to catch up. "Ernie and I were locked out of a big shed on the bayou. The driver did that so he could take carnal advantage of Emma. Tess waylaid him with a boat hook. That's what we were laughing about."

"Then we have to be sure the driver doesn't see us, right?" Steve asked.

Tess smiled, "Not likely he will show up. He's probably still at the boat dock or maybe went for a swim."

Steve looked at Tess as if in question but said nothing more.

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Following the rain that seemed to visit each afternoon. Emma and Tess began their casual walk into danger. Steve remained available with the plain-clothes police. Ernie took a position at one end of a foreboding dark alley that trailed along next to the church. Bren at the other street, about a block away, appeared to be loitering.

The two girls turned onto the alleyway. Shadows marked their path and a cloud of humidity left by the rain glistened along the stone walk.

“How do we know it will be the chief who finds us?” Tess asked. She tucked her arm through Emma’s elbow loop and sighed.

“Are you having regrets about that driver’s destiny? You need not; it was a matter of protection. You have to agree.”

“I’ve thought it over and over. I was in a panic; scared for certain. Now I wish it could have been avoided or, yet, perhaps get revenge at the chief or one of his thugs. They beat me to a pulp.”

Emma did not break stride. “This might be the day we stop these jerks from beating up any more youngsters. I’m afraid I’ve no pity on them if they get locked away for a long time.”

“Part of my anger that surfaced was seeing the driver getting ready to force your mouth. Not knowing you well, I just did not think you would survive the attack. Have you done that before?”

Part way down the alley, there was a quaint art gallery which was closed. They sat on a park-type bench and tried to calm themselves. “I’ve not done it but I know my time will come one of these days. Actually, Ernie and I had very strict parents. Over-protective might be the word. Mom lost Dad to the disease of alcoholism so we were all she had in life.”

Tess scanned the narrow passageway, both directions. No lurking figures in the early evening shadows appeared. "Not a soul in sight," she said softly and pulled Emma closer. "No pirates about trying to return to Barataria."

Emma followed Tess's gaze. Neither could see any lurking threats.

Tess lay her head on Emma's shoulder "We've had one escapade after another," she began unhurriedly. "You have been very gentle with me. Is it because you too were attacked? Did that happen? I can tell you were more than playing nurse. Am I right?"

Emma squinted into the shadows. A slight wind rustled some plants in the churchyard. "I've had a few occasions with a girl. Have you been with a woman?"

"No; not yet. That reply goes along with your comment about 'maybe it will happen' but perhaps not yet. When the situation surfaces, I hope it is with someone as nice as you."

Emma grinned. "You're just enjoying a crush on girls dressed as cowboys." She smiled and tightened her arm around Tess's shoulders. "I am mostly a bust when it comes to oral sex or any other for that matter. Bren and I have sort of agreed to experiment some. I like him a lot."

Tess stood up. "It seems we are both in the same pirogue back on that bayou behind the Cajun Kitchen. Possibly our time will come. You are very attractive to me. Maybe it's because neither of us have had much sex in our growing-up years. I've thought about it more since I've been around you."

"I'll take that as flattery; thank you." They began to stroll toward the other street when they were caught by surprise.

The chief stepped away from an alcove in the building directly in their path. Tess yelped and

Emma turned quickly to face him. "Easy, Chief," she said quickly. "We aren't looking for trouble unless you are it."

"You chicks think I'm stupid but I'm not. I can see you have both ends of this alley covered. On my own, am I?" He grabbed both girls by the shoulders and shoved them back beyond the bench. "I think I know what happened to the driver. Everyone is hush-hush. I also know what he had in mind doing with the two of you. Since he isn't here, I've an idea of my own."

That was when he saw Emma slowly withdrawing the pistol from her holster. He reacted with a sucker punch to the jaw. Tess screamed and Emma crumpled to the stone way. She struggled to stand and watched in dismay as the chief tucked the pistol into his belt. Tess helped her up. They both accepted his lead which was a short walk past the art gallery toward the side street,

Steve was racing down the alley with two policemen in tow. Bren also responded by running toward them. Ernie gained first and stopped, turned around and gasped. The hoodlum had told the truth; he was prepared to disappear with the two very valuable assets to Jack's problem. They were not to be seen.

"What the hell?" one cop said as he diligently began searching the area.

Expecting trouble, the chief forced both girls into a covered doorway. It opened to a narrow staircase up to the second floor. They stumbled to the landing and found themselves in a vacant room. The door was quickly closed and a strong bolt slid into place. They could hear the others frantically searching for them. Several took the stairway two steps at a time but saw nothing.

Forced to sit on the floor, backs to the wall, the girls bravely faced their tormentor. Emma kept him in sight as she waited for a chance to grab the pistol stuck in his belt. Tess was terrified. It was happening

again, she considered, but this time there was no weapon at hand. “Omigod,” she said, lamenting the abduction. “Don’t lose us, Emma; we are too valuable to keep. I don’t think he will use that pistol unless it is to bonk us on the skull like Steve did earlier.”

“Shut up,” Chief said. “We were on to you from the beginning. We let you linger on that bench until all our guys were in place. Your small band that relied on police protection are out of luck. There is going to be a fight and, as usual, the police are useless. They only know how to write parking tickets.”

Three of the chief’s cohorts came out of the courtyard and vaulted the fence toward them. The two at the Cajun Kitchen were summoned when Jack was tipped off by Bren’s phone call.

“Shot fired!” one of the cops called. Everyone ducked for cover. Jack strutted to stand by the art gallery. “There is nothing you jerks can do except accept our hospitality once again,” Jack said, mocking them. “The policemen can go unless y’all want to start a blood bath.” He looked around and with a scathing tone said, “Where are the chicks?”

With no answer, Jack decided the chief had likely herded the girls ahead of them back to Jack’s Pack. He sighed, glanced around, and finally led the small troupe down Royal Street like a Carnival procession.

Chief had taken a position between the two girls as they sat on the rustic floor. He had one hand clasped about each of their mouths. Once it seemed the fight was over, he released his hold and stepped away. “Turn and face the wall,” he said gruffly. “Hands behind your back. OK, yes; that’s right.” He removed their belts and tightened them around their wrists. There was no chance to move and no reason to call out. Night had settled on the old square of the city and the lights were out except for a few illuminating the park-like area.

“What do you want with us?” Emma inquired in a sing-song voice like an English teacher,

“First, some answers. What did you do with the money?”

Tess’s voice gurgled with fear. “What money? We were hoping to get some from you guys; you don’t need it where you’re going.” She leaned back against him when he sat gingerly behind her. He ran both hands along her arms and shoulders until he brushed against her breasts.

“You know it will all come to light one of these days. The driver is a friend of mine. Why didn’t he come here to help when it was needed?”

Emma tried to divert his interest. “We are sorry about your friend. He won’t be playing in any of your games anymore.”

“You couldn’t have done him in. Neither of you are strong enough or quick enough to slow him down. He really wanted you; no secret about that.”

Tess winced but held her chin up bravely. “He went for a swim in the bayou; hungry buddies might have had him for lunch.” She could feel his shoulders droop, withered. “Look, Chief. What can we say? We don’t know for sure but it’s very likely he’s dead. Like you say, the truth will come to light one of these days.”

He stood up and began pacing the floor. Several times he sneaked an opening in the shutters to look down to the Pirates Alley. “Nothing going on down there,” he said in a tense voice. He fingered the inner pocket of his jacket for his cell phone. “I can call them and Jack will pay me well for your return. How I can bring you there without risk? Well, I guess I can use some help.” Again, he knelt next to Tess and ran his hand over her hips and thighs. “Very pretty, I’ll delay calling for help until I’ve had a chance to provide you with the pleasures the driver had in mind.” Her belt was already used to hold her prisoner so he lifted the

hem of her dress, He whistled in appreciation. "Sorry I had to rough you up before." He looked at Emma. "Are you her cowboy friend or are you going to the rodeo?" He chuckled and continued to fondle Tess's curves.

"Please leave her alone, you jerk. She doesn't want you doing that," Emma said with disdain.

Tess was crying softly as he turned to face Emma. He touched her lips with one finger and moved across, side-to-side. Next he pushed the suede vest aside. The bundle of cowhide strands gathered aside, he fingered her breasts. "Undo my belt and I'll make it easy for you," she said with as much conviction as she could gather.

He laughed and turned to Tess. "Do her!" he demanded and pushed her down until her face was mashed with Emma's naked breasts. She brought out her tongue and began what she thought he wanted to see. Emma continued to work her wrists until finally she had both hands free. She went along gleefully as Tess licked and pressed to the obvious delight of the thug. Then she swiftly grabbed the gun and pressed the muzzle against his temple.

"One bad move and you're as dead as your friend, the driver," she said. Unable to come to terms with being at the mercy of a mere girl, the Chief raised his free hand to form a fist. The long-awaited final denouement was quick. She squeezed the trigger. The Chief slumped over, dead,

Emma released Tess's wrists and both girls sat in the middle of the floor in a cloying embrace. They did not want to believe what happened. "Omigod, Emma, That happened so fast; wow! Did you see his trousers? He had a big one ready for action. I hope never, ever, to see that again. Have you been to a rodeo?"

"When I go, I'll take you along. You seem to like seducing cowboy girls." Emma patted Tess and ran one hand over her back, trying to assure her safety.

"I guess it wasn't our turn," Tess said slowly, pensive. "Another time, perhaps."

"Only if you dress up special for me. I would like to be seduced by a medico transvestite in green scrubs."

They laughed but, also, both knew the future held more danger than they were willing to admit.

## IX.

Dolan stepped out of the door, checked to be certain it was locked and turned his face to the sun. He wore three-quarter length sweat pants and a loose fitting linen shirt. His destination for the jogging was the levee path that began near the towering Aquarian.

Crossing behind the once-formidable Jax Brewery, he caught his first glimpse of the river. He took a moment to do his stretch exercises and breathe in the crisp morning air mixed with the scent of the burgeoning river moving impassively.

That was when he noticed a drunk asleep in a narrow furrow. It was easy to see the unfortunate man was among the many homeless in the city. Yet, there was a mystery; the older man seemed familiar somehow.

"Come on, old timer," Dolan said softly as he tugged at the man's shoulder. Once assured the man was alive, merely passed out, he moved to leave him in peace.

“Who are you?” Dad asked. He pushed himself up, half-sitting with his weight on elbows. He looked furtively around. “Oh, the levee; I remember stopping here for a brief rest. Help me up, young sir.”

Dolan unsnapped the water bottle he carried on his belt. “Here, try this, Tough way to take hair of the dog.” He watched as the man tipped the jug up and, feeling the bland water, almost spit it out. Dolan laughed. “There is a coffee shop a few steps from here. If you can walk, I’ll buy you one to begin yet another day.” He helped the unfortunate man up. “You seem a decent sort,” he said as they hobbled toward the coffee stand. “How did you get in such a mess?”

“My kids have been abducted,” Dad answered and twice grabbed Dolan’s arm for support. “I went to the police. I know who is doing it; the whole business. They laughed at me and all but threw me out.”

When they finally settled at a table, Dolan ordered coffee and beignets. Between the pangs of a hang-over, the old gent was making sense. “I believe you because I have some friends who have to be constantly alert to protect themselves. How old are your kids? How many?”

Dad sat up straight and ran his fingers through his unruly hair. “Ernie is in league with ‘em. He seems intent on destroying his masculinity. Not a situation a parent can accept.”

Dolan went on alert, The name struck a familiar chord. “Is there nothing you can do to help Ernie?”

Dad coughed and drained his cup. Next he chanced the ice water and made a face to amuse Dolan. “Ernie does not want help; that’s one issue I learned. His sister is in more trouble because she is so beautiful. Her name is Emma.”

Incredulous, Dolan closed his eyes and slumped back in the chair. He was silent as if comatose for a long time as he put together the facts. Finally, “You’ve no idea how close you came to the grave, sir. I

know of these thugs and their business that they conduct within easy sight of the authorities. They apparently considered you no threat and would probably die of exposure on that levee.”

“What can I do to get my kids out of there?”

“It might cost you your life,” Dolan said in a soft tone. “Let me try to learn a bit more.” He took his cell phone from his vest pocket and pressed Bren’s number. Knowing Bren would recognize his voice, he quickly said, “Play wrong number or sales call; let me talk.”

“No, thanks,” Bren said still holding the line open.

“I have Dad with me. He has your organization figured out and has been to the police. They don’t listen to drunks. Too many, probably. We are going to try to boost the hostages there. Is Emma OK?”

“Not here, you idiot. I told you not to call this number.”

“Just giving you a heads-up. Hang in there.” Dolan could hear animated voices in Jack’s Pack. He knew from the rumor mill that Jack wouldn’t miss the reason for the call. At that moment, Dolan looked up to see Emma and Tess being led to the Po’boy Cafe across the street by a plainclothesman and one uniformed cop. “Whoa! Dad,” he said excitedly. “I think we have a new chapter. Look over there; is that your daughter?”

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An easy view from Jack’s kitchen window, a SWAT team pulled up and the side door slid open. The street including the alleyway from all directions was blocked by police patrol cars.

“Is this all of ‘em?” the detective asked. He looked around until he saw Bren standing alone with his arm raised. “Sir,” Bren said. “Your net has only the

little fish. The big nest they use for a corridor to adversity is down River Road; the Cajun Kitchen. We escaped from there.”

Another officer stepped forward to whisper in the detective’s ear. He breathed a long sigh. “It appears we should have checked out that ready hiding place when we brought you girls in. Neighbors have reported a body, very dead and smelling to high heaven.” He stared at the two girls as if waiting for them to speak. They were silent,

Tess stepped forward. “These are evil men,” she began glancing around the room. “They plan their abductions, transport the unfortunates to a dismal end. It happened to us. If I am guilty of eluding their grasp, I confess. Not one but two murders. The first in the boathouse on the bayou behind the Cajun Kitchen. I did it to get my friend out of harm’s way. The next you’ve already been informed about. You will find that nasty rapist on the second floor just off the landing. He has a neat hole between the eyes. Again; it was to recognize criminal acts by applying justice. These hostages are innocent. The leader, Jack, has been supporting a lucrative crime wave. They need to be stopped.”

“OK,” the detective said. “With what we already have to indict this man, the rest of you are free to go.” He smiled when Emma threw herself into Bren’s arms.

“Come along with me,” Bren said. “I’ve paid for a neat pad just inside here. We have a lot to talk about.” He gazed across the kitchen to see Dad diligently emptying Twelve-Year-Old” Scotch whiskey down the kitchen sink.

As Jack was led away, Tess smiled when she saw Ernie and his dad walking back toward the hotel. Dad had his arm across Ernie’s back. Dolan excused himself when he saw Steve and Tess heading back to the now empty room.

“Don’t forget,” Bren called from his room (first one on the left). “We meet for some friendly dancing at the transvestite ball. All expenses are courtesy of Jack’s Pack. Where they’re going, they won’t need a bank-roll.”

It was over. The lovers paired off, the broken family ties showed signs of healing and in the distance, toward Basin Street, Dolan stepped lively back to his pad.

The End