

BLOOD SISTERS

So I used to carry two different business cards: J. Michael Loomis, Data Concentration, and Jack Loomis, Private Investigator. They mean the same thing, nine cases out of ten. You have to size up a potential customer, decide whether he'd feel better hiring a shamus or a clerk.

Some people still have these romantic notions about private detectives and get into a happy sweat at the thought of using one. But it is the twenty-first century and, endless Bogart reruns notwithstanding, most of my work consisted in sitting at my office console and using it to subvert the privacy laws of various states and countries—finding out embarrassing things about people, so other people can divorce them or fire them or get a piece of the slickery.

Not to say I didn't go out on the street sometimes; not to say I didn't have a gun and a ticket for it. There are Forces of Evil out there, friends, although most of them would probably rather be thought of as businessmen who use the law rather than fear it. Same as me. I was always happy, though, to stay on this side of murder, treason, kidnapping—any lobo offense. This brain may not be much, but it's all I have.

I should have used it when the woman walked into my office. She had a funny way of saying hello:

"Are you licensed to carry a gun?"

Various retorts came to mind, most of them having to do with her expulsion, but after a period of silence I said yes and asked who had referred her to me. Asked politely, too, to make up for staring. She was a little more beautiful than anyone I'd ever seen before.

"My lawyer," she said. "Don't ask who he is."

With that, I was pretty sure that this was some sort of elaborate joke. Story detectives always have beautiful mysterious customers. My female customers tend to be dowdy and too talkative, and much more interested in alimony than romance.

"What's your name, then? Or am I not supposed to ask that either?"

She hesitated. "Ghentlee Arden."

I turned the console on and typed in her name, then a seven-digit code. "Your legal firm is Lee, Chu, and Rosenstein. And your real name is Maribelle Four Ghentlee: fourth clone of Maribelle Ghentlee."

"Arden is my professional name. I dance." She had a nice blush.

I typed in another string of digits. Sometimes this sort of thing would lose a customer. "Says here you're a registered hooker."

"Call girl," she said frostily. "Class One courtesan. I was getting to that."

I'm a liberal-minded man; I don't have anything against hookers or clones. But I like my customers to be frank with me. Again, I should have shown her the door—then followed her through it.

Instead: "So. You have a problem?"

"Some men are bothering me, one man in particular. I need some protection."

That gave me pause. "Your union has a Pinkerton contract for that sort of thing."

"My union." Her face trembled a little. "They don't let clones in the union. I'm an associate, for classification. No protection, no medical, no anything."

"Sorry, I didn't know that. Pretty old-fashioned." I could see the reasoning, though. Dump a thousand Maribelle Ghentlees on the market, and a merely ravishing girl wouldn't have a chance.

"Sit down." She was on the verge of tears. "Let me explain to you what I can't do."

"I can't hurt anyone physically. I can't trace this cod down and wave a gun in his face, tell him to back off."

"I know," she sobbed. I took a box of Kleenex out of my drawer, passed it over.

"Listen, there are laws about harassment. If he's really bothering you, the cops'll be glad to freeze him."

"I can't go to the police." She blew her nose. "I'm not a citizen." I turned off the console. "Let

me see if I can fill in some blanks without using the machine. You're an unauthorized clone." She nodded.

"With bought papers."

"Of course I have papers. I wouldn't be in your machine if I didn't."

Well, she wasn't dumb, either. "This cod. He isn't just a disgruntled customer."

"No." She didn't elaborate.

"One more guess," I said, "and then you do the talking for a while. He knows you're not legal."

"He should. He's the one who pulled me."

"Your own daddy. Any other surprises?"

She looked at the floor. "Mafia."

"Not the legal one, I assume."

"Both."

The desk drawer was still open; the sight of my own gun gave me a bad chill. "There are two reasonable courses open to me. I could handcuff you to the doorknob and call the police. Or I could knock you over the head and call the Mafia. That would probably be safer."

She reached into her purse; my hand was halfway to the gun when she took out a credit flash, thumbed it, and passed it over the desk. She easily had five times as much money as I make in a good year, and I'm in a comfortable seventy percent bracket.

"You must have one hell of a case of bedsores."

"Don't be stupid," she said, suddenly hard. "You can't make that kind of money on your back. If you take me on as a client, I'll explain."

I erased the flash and gave it back to her. "Miz Ghentlee. You've already told me a great deal more than I want to know. I don't want the police to put me in jail, I don't want the courts to scramble my brains with a spoon. I don't want the Mafia to take bolt cutters to my appendages."

"I could make it worth your while."

"I've got all the money I can use. I'm only in this profession because I'm a snoopy bastard." It suddenly occurred to me that that was more or less true.

"That wasn't completely what I meant."

"I assumed that. And you tempt me, as much as any woman's beauty has ever tempted me."

She turned on the waterworks again.

"Christ. Go ahead and tell your story. But I don't think you can convince me to do anything for you."

"My real clone-mother wasn't named Maribelle Ghentlee."

"I could have guessed that."

"She was Maxine Kraus." She paused. "Maxine . . . Kraus." "Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

"Maybe not. What about Werner Kraus?"

"Yeah." Swiss industrialist, probably the richest man in Europe. "Some relation?"

"She's his daughter and only heir."

I whistled. "Why would she want to be cloned, then?"

"She didn't know she was being cloned. She thought she was having a Pap test." She smiled a little. "Ironic posture."

"And they pulled you from the scraping."

She nodded. "The Mafia bought her physician. Then killed him."

"You mean the real Mafia?" I said.

"That depends on what you call real. Mafia Incorporated comes into it too, in a more or less legitimate way. I was supposedly one of six Maribelle Ghentlee clones that they had purchased to set up as courtesans in New Orleans, to provoke a test case. They claimed that the Sisterhood's prohibition against clone prostitutes constituted unfair restraint of trade."

"Never heard of the case. I guess they lost."

"Of course. They wouldn't have done it in the South if they'd wanted to win."

"Wait a minute. Jumping ahead. Obviously, they plan ultimately to use you as a substitute for the real Maxine Kraus."

"When the old man dies, which will be soon."

"Then why would they parade you around in public?"

"Just to give me an interim identity. They chose Ghentlee as a clone-mother because she was the closest one available to Maxine Kraus's physical appearance. I had good makeup; none of the real Ghentlee clones suspected I wasn't one of them."

"Still . . . what happens if you run into someone who knows what the real Kraus looks like? With your face and figure, she must be all over the gossip sheets in Europe:"

"You're sweet." Her smile could make me do almost anything. Short of taking on the Mafia. "She's a total recluse, though, for fear of kidnappers. She probably hasn't seen twenty people in her entire life."

"And she isn't beautiful, though she has the raw materials for it. Her mother died when she was still a baby—killed by kidnappers."

"I remember that."

"So she's never had a woman around to model herself after. No one ever taught her how to do her hair properly, or use makeup. A man buys all her clothes. She doesn't have anyone to be beautiful for."

"You feel sorry for her."

"More than that." She looked at me with an expression that somehow held both defiance and hopelessness. "Can you understand? She's my mother. I was force-grown so we're the same apparent age, but she's still my only parent. I love her. I won't be part of a plan to kill her."

"You'd rather die?" I said softly. She was going to.

"Yes. But that wouldn't accomplish anything, not if the Mafia does it. They'd take a few cells and make another clone. Or a dozen, or a hundred, until one came along with a personality to go along with matricide."

"Once they know you feel this way—"

"They do know. I'm running."

That galvanized me. "They know who your lawyer is?"

"My lawyer?" She gasped when I took the gun out of the drawer. People who only see guns on the cube are usually surprised at how solid and heavy they actually look.

"Could they trace you here, is what I mean." I crossed the room and slid open the door. No one in the corridor. I twisted a knob and twelve heavy magnetic bolts slammed home.

"I don't think so. The lawyers gave me a list of names, and I just picked one I liked."

I wondered whether it was Jack or J. Michael. I pushed a button on the wall and steel shutters rolled down over the view of Central Park. "Did you take a cab here?"

"No, subway. And I went up to One hundred and twenty-fifth and back."

"Smart." She was staring at the gun. "It's a .48 Magnum Recoilless. Biggest handgun a civilian can buy."

"You need one so big?"

"Yes." I used to carry a .25 Beretta, small enough to conceal in a bathing suit. I used to have a partner, too. It was a long story, and I didn't like to tell it. "Look," I said. "I have a deal with the Mafia. They don't do divorce work and I don't drop bodies into the East River. Understand?" I put the gun back in the drawer and slammed it shut.

"I don't blame you for being afraid—"

"Afraid? Miz Four Ghentlee, I'm not afraid. I'm terrified! How old do you think I am?"

"Call me Belle. You're thirty-five, maybe forty. Why?"

"You're kind—and I'm rich. Rich enough to buy youth: I've been in this business almost forty years. I take lots of vitamins and try not to fuck with the Mafia."

She smiled and then was suddenly somber. Like a baby. ""Try to understand me. You've

lived sixty years?"

I nodded. "Next year."

"Well, I've been alive barely sixty days. After four years in a tank, growing and learning.

"Learning isn't being, though. Everything is new to me. When I walk down a street, the sights and sounds and smells, it's . . . it's like a great flower opening to the sun. Just to sit alone in the dark—"

Her voice broke.

"You can't even know how much I want to live—and that's not condescending; it's a statement of fact. Yet I want you to kill me."

I could only shake my head.

"If you can't hide me you have to kill me." She was crying now, and wiped the tears savagely from her cheeks. "Kill me and make sure every cell in my body is destroyed."

She took out her credit card flash and set it on the desk. "You can have all my money, whether you save me or kill me."

She started walking around the desk. Along the way she did something with a clasp and her dress slithered to the floor. The sudden naked beauty was like an electric shock.

"If you save me, you can have me. Friend, lover, wife ... slave. Forever." She held a posture of supplication for a moment, then eased toward me. Watching the muscles of her body work made my mouth go dry. She reached down and started unbuttoning my shirt.

I cleared my throat. "I didn't know clones had navels."

"Only special ones. I have other special qualities."

Idiot, something reminded me, every woman you've ever loved has sucked you dry and left you for dead. I clasped her hips with my big hands and drew her warmth to me. Close up, the navel wasn't very convincing; nobody's perfect.

I'd done drycleaning jobs before, but never so cautiously or thoroughly. That she was a clone made the business a little more delicate than usual, since clones' lives are more rigidly supervised by the government than ours are. But the fact that her identity was false to begin with made it easier; I could second-guess the people who had originally drycleaned her.

I hated to meddle with her beauty, and that beauty made plastic surgery out of the question. Any legitimate doctor would be suspicious, and going to an underworld doctor would be suicidal. So we dyed her hair black and bobbed it. She stopped wearing makeup and bought some truly froppy clothes. She kept a length of tape stuck across her buttocks to give her a virgin-schoolgirl kind of walk. For everyone but me.

The Mafia had given her a small fortune—birdseed to them—both to ensure her loyalty and to accustom her to having money, for impersonating Kraus. We used about half of it for the dry-cleaning.

A month or so later there was a terrible accident on a city bus. Most of the bodies were burned beyond recognition; I did some routine bribery, and two of them were identified as the clone Maribelle Four Ghentlee and John Michael Loomis, private eye. When we learned the supposed clone's body had disappeared from the morgue, we packed up our money—long since converted into currency—and a couple of toothbrushes and pulled out.

I had a funny twinge when I closed the door on that console. There couldn't be more than a half-dozen people in the world who were my equals at using that instrument to fish information out of the System. But I had to either give it up or send Belle off on her own.

We flew to the West Indies and looked around. Decided to settle on the island of St. Thomas. I'd been sailing all my life, so we bought a fifty-foot boat and set up a charter service for tourists. Some days we took parties out to skindive or fish. Other days we anchored in a quiet cove and made love like happy animals.

After about a year, we read in the little St. Thomas paper that Werner Kraus had died. They mentioned Maxine but didn't print a picture of her. Neither did the San Juan paper. We watched all the news programs for a couple of days (had to check into a hotel to get access

to a video cube) and collected magazines for a month. No pictures, to our relief, and the news stories remarked that Fraulein Kraus went to great pains to stay out of the public eye.

Sooner or later, we figured, some paparazzo would find her, and there would be pictures. But by then it shouldn't make any difference. Belle had let her hair grow out to its natural chestnut, but we kept it cropped boyishly short. The sun and wind had darkened her skin and roughened it, and a year of fighting the big boat's rigging had put visible muscle under her sleekness.

The marina office was about two broom closets wide. It was a beautiful spring morning, and I'd come in to put my name on the list of boats available for charter. I was reading the weather printout when Belle sidled through the door and squeezed in next to me at the counter. I patted her on the fanny. "With you in a second, honey."

A vise grabbed my shoulder and spun me around.

He was over two meters tall and so wide at the shoulders that he literally couldn't get through the door without turning sideways. Long white hair and pale blue eyes. White sport coat with a familiar cut: tailored to deemphasize the bulge of a shoulder holster.

"You don't do that, friend," he said with a German accent.

I looked at the woman, who was regarding me with aristocratic amusement. I felt the blood drain from my face and damned near said her name out loud.

She frowned. "Helmuth," she said to the guard, "Sie sired ihm erschrocken. I'm sorry," she said to me, "but my friend has quite a temper." She had a perfect North Atlantic accent, and her voice sent a shiver of recognition down my back.

"I am sorry," he said heavily. Sorry he hadn't had a chance to throw me into the water, he was.

"I must look like someone you know," she said. "Someone you know rather well."

"My wife. The similarity is ... quite remarkable."

"Really? I should like to meet her." She turned to the woman behind the counter. "We'd like to charter a sailing boat for the day."

The clerk pointed at me. "He has a nice fifty-foot one." "That's fine! Will your wife be aboard?"

"Yes . . . yes, she helps me. But you'll have to pay the full rate," I said rapidly. "The boat normally takes six passengers." "No matter. Besides, we have two others."

"And you'll have to help me with the rigging."

"I should hope so. We love to sail." That was pretty obvious. We had been wrong about the wind and sun, thinking that Maxine would have led a sheltered life; she was almost as weathered as Belle. Her hair was probably long, but she had it rolled up in a bun and tied back with a handkerchief.

We exchanged false names: Jack Jackson and Lisa von Hollerin. The bodyguard's name was Helmuth Zwei Kastor. She paid the clerk and called her friends at the marina hotel, telling them to meet her at the Abora, slip 39.

I didn't have any chance to warn Belle. She came up from the galley as we were swinging aboard. She stared open-mouthed and staggered, almost fainting. I took her by the arm and made introductions, everybody staring.

After a few moments of strange silence, Helmuth Two whispered, "Du bist ein Klon."

"She can't be a clone, silly man," Lisa said. "When did you ever see a clone with a navel?" Belle was wearing shorts and a halter. "But we could be twin sisters. That is remarkable."

Helmuth Two shook his head solemnly. Belle had told me that a clone can always recognize a fellow clone, by the eyes. Never be fooled by a man-made navel.

The other two came aboard. Helmuth One was, of course, a Xerox of Helmuth Two. Lisa introduced Maria Salamanca as her lover: a small olive-skinned Basque woman, no stunning beauty, but having an attractive air of friendly mystery about her.

Before we cast off, Lisa came to me and apologized. "We are a passing strange group of people. You deserve something extra for putting up with us." She pressed a gold Krugerrand into my palm—worth at least triple the charter fare—and I tried to act suitably

impressed. We had over a thousand of them in the keel, for ballast.

The Abora didn't have an engine; getting it in and out of the crowded marina was something of an accomplishment. Belle and Lisa handled the sails expertly, while I manned the wheel. They kept looking at each other, then touching. When we were in the harbor, they sat together at the prow, holding hands. Once we were in open water, they went below together. Maria went into a sulk, but the two clones jollied her out of it.

I couldn't be jealous of her. An angel can't sin. But I did wonder what you would call what they were doing. Was it a weird kind of incest? Transcendental masturbation? I only hoped Belle would keep her mouth shut, at least figuratively.

After about an hour, Lisa came up and sat beside me at the wheel. Her hair was long and full, and flowed like dark liquid in the wind, and she was naked. I tentatively rested my hand on her thigh. She had been crying.

"She told me. She had to tell me." Lisa shook her head in wonder. "Maxine One Kraus. She had to stay below for a while. Said she couldn't trust her legs." She squeezed my hand and moved it back to the wheel.

"Later, maybe," she said. "And don't worry; your secret is safe with us." She went forward and put an arm around Maria, speaking rapid German to her and the two Helmuhs. One of the guards laughed and they took off their incongruous jackets, then carefully wrapped up their weapons and holsters. The sight of a .48 Magnum Recoilless didn't arouse any nostalgia in me. Maria slipped out of her clothes and stretched happily. The guards did the same. They didn't have navels but were otherwise adequately punctuated.

Belle came up then, clothed and flushed, and sat quietly next to me. She stroked my bicep and I ruffled her hair. Then I heard Lisa's throaty laugh and suddenly turned cold.

"Hold on a second," I whispered. "We haven't been using our heads."

"Speak for yourself." She giggled.

"Oh, be serious. This stinks of coincidence. That she should turn up here, that she should wander into the office just as—"

"Don't worry about it."

"Listen. She's no more Maxine Kraus than you are. They've found us. She's another clone, one that's going to—"

"She's Maxine. If she were a clone, I could tell immediately."

"Spare me the mystical claptrap and take the wheel. I'm going below." In the otherwise empty engine compartment, I'd stored an interesting assortment of weapons and ammunition.

She grabbed my arm and pulled me back down to the seat. "You spare me the private eye claptrap and listen—you're right, it's no coincidence. Remember that old foreigner who came by last week?"

"No."

"You were up on the stern, folding sail. He was just at the slip for a second, to ask directions. He seemed flustered—"

"I remember. Frenchman."

"I thought so too. He was Swiss, though."

"And that was no coincidence, either."

"No, it wasn't. He's on the board of directors of one of the banks we used to liquify our credit. When the annual audit came up, they'd managed to put together all our separate transactions —"

"Bullshit. That's impossible."

She shook her head and laughed. "You're good, but they're good, too. They were curious about what we were trying to hide, using their money, and traced us here. Found we'd started a business with only one percent of our capital.

"Nothing wrong with that, but they were curious. This director was headed for a Caribbean vacation anyhow; he said he'd come by and poke around."

I didn't know how much of this to believe. I gauged the distance between where the Helmuths were sunning and the prow, where they had carefully stowed their guns against the boat's heeling.

"He'd been a lifelong friend of Werner Kraus. That's why he was so rattled. One look at me and he had to rush to the phone."

"And we're supposed to believe," I said, "that the wealthiest woman in the world would come down to see what sort of innocent game we were playing. With only two bodyguards."

"Five. There are two other Helmuths, and Maria is . . . versatile."

"Still can't believe it. After a lifetime of being protected from her own shadow—"

"That's just it. She's tired of it. She turned twenty-five last month, and came into full control of the fortune. Now she wants to take control of her own life."

"Damned foolish. If it were me, I would've sent my giants down alone." I had to admit that I essentially did believe the tale. We'd been alone in open water for more than an hour, and would've long been shark bait if that had been their intent. Getting sloppy in your old age, Loomis.

"I probably would have too," Belle said. "Maxine and I are the same woman in some ways, but you and the Mafia taught me caution. She's been in a cage all her life, and just wanted out. Wanted to sail someplace besides her own lake, too."

"It was still a crazy chance to take."

"So she's a little crazy. Romantic, too, in case you haven't noticed."

"Really? When I peeked in you were playing checkers."

"Bastard." She knew the one place I was ticklish. Trying to get away, I jerked the wheel and nearly tipped us all into the drink.

We anchored in a small cove where I knew there was a good reef. Helmuth One stayed aboard to guard while the rest of us went diving.

The fish and coral were beautiful as ever, but I could only watch Maxine and Belle. They swam slowly hand-in-hand, kicking with unconscious synchrony, totally absorbed. Though the breathers kept their hair wrapped up identically, it was easy to tell them apart, since Maxine had an all-over tan. Still, it was an eerie kind of ballet, like a mirror that didn't quite work. Maria and Helmuth Two were also hypnotized by the sight.

I went aboard early, to start lunch. I'd just finished slicing ham when I heard the drone of a boat, rather far away. Large siphon jet, by the rushing sound of it.

The guard shouted, "Zwei—komm' herauf!"

Hoisted myself up out of the galley. The boat was about two kilometers away, and coming roughly in our direction, fast. "Trouble coming?" I asked him.

"Cannot tell yet, sir. I suggest you remain below." He had a gun in each hand, behind his back.

Below, good idea. I slid the hatch off the engine compartment and tipped over the cases of beer that hid the weaponry. Fished out two heavy plastic bags, left the others in place for the time being. It was all up-to-date American Coast Guard issue, and had cost more than the boat.

I had rehearsed this a thousand times in my mind, but I hadn't realized the bags would be slippery with condensation and oil and be impossible to tear with your hands. I stood up to get a knife from the galley, and it was almost the last thing I ever did.

I looked up at a loud succession of splintering sounds and saw a line of holes marching toward me from the bow, letting in blue light and lead. I dropped and heard bullets hissing over my head; heard the regular cough-cough-cough of Helmuth One's return fire. At the stern there was a cry of pain and then a splash; they must have caught the other guard coming up the ladder.

Also not in the rehearsals was the effect of absolute death-panic on bladder control; some formal corner of my mind was glad I hadn't yet dressed. I controlled my trembling well enough to cut open the bag that held the small-caliber spitter, and it only took three tries to get the cassette of ammunition fastened to the receiver. I jerked back the arming lever and

hurried back to the galley hatch, carrying an armload of cassettes.

The spitter was made for sinking boats, quickly. It fired small flechettes, the size of old-fashioned metal stereo needles, fifty rounds per second. The flechettes moved at supersonic speed and each carried a small explosive charge. In ten seconds, they could do more damage to a boat than a man with a chainsaw could, with determination and leisure.

I resisted the urge to blast away and get back under cover (not that the hull afforded much real protection). We had clamped traversing mounts for the gun on three sides of the galley hatch—nautically inclined customers usually asked what they were; I always shrugged and said they'd come with the boat—because the spitter is most effective if you can hold the point of aim precisely on the waterline.

They were concentrating fire on the bow, most of it going high. Helmuth One was evidently shooting from a prone position, difficult target. I slid the spitter onto its mount and cranked up its scope to maximum power.

When I looked through the scope, a lifetime of target-shooting reflexes took over: deep breath, half let out, do the Zen thing. Their boat moved toward the center of the scope's field, and I waited. It was a Whaler Unsinkable. One man crouched at the bow, firing what looked like a .20-mm. recoilless, clamped on the rail above a piece of steel plate. They were less than a hundred meters away.

The Whaler executed a sharp starboard turn, evidently to give the gunner a better angle on our bow. Good boatmanship, good tactics, but bad luck. Their prow touched the junction of my crosshairs right at the waterline, and I didn't even have to track. I just pressed the trigger and watched a cloud of black smoke and steam zip from prow to stern. Not even an Unsinkable can stay upright with its keel sliced off. The boat slewed sideways into the water, spilling people, and turned turtle. Didn't sink, though.

I snapped a fresh cassette into place and tried to remember where the hydrogen tank was on that model. Second burst found it, and the boat dutifully exploded. The force of the blast was enough to ram the scope's eyepiece back into my eye, painfully.

Helmuth One peered down at me. "What is that?" "Coast Guard weapon, a spitter."
"May I try it?"

"Sure." I traded places with him, glad to be up in the breeze. My boat was a mess. The mainmast had been shattered by a direct hit, waist high. The starboard rail was splinters, forward, and near misses had gouged up my nice teak foredeck. My eye throbbed, and for some reason my ears were ringing.

I remembered why the next second, as Helmuth fired. The spitter makes a sound like a cat dying, but louder. I had been too preoccupied to hear it.

I unshipped a pair of binoculars to check his marksmanship. He was shooting at the floating bodies. What a spitter did to one was terrible to see.

"Jesus, Helmuth ..."

"Some of them may yet live," he said apologetically.

At least one did. Wearing a life jacket, she had been floating face down but suddenly began treading water. She was holding an automatic pistol in both hands. She looked exactly like Belle and Maxine.

I couldn't say anything; couldn't take my eyes off her. She fired two rounds, and I felt them slap into the hull beneath me. I heard Helmuth curse, and suddenly her shoulders dissolved in a spray of meat and bone and her head fell into the water. My gorge rose and I didn't quite make it to the railing. Deck was a mess anyhow.

Helmuth Two, it turned out, had been hit in the side of the neck, but it was a big neck and he survived. Maxine called a helicopter, which came out piloted by Helmuth Three.

After an hour or so, Helmuth Four joined us in a large speed-boat loaded down with gasoline, thermite, and shark chum. By that time, we had transferred the gold and a few more important things from my boat onto the helicopter. We chummed the area thoroughly and, as sharks began to gather, towed both hulks out to deep water, where they burned brightly and sank.

The Helmuths spent the next day sprinkling the island with money and threats, while Maxine got to know Belle and me better, behind the heavily guarded door of the honeymoon suite of the quaint old Sheraton that overlooked the marina. She made us a job offer—a life offer, actually—and we accepted without hesitation. That was six years ago.

Sometimes I do miss our old life—the sea, the freedom, the friendly island, the lazy idylls with Belle. Sometimes I even miss New York's hustle and excitement, and the fierce independence of my life there.

We do travel on occasion, but with extreme caution. The clone that Helmuth killed in that lovely cove might have been Belle's sister, pulled from Maxine, or Belle's own daughter, since the Mafia had had plenty of opportunities to collect cells from her body. It's immaterial. What's important is that if they could make one, they could make an army of them.

Like our private army of Helmuths and Lamberts and Delias. I'm chief of security, and the work is interesting, most of it at a console as good as the one I had in Manhattan. No violence since that one afternoon six years ago, not yet. I did have to learn German, though, which was an outrage to a brain as old as mine.

We haven't made any secret of the fact that Belle is Maxine's clone. The official story is that Fraulein Kraus had a clone made of herself, for "companionship." This started a fad among the wealthy, being the first new sexual wrinkle since the invention of the vibrator.

Belle and Maxine take pains to dress alike and speak alike and have even unconsciously assimilated one another's mannerisms. Most of the non-clone employees can't tell which is which, and even I sometimes confuse them, at a distance.

Close up, which happens with gratifying frequency, there's no problem. Belle has a way of looking at me that Maxine could never duplicate. And Maxine is literally a trifle prettier: you can't beat a real navel.