**Maragana Girl**

by EC

**Chapter 29 � The Summer of Life**

In spite of all Dukov's efforts, the Party of the Duchy faced a huge obstacle countering the barrage of advertising on television. The TV ads were aimed at unsophisticated voters who were unaccustomed to seeing a well-organized television advertising campaign. As long as the ads stayed on track, it looked like the Greater Danubian Progressive Party would still win, although perhaps not by as large a margin as they would have liked.

At the end of the second week of November and only a week before the election, the foreign advisors of the Greater Danubian Progressive Party made a mistake that cost their candidates any chance whatsoever of winning. It was a miscalculation that political scientists would analyze for years as a case study for failed political consulting. The consultants decided to target Vladim Dukov's son in personal attacks, and in doing so turned a likely electoral victory into certain electoral defeat.

The foreign advisors were elated when they found out about Vladik Dukov's public penance. They abandoned their attacks against Vladim Dukov's past and instead decided to concentrate on humiliating Vladik. They filmed him as he walked naked around the music store complex with blueprints in his hand and a collar around his neck. There was public discussion of the shame he had brought upon Vladim Dukov and on the police department. There was an ugly incident at the music store, as a couple of reporters aggressively approached a terrified Tiffany Walker as she was working at a cash register. The store�s owner, Vladik, and five naked male employees confronted the reporters, broke their cameras, and threw them out the door.

Reporters contracted by the foreign advisors then tracked down both Vladik's ex-fianc�e and his ex-boss, demanding to know why he had resigned and why he no longer was engaged. Both the woman and the police official were incensed at having rogue reporters approach them about someone else's personal issues. Vladik's ex-fianc�e, in particular, was furious that any reporter would be interested in what she considered a private matter. She was a hard and proud woman who would never forgive him for what he had done to their relationship, but she considered the matter closed when he resigned from the National Police. The use of their personal problems to further a political campaign was an attack on not just his honor, but also hers. It was a violation of the most basic Danubian value about the sanctity of personal relationships. Such people had no right to win an election.

She approached Vladik's ex-boss to discuss the inquiries. It turned out he was equally incensed, for very similar reasons. Officer Vladik Dukov had resigned to protect other people in the National Police. He had resigned honorably. The matter was closed as far as the National Police was concerned and not open to further discussion. Vladik's Section Chief suggested that he and the young woman jointly file an official complaint with the High Priest at the Temple of the Ancients.

The High Priest gladly accepted the complaint, because it gave him justification to take action. The clergy already had been offended that public penance, which was a personal matter between the priest and the sinner, would become a political campaign issue. Maybe such things are acceptable elsewhere, but not in Upper Danubia. As the sun set behind the National Cathedral, the High Priest, surrounded by other members of the Clergy, issued an official condemnation of the entire campaign of the Greater Danubian Progressive Party. He considered an attack on penance as an attack on the Church itself and on the fundamental concept of personal redemption.

The Church condemnation handed the election to Vladim Dukov and the Party of the Duchy. A condemnation was a very serious matter for many voters, especially among the rural constituents the Greater Danubian Progressive Party needed to win the election. It took the foreign advisors several days to understand how seriously their campaign targeting Vladik Dukov's penance had offended traditional Danubian values. The Danubian press also turned against the "Progressives", its traditional journalists angered by the strategy of using rogue reporters to promote personal attacks. Maybe such things were acceptable in other countries, but not in the Duchy.

Vladim Dukov already sounded like a Prime Minister in the final televised debate with his opponent. Rather than try to critique his opponent's campaign, the ex-Spokesman again took the opportunity to lay out his plans for the future. He made it clear the Party of the Duchy under him would be very different from the Party of the Duchy that had existed since World War II.

Following the debate, "Socrates' Mistresses" performed the final concert of the campaign in the Plaza of the Ancients. In spite of Dukov's likely victory the next day, the group was neither proud nor triumphant. Instead they were very reflective and somber, realizing the seriousness of the new phase in Dukov's life and the professional sacrifices they needed to make to assist his campaign. Eloisa sang in her usual forlorn manner. However, for the night's final song, she stepped back and turned the lead microphone over to Kim. To the surprise of the audience, Kim did not perform her favorite song, "The wall that divides my soul", but instead the English rendition of "A question I cannot answer".

The election held the following day was a rout for the "Progressives". Not even their most pessimistic advisors for could have dreamt the party would come in third, losing not only to the Party of the Duchy, but also to the coalition of dissidents. Vladim Dukov's party won 58% of the popular vote, leaving him in complete control of the next Cabinet. The humiliation for the foreign political consultants was absolute. They quickly checked out of their hotel rooms and were out of the country even before the official vote was completely counted.

Dukov's victory speech was low-key. He gave thanks to his supporters, to the members of "Socrates' Mistresses", and to the owners of the Socrates Club and the city's various music stores. He then thanked the people he had worked with over the years: Spokesman Havlakt and his other co-workers, various judges and top police officials, and the leaders of the Party of the Duchy who had placed faith in him. Finally, he thanked his own Spokesman and university professors from many years before, the people who had helped him focus his frustrated political energies into his future career with the Danubian court system.

----------

Tiffany viewed Dukov�s victory with very mixed emotions. On the one hand she was glad to see him elected, but on the other hand Dukov�s win frightened her because she couldn�t see how Vladik would want to stay with her now that he was the son of the country�s Prime Minister. However, the morning after the election Vladik Dukov had a huge surprise for Tiffany. He invited her to go with him to see his father's swearing in ceremony.

In spite of their friendship, Tiffany was stunned that Vladik wanted to be seen with her at such a public event. At first he justified the invitation by arguing he felt very uneasy having to appear collared and naked in public by himself, and her presence would make him look not so much out of place. Vladik then checked himself. That wasn't the reason. He wanted her to go with him...well, because he wanted her to go with him. Maybe this time, with Tiffany, he could simply tell the truth. He struggled to express himself in English:

"Deevonay, I say you come with me, because I want. That why you come. I feel myself good when you with me, so you come please?"

"You...like...really want me to come? You're really not...like...ashamed to be with me?"

"Why I shame, Deevonay? I no better you." Vladik struggled to find the words to express himself, a task twice as hard because of his limited English vocabulary. Finally he faced her with the truth "Deevonay, you, me, we...we two start new. You no drug no more, I no police no more. We live life new. That what priest say, that why I wear collar. Kimberly, she say, maybe good thing I no police no more, because I no worry no more...no worry about the other people. Only think me happy, no other people. And Kimberly say, and I know true, I look at woman...I look at you, Deevonay...and I think...maybe you the right woman...."

Tiffany became quiet as tears started flowing down her cheeks.

"I...I don't know what to say, but...you can't fall in love with me...I mean... your father...he's now Prime Minister...and...people would laugh at you...and I...I'm�I mean�that �honor� thing you guys have here�I don�t have it�"

"Deevonay, I now ask, what you think me? What YOU think me?"

"Vladik, if it was just me...I mean, I really like you...you're the best guy I've ever gone out with. That's not it. It's just..."

"You, me, we got time, much time. I no worry people laugh. I worry you come with me see Father in Parliament. Very important you come. I need you come."

Finally Tiffany nodded. She gave Vladik a teary smile and hugged him hard. Time...yes, she and Vladik did have time. Maybe time would heal her after all. Perhaps there really was something to Kim's promise of "maybe even a family".

Vladik Dukov and Tiffany Walker stood together with the owner of Danube City�s main music store and his other employees during his father's victory speech. Their bare bodies and collars totally made them look out of place in the otherwise well-dressed crowd. While everyone else saluted they had to drop to their knees. There was no real shame in that, however. He was performing penance and his companions were convicted criminals. It was the way things were done in the Duchy. The naked men and women standing in the crowd of Dukov's supporters simply were fulfilling the protocol and duties of their positions in life.

----------

Dukov took the Prime Minister's sash from the caretaker Prime Minister. The Temple's High Priest gave a brief benediction, and then the Chief Justice of the Danubian Supreme Court saluted the new Prime Minister. Dukov saluted back, then turned to salute the thousands of spectators.

"DOC-DOC DANUBE!"

The crowd saluted back and roared its support:

"DOC-DOC DUKOV! DOC-DOC DUKOV! DOC-DOC DUKOV!"

Prime Minister Dukov lost no time getting down to business. He left the stage to enter the National Parliament with his hands full of folders, legislation he planned to present as soon as his cabinet was sworn in.

However, as he stood at the Prime Minister's podium, the vision of the collapsed dam from the Rika Chorna Reservoir filled his mind. Protecting the lake's watershed was the first priority of his government. Even before his cabinet was sworn in, the new Prime Minister issued several emergency edicts to safeguard the forested hills overlooking the lake. He spoke with anger and force, making it very clear that any foreign business wishing to exploit Upper Danubia's natural resources or its people would have to look elsewhere.

----------

Dukov's election removed an immediate financial threat to "Socrates' Mistresses", by placing them out of reach from anyone wanting to sue them for breach of contract. Kim's old sentencing judge became the new Minister of Justice. One of his first announcements was to declare that no lawsuit against any Danubian entertainer by a foreign company would be permitted in a Danubian court. During his first press conference he stated: "I will personally prosecute any foreigner entering our territory to harass our citizens under Item 2, article 3 of the 1968 Professional Harassment Decree. That law carries a minimum five-year sentence. Furthermore, I will personally issue an arrest warrant for any foreigner who attempts to harass one of our entertainers in a foreign court."

The Minister of Justice made good on his word. The following week Danubian embassies infuriated some of the world's most influential music executives by sending official letters to their corporate attorneys. The letters contained arrest warrants and extradition requests for the members of the legal team who had confronted Kim for violations of Item 2, article 3 of Upper Danubia's 1968 Professional Harassment Decree.

A couple of nights after the election Eloisa's old high school group decided to have dinner at the Socrates Club. Everyone, with the exception of Tuko, who still was at the National Police Academy, was present. For the first time, Tiffany and Vladik sat at the table at the invitation of Kim. There was much good cheer that evening, the band members happier than they had been at any time since the euphoric day their sentences ended. Later in the evening Eloisa reflected to the group that it felt good to have her clothes off again and just relax in a familiar setting, a comment to which many band members agreed. Sergekt then made a comment that it looked like the band was starting over, their foreign contract breached and the group unable to perform outside Upper Danubia.

"I've been thinking, maybe the foreign contract wasn't such a good thing for us. Did we really need all that money? Kim and I already have enough to build a very nice house and still plenty left over to put our kids though school. Do we need even more? Now we have the chance to go back to who we really are. We can return to our roots and do what we want to do, not what anyone else wants us to do. We can sing what we want to sing, and chose where and when our concerts are going to be. We're going to do it right this time, as Danubians."

There was a toast, as Kim mulled over the statements of both Eloisa and Sergekt. Finally an idea came into her head. She addressed the group.

"Does everyone still have their criminal's collar?"

The question surprised her friends, because it seemed to come from nowhere, but everyone in the group still had their collars. Danubian ex-criminals rarely got rid of their collars, given the importance of the device in their lives and in forming their characters. Kim's purpose became clear with her next statement.

"Then I want to go back too, completely back. We started performing as criminals. Our first listeners were criminals. That's how we got our inspiration. Now here's what I want. I want our next concert to be in this club, where we started. Then, we'll perform just like we did last year, wearing our collars and nothing else. I want us to practice that way as well, wearing our collars and nothing else. Whenever we get together to do any band business, we'll wear our collars and nothing else. Whenever we get interviewed, we'll wear our collars and nothing else. Who we really are is not a bunch of rich kids performing in Barcelona and Paris. Who we really are...is Danubian criminals. I want to make that our trademark."

The idea was a bit unusual; to return to performing in the nude when it was neither necessary nor expected, but the other members of the group liked it. Yes, go back to the very beginning, start over, write new songs, perform for the Duchy. The group's foreign fans would be welcome to travel to Upper Danubia to see the band's new concerts, but would see them as naked ex-criminals. The most important part of Kim's proposal would be frequently returning to the Socrates Club for the inspiration needed to write new songs.

"Socrates' Mistresses" had come home.

----------

Two days later Tiffany became an important asset to Dukov's Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Public Health. Dukov called Kim into the Prime Minister's office in the National Parliament Building to ask about Tiffany's knowledge of methamphetamine. Kim stood at attention in her formal white dress and saluted the new Prime Minister; in spite of the fact she still was living in his house and having dinner with his family every night. Once her formal gesture of respect was finished, she answered his question in Danubian.

"Prime Minster, I believe Criminal # 98946 has extensive knowledge about the production of methamphetamine, as well as knowledge of other drugs such as heroin, pharmaceuticals, and on-line prescription drugs."

"Another question, Apprentice: do you think she knows how to obtain these items on the Internet?"

"Yes, Prime Minister Dukov, I believe she does."

"Very well, Apprentice Lee. Then you and Criminal # 98946 will be able to perform an important service to our country. Please bring Criminal # 98946 to this office at 15:00 this afternoon. I will have the head doctor from the National Hospital Chemical Addiction Rehabilitation Program present, and also the Vice-Minister of Health and two court recorders. I would like Criminal # 98946 to share whatever knowledge she has about methamphetamine with us. Once we have completed interviewing her, I will ask that she go on-line in our presence and instruct us about the availability of drugs through the Internet. I plan to use the information to update our drug laws."

Kim saluted. "I will obey your command, Prime Minister. I will bring my client to this office at 15:00 today and ask her to assist you to the best of her ability."

Kim and Tiffany showed up at the National Parliament Building at 3:00 in the afternoon. Tiffany felt very uneasy as she walked naked among Upper Danubia's most important leaders, but she was a criminal performing a public service and that was what was expected of her. As she and Kim entered the Prime Minister's office, Tiffany dropped to her knees and nervously put her forehead to the ground while Kim stood at attention and saluted. Tiffany was scared being pulled out of her regular life, even more so because the Prime Minister was her lover's father.

Once Kim had saluted, Dukov ordered Tiffany to stand up and take a seat. He offered her some tea and poured it for her himself. Once he passed her the cup he got down to business, asking her what information she could provide him about methamphetamine and any other drugs she had used. The debriefing of Kim's client was the beginning of Dukov's plan to mount a huge anti-drug effort, before the problem had a chance to take hold in his country.

It turned out Tiffany knew three separate recipes for making methamphetamine. She knew about several on-line suppliers of psuedoephdrine, iodine, and glassware. She knew about suppliers of ecstasy and LSD. She knew about concealment methods. She was familiar with on-line chat groups. Finally, she was able to analyze herself and her friends in the US, giving her listeners a perspective on why persons like herself started using drugs in the first place. The scope of Tiffany's knowledge on the topic was impressive. Both Kim and the Prime Minister realized she was precisely the source of information Dukov's government needed to begin comprehending the scale of the threat facing the country.

Tiffany spent two weeks in the Prime Minister's office, being de-briefed and teaching investigators from the Health Ministry and National Police how to look up Internet suppliers. The Danubian officials were taken aback by the scale of the challenge facing them. In the end, the naked criminal sat next to the Prime Minister at his computer and taught him how to access the chat sites. After a very short time Prime Minister Dukov and several of his Vice-Ministers had acquired a working knowledge of the world that had destroyed so many young people in other countries. Finally, at the end of her debriefing, Tiffany returned to her job at the music store, but with the expectation she would come back every so often to answer additional questions or give advice.

Over the next several months Dukov and his Ministers used the information from taken from Tiffany and several other drug addicts to grill police officials, pharmacy workers, and customs agents about the measures they were taking to protect Upper Danubia. By the end of the year the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education had an effective drug education program in place for high schools, while new laws and customs screening procedures targeted imported pharmaceuticals. The entire process began because of the contribution of Criminal # 98946.

Prime Minister Dukov treated Tiffany with respect and made it clear he appreciated the information she could give him. The only protocol he expected from her was standard criminal's kneeling when she greeted him and when she said goodbye. Apart from that he conversed with her in a completely normal manner, which in turn boosted her own self-confidence. He expressed his gratitude by giving her an official commendation and forwarding a request to the Danubian Supreme Court to cancel the last five of her 34 remaining switchings.

Tiffany's service to his father's government encouraged Vladik to discuss the possibility of a relationship with her to his parents. He fully expected his parents to vehemently oppose any relationship between himself and the American criminal, but they seemed to be able to accept Tiffany, if not exactly approve of her. Maritza felt guilty over kicking Vladik the night after he resigned from the National Police and realized the need to give her son some space in his life, while Dukov saw Tiffany as a damaged person but with huge potential.

The elder Dukovs opened the opportunity for Vladik to talk to them about his own life, and what had gone wrong. He explained his need to attempt to find out who he really was on the inside, instead of trying to meet other people's expectations. Tiffany was an important part of that journey of self-discovery. She was a deeply flawed woman, but she and Vladik seemed to match each other's needs.

Dukov's only advice was that Vladik take his time with Kim's client. He needed to give her time to stabilize her life and re-build her character before becoming too serious with her. To that Vladik responded:

"Father, I am in the same place in the path of my life as Tiffany. I am rebuilding my own character and finding myself. I think both Tiffany and I are going to need a lot of time. Things will go slowly for us, because both of us have such damaged souls."

The following Sunday Victor Dukov and his wife prepared a formal dinner for Vladik and Tiffany. Following the traditional custom, Vladik would sit at the table of Tiffany's guardian, even though that guardian was his own uncle. When Tiffany found out about the impending dinner, she approached Kim to ask her what was going on. Kim explained the meaning of the custom and its importance. Then she added:

"At some point you'll probably be coming over here, to Prime Minister Dukov's house, or he may have you go over to the Prime Minister's Official Residence, if he decides to move there with Maritza and Anyia. Anyhow, if that happens, you'll need to understand you and Vladik will have a commitment to each other."

Tiffany did not know how to react. She couldn't believe how quickly her life had changed in the short time since she saw Kim holding up those two dollars at Dirty Grampy's. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a strand of her long hair draped over her chest. She realized another change was necessary. If she was going to do that formal Danubian dinner thing, she had to fix her hair. Kim volunteered to help her client with braiding. Over the next hour Tiffany learned how to arrange her hair according to Danubian tradition.

----------

The next month passed peacefully for Kim and her friends as the weather grew colder and the days shorter. They studied, they reunited at the Socrates Club, and they prepared and practiced new music. Relieved from the pressure of satisfying anyone except themselves, the group experimented with more modern instruments and different themes for their music. Over the following year they would try out new music at the Socrates Club, and then perform to a packed Danube City concert hall about once every three weeks.

"Socrates' Mistresses" would remain enormously popular throughout Europe. Foreign fans came across the border by the trainload to see the defiant group of Danubians and buy their CD's, the band's mystique only increased by the fact they had decided to return to performing as naked criminals. There were differences from the previous year, however. The variety of music had increased, and some of it had a sharper edge to it. When their performances ended the band's members always took off their collars, held them up, and then bowed to the audience instead of kneeling. When asked about the gesture during an interview, Eloisa responded.

"The way we perform, and the way we end our concerts, symbolizes the path of our lives. We began singing as sentenced criminals, but now we are free and making our own choices. How we present ourselves is to show our fans who we really are, where we came from, and perhaps where the paths of our future will take us."

----------

Vladik Dukov continued working peacefully at the music store throughout November and December, still planning to enter the military academy in January. However, just before Christmas his plans changed when his ex-fianc�e entered his workplace with a large package in her hand and asked to speak with him. Vladik was amazed she actually would come looking for him and uneasy about having to confront the woman he had so badly dishonored. However, it was obvious she had something important to tell him. He wondered about the package, then noticed she was wearing engagement jewelry that must have been given to her by another man.

The naked man and the well-dressed woman withdrew to one of the store's small recording studios and sat down. Vladik's ex-fianc�e handed the package to Vladik. When he opened it, he saw it was his police uniform. She then addressed him in her usual cold, proud manner.

"Vladik, last week I spoke with your priest and prayed at the Temple. I realized many things about myself, and my path in life. Those issues are my concerns, things you have no right to know because of what you did to me. However, I realized something else. It was wrong of me to destroy your police career. You're a good police officer and an asset to our nation's security. I have no right to take that away from our country, regardless of how I feel about you personally. Yesterday I spoke with your section chief and asked him to let you return to duty. I explained you resigned because of me, but I didn't give him any details and I expect that you will not, either. He seemed very happy and made me wait so he could have your clothes packaged and brought up to his office. It's quite clear he wants you back"

Vladik was dumbstruck. He took the package. His ex-fianc�e stood up and put her hand on the doorknob.

"Vladik, I want you to understand I'm doing this for the Duchy, not for you. I hate you more than I think you can imagine. But, apart from the National Police, I...I suppose I'm doing this for myself as well." She touched her hand to her new engagement necklace and continued. "As you can see, the Ancients have blessed me with another relationship. Before I commit to him I need to find peace with myself and make peace with you."

Vladik stood up, wanting to thank her, but she quickly slipped through the door and shut it in his face. He decided not to try to follow her.

Vladik sat down with the package. He pulled out his hat and looked at it.

Vladik thought about the challenges that lay ahead, now that the path of his life was restored. His thoughts wandered not to his ex-fianc�e or even his restored career, but to Tiffany. He now realized he loved Criminal # 98946, and had every intention of staying with her. Marriages between police officers and criminals happened occasionally, so the possibility of Vladik formally marrying Tiffany was real. There would be some difficult challenges for Vladik�s future with the American, but whatever those challenges might be, he was determined to overcome them.

In the meantime the once-and-future Officer Dukov needed to finish his immediate assignment at the store. Once he finished his commitment to Kim's employer he would return to the Temple and request permission from the priest to end his penance.

----------

Kim and Sergekt finally settled on a day to get married. They decided to hold the wedding on December 27th, half way between Christmas and New Year's Eve. The date gave the people in their lives a chance to attend, including the increasingly busy Prime Minster and his family.

Kim spent the days before Christmas with her sister and parents, showing them her life as a singer, as a student to become a Spokeswoman for the Criminal, and as a future Danubian citizen. Kim was elated finally having her parents in Danube City. The Lees got to see all of the capitol's major tourist attractions, including several areas of King Vladik's Castle normally off-limits to the public. Kim showed them the university and the Temple of the Ancients. Unfortunately she had to skip showing her parents the music store and the Socrates Club. They weren't quite ready to see Kim in her work uniform and her singing costume.

A couple of nights before the wedding Kim and her friends took Cindy to the Socrates Club for a pre-wedding celebration. While Cindy once again partied naked at the club with her sister, her future brother-in-law, and their friends, Vladim and Maritza Dukov invited Mr. and Mrs. Lee to have a state dinner at the Prime Minister's Residence. In spite of the elegant surroundings, Dukov quickly put the elder Lees at ease. For a night he could take a break from being Prime Minister and return to his old role as Kim's Danubian guardian. The Lees and the Dukovs exchanged stories about their daughters Kim and Anyia. Dukov's conversation allowed Kim's parents to understand their daughter much better and laid the foundation of a new relationship they would have with her as an adult.

----------

The wedding itself took place in the main prayer chamber of the Temple of the Ancients. Given Dukov's role in Kim's life, the wedding came close to being a state ceremony, with everyone in her life present. The Prime Minister and his brother were present with their families, as were the members of "Socrates' Mistresses" and their families, Dukov's secretaries, Spokesman Havlakt and his grandchildren, and the staff of both the music store and the Socrates Club. Tiffany and Vladik stood together, he in his police uniform and she in her collar with her hair done-up properly.

In spite of Dukov's role in Kim's life, he merely was a spectator at her wedding. Presenting her to Mrs. Dolkiv was Mr. Lee's responsibility. Mr. Lee approached the moment with much trepidation, regretting that he had allowed so much time to pass by without really getting to know his daughter properly. Now she was slipping away, soon to be the wife of another man and the citizen of another country. Kim noticed he was trying his best to hold back his tears as he presented her to Sergekt's mother. There would be time for Kim and her father to re-establish their relationship, but it would be a relationship between to adults, no longer a relationship between father and daughter.

Kim and Sergekt exchanged their vows and turned to face their friends and family members. Kimberly Lee now was Kimberly Lee-Dolkivna, the wife of Sergekt Dolkivna. Until she graduated from college, Kim would be known as Apprentice Lee-Dolkivna whenever she appeared in court.

To close the ceremony, Eloisa and the other three back-up singers, for once wearing traditional dresses, performed a song Dima had written in honor of his best friend and his fianc�e's best friend. The song was titled "The summer of my life".

Dima's song alluded to the passing of springtime, a period of excitement and hope, but also of hard work and struggle, a time when Kim and Sergekt had to form their characters and determine who they were as people. That first phase of their lives was completed. Now life's second phase had come, the time to apply the lessons and hard work of the springtime to better enjoy the summer. It was a song of sadness and hope, an accurate depiction of the couple's past and the future they had yet to enjoy.

As Kim and Sergekt held hands and exchanged glances, they knew Dima and Eloisa could not have come up with a better gift. The women of "Socrates' Mistresses" were celebrating their friends' journey through time and the beginning of the summer of their lives.

**Chapter 30 � Epilogue**

Tiffany Walker-Dukovna woke up at 6:00 in the morning as always. There was no sleeping in for Tiffany, not with two kids, a husband who had to be at work in an hour and a boss like Spokeswoman Lee-Dolkivna. Those were the three priorities in Tiffany's life. Maybe in the evening there would be a little time to herself, if she was lucky. Ha! Not very likely.

Tiffany's first concern was her husband, who soon would become Chief of Police for Danube City, the youngest police chief in the city's history. She quickly got his breakfast on the table as he put on his uniform. The breakfast was a standard US breakfast of pancakes and eggs with bacon, the only difference being she had to use blackberry jelly instead of maple syrup. When they first got married Vladik had trouble getting used to the American style of eating. However, when it came to fixing buckwheat porridge and fried potatoes for the morning meal...well...Tiffany had to put her foot down on that one. No, there wasn't going to be any buckwheat porridge and fried potatoes, not in Tiffany's kitchen.

Tiffany kissed Vladik passionately; her bare body pressing against his freshly pressed uniform. Tiffany was one of those lucky women whose figures never seem to change, no matter how old they are or how many kids they have. Tiffany slipped her hands under his belt to squeeze his bottom. She gave him a mischievous look...get home early Vladik, there's plenty more for you tonight.

Getting the kids ready was next. There were more pancakes to be passed out, more eggs, and milk. The older boy didn't have his school uniform on yet, which precipitated some yelling. There was the usual complaint, "Mother, you never have to get dressed, why do I have to?" There was the usual explanation about school rules and the dress code. Someday, soon, she would have to tell him the real reason. The boy's mother was a convicted criminal serving a 35-year sentence. For Tiffany Walker-Dukovna there would be no getting dressed for another 26 years.

The local school sent a small bus to pick up the older boy. The younger one went a couple of minutes later in a mini-van owned by the Danubian Royal Family. The boy's aunt Anyia had sent the mini-van to pick up Tiffany's toddler and Spokeswoman Lee-Dolkivna's daughter to spend the day at her house with her own two small children. Once Tiffany's younger boy was in the vehicle, its driver waved at her and pulled out away from town. He passed the yellow sign that marked the edge of Tiffany's world and continued on to the house were Anyia lived with her husband. That house belonged to the estate of the Grand Duke of Danubia. Anyia's husband was the Grand Duke, although now the Royal Family's role in the Republic of Danubia's political life was completely symbolic.

Tiffany reflected on the strange contrast between the role of Anyia's husband, whose power was ceremonial, and her own father-in-law, whose power was quite real. Vladim Dukov had been Prime Minister for nearly nine years, with no sign that his government was about to end anytime soon. He was adored by most Danubians. When the crowds shouted "DOC-DOC DUKOV!", they meant it.

Vladim Dukov was halfway through what would be the most successful and influential government the Republic of Danubia had seen since the times of King Vladik the Defender. The change in the country's name was one example of the Prime Minister's influence. After nearly 500 years Upper Danubia formalized its southern border, finally recognizing Lower Danubia was nothing more than a memory and there was no hope of ever getting that land back. In exchange for the formal border recognition, Upper Danubia's southern neighbor ceded some archeological sites, two small towns, and three ancient villages back to the Danubian government. The places had huge historical significance, so bringing them back under Danubian control was well worth the border treaty. Dukov asked the Parliament to change the country's name the following year, because it was time to get real. Upper Danubia no longer was a Duchy and there was no such place as "Lower Danubia".

There were many other changes, including upgrading the dam at the Rika Chorna Reservoir and tripling the nation's hydroelectric production capacity, projects that kept Kim's husband Sergekt Dolkiv quite busy. There were comprehensive modernization programs for sewers and irrigation systems, aggressive educational reforms, and the upgrading of fire-fighting and police services, just to name a few of Dukov's other projects. In foreign affairs Dukov proved to be a crafty and hard-headed negotiator. Danubia finally did join the EU, but under much more favorable terms than originally negotiated by the former government. Among other world leaders Dukov�s negotiating skills earned him the nickname �Vladim the Extortionist�.

Danubia was the one country in eastern Europe without a major drug addiction or AIDS problem, largely because the Prime Minister had insisted on awareness education and mass testing of the younger population at the beginning of his administration. Tiffany could feel some pride that nine years before she had played an important role in making the new Prime Minister understand part of what he was up against with the drug issue.

Drugs. Fortunately Tiffany's first-hand knowledge of drugs no longer was current. It remained current for a while, but over time became outdated because she no longer was part of that world. There were a few reminders that never would go away, however. There were the scars on her arms, the cut on her forehead, the occasional cravings, and the pictures of her co-workers from Dirty Grampy's. Her old co-workers were now dead, all of them. From that group, Tiffany was the only survivor.

Tiffany forced the memories of her fellow dancers out of her mind. She had to get to work. She left everything in the kitchen as is, because Vladik had hired a cleaning service to clean up the house and maintain the garden. Between two jobs and two kids, there just wasn't time for housework.

Tiffany got on her bicycle and pedaled downtown. She could have ridden the trolley, but never did so unless it was totally freezing outside. Rain or shine, Tiffany rode her bike. She was one of those stubborn criminals who refused to stand naked in a packed trolley. She passed the pleasant parks and old buildings, as well as numerous hotels and tourist cafes. The city now was full of tourists, whose money fueled the Prime Minister's ambitious improvements. Some of the foreigners, especially visitors from the US and Latin America, stared at the attractive naked woman as she pedaled past them. Tiffany did not notice. She was a criminal and that's just the way things were.

As Tiffany neared downtown she passed the Danube City Studio Complex. The studio area was full of groups of naked criminals, the people who formed the heart of the still-popular Danube City music scene. Tiffany then passed the music store where she had worked a couple of years at the beginning of her sentence. She glanced at a display of the latest CD of "Socrates' Mistresses", the enormously influential band that had changed the course of Danubia's music, and probably the course of the nation's history. It was weird to think, without "Socrates' Mistresses"; it was unlikely Vladim Dukov ever would have become Prime Minister.

"Socrates' Mistresses" still performed, although not as often as before because its members were pursuing other careers. When the band did perform, Tiffany's boss, along with its other 14 members, always performed naked. That held true even when one or more of the singers were pregnant. Performing naked had become the band's trademark, their reminder to the world they began their careers as criminals.

Tiffany's journey took her past the Socrates Club, which still was going strong. She rode past the old armory building, where she could hear Malka Chorno's voice snarling at a morning gym class. Tiffany had classes in the evenings with that strangely driven woman, which kept her in shape and partly explained her still-attractive figure.

Tiffany finally arrived at the Central Police Station. She parked her bicycle and looked at the sprawling complex, feeling satisfaction her husband soon would be in charge of the entire building and everyone in it. Vladik had moved up very quickly and was very well liked in the National Police. Of course, having his father as Prime Minister didn't hurt, but Vladik had moved up mostly by his own merits. He had a bright future.

Tiffany walked up the two flights of stairs to Spokeswoman Lee-Dolkivna's Office, which had been the office of the Prime Minister when he still was Kim's mentor. The Spokeswoman was digging through some files, pulling out the folders of some foreign clients who had trials scheduled for that morning. Tiffany, now in her official position as Criminal Adjunct Walker-Dukovna, knelt in front of Spokeswoman Lee-Dolkivna and touched her forehead to the floor.

"Good morning, Spokeswoman Lee-Dolkivna, I am pleased to see you have safely returned."

"Good morning, Criminal # 98946. I too, am pleased to see you. Please rise and we'll get started."

Apart from the formal greeting, Kim and Tiffany talked in a perfectly normal manner. Tiffany officially was Kim's assistant, however the truth was she almost was a Spokeswoman herself. She and Kim shared some clients, but Tiffany also had several clients of her own. Both of them were specializing in foreigners and drug cases, given that so many foreigners now were entering Danubia and unfortunately some of them were not taking the country's drug laws seriously. Tiffany had the same law degree as Kim, but was not a Spokeswoman in full standing because she remained a convicted criminal. Tiffany's status as a criminal, however, did not prevent her from appearing in court and arguing cases.

That particular morning there was a trial pending for a group of Canadians caught with several kilograms of hashish. The case would be complicated because they were various ages and it was not clear the hashish belonged to all of them. There were interviews to conduct and a convoluted truth to straighten out. The arraignment committee, the same three dour individuals who had interviewed Kim nearly 11 years before, would be hearing the case before sending it to trial. In their old age the three had little patience for dealing with criminals who had not been properly interviewed by their Spokespersons.

Momentarily a group of scared, naked young Canadians would be brought to the office in handcuffs and forced to kneel on the floor. There would be a trial, there would be collarings and switchings, and then there would be redemption...hopefully. Kim and Tiffany would have to guide the Canadians, just like Spokesman Dukov had guided Kim and Kim had guided Tiffany.

The day would be a routine workday, but Kim knew that in one way it was a momentous one as well. In the moment of quiet that preceded the entry of the new clients, Kim needed to remind Tiffany of something important, a promise from a long time ago, now fulfilled.

"Tiffany, I got a question for you. Do you remember what day it is today?"

Tiffany thought for a second:

"My God, today's my 30th birthday! I totally forgot!"

"Yeah. I remembered, 'cause it's what I promised you, isn't it? Your 30th birthday. So you made it."

Tiffany badly wanted to hug Kim, but knew she couldn't because it would break protocol. For a moment her emotions overwhelmed her. Finally, she responded:

"Thank you, Spokeswoman Lee-Dolkivna. Thank you for...giving me my 30th...."

"And many more birthdays ahead of you, don't you think?"

"Yeah...I'm sure of it. Many more ahead..."

There was a loud knock on the outer office door, announcing the arrival of the new clients and their police escort. It was the beginning of another long day in court.