

Selling Vintage



Jessica Matthews

A "Her TV" Novel

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Selling Vintage

By Jessica Matthews

I started to be fascinated with antiques when I was quite young. I'd haunt the local goodwill shops and flea markets in search of a bargain. My mother told me off for wasting my money, but Aunt Emma saw it all differently and encouraged me. But she wasn't my mother's favourite sister-in-law anyway.

Garage sales, rummage sales, any old sales, even, when they'd let me in, auction sales. There weren't many of those; they insisted on a minimum age of eighteen or twenty-one.

Antiques; you're thinking tables and chests, paintings and ceramics. Forget it. They were too big, too heavy, and frankly to me at least, too boring. I went for the small stuff, things that would fit in my pocket or perhaps a bag the size of a laptop.

I specialised. I loved jewellery; perhaps a strange thing for a boy to be obsessed with, but to me these were the most exciting objects. I wondered who bought them, who wore them and where and when. I told myself stories around them, and developed quite a fantasy life around the stories I made up.

I bought job lots where they were offered, and occasionally single pieces. I learned to recognise precious metals and gemstones, makers' marks. I devoured books and old catalogues. All these things helped me to value and date my collection.

I bought at online auctions only occasionally. Someone else had probably done all that I would have done, and the prices were unlikely to allow a decent profit. I'd buy at police auctions of lost and recovered property, insurance sales, and those sales where airlines sell off lost and unclaimed luggage. These didn't give great returns, but occasionally, there'd be something really good.

This helped me to turn a profit. An anonymous piece, when I'd cleaned it, dated it and attached a little history, could sell for far more than I paid. If I could find a picture of someone famous wearing it, or at least something like it, that would help to drive the value up.

I saved and saved, always with the idea that I could buy better and turn a bigger profit. I envied the dealers who could offer the really good stuff. I so wanted to be up there with them. The only way of getting there was to save and move up market. I knew it would take a long time.

I'm getting a little ahead of myself here. You want to know how I went from being that obsessive boy collector to where I am today, with a penthouse home and an impressive inheritance from my last husband.

I say "last" not to imply that I'm finished. At my age that would be very foolish but he was significantly older than I am. I quite fancy that I'll delight in my role as the merry widow for a while. I can indulge myself in the future as I never had in the past.

So let's go to the beginning of this story.

I was about fourteen when it started. I'd been wandering the streets, as bored as any kid of that age. I wasn't into sport, and the idea of joining my contemporaries in the junior smokers and drinkers club in the local park wasn't for me either.

I haunted the junk shops. They simply fascinated me. I've no idea why I drifted into them. Perhaps I was looking for buried treasure in a modern sense.

Was I interested in the girls? Yes and no. I was fascinated by them; not all of them, but the more sophisticated ones. I loved the way they were so much more interesting in dress, poise, scent, conversation, and naturally, I watched their jewellery too.

They weren't interested in me. Some were attracted to the boys who could spit further and curse louder than the others. Some were attracted to the older boys who had the use of Mummy's car, or the jocks from the football team and the ones who had money to flash around. I didn't fit anywhere in those categories.

I got grumbled at for a few years, but my interest never waned. I learned more and more though.

"I don't know where he gets his ideas," I heard Mum grumble to Aunt Emma. "The stuff he buys. It's all a waste. He should be saving for college."

"He's a good boy," Emma replied. "He's not getting into any trouble, he's studying, and maybe there's something in what he's doing."

"He should be collecting sports stuff at his age," Mum replied. "Goodness knows what his father would have thought of all these girls' things he's collecting."

"My brother was always very liberal and tolerant." Emma shook her head. "He'd have taken an interest with him and listened to him."

“I don’t have time for his nonsense and your brother isn’t here anymore. He disappeared when Melvin was two.” Mum’s voice rose. “It’s hard enough being a single parent without worrying that my son might be different. He’s not normal.”

“My brother didn’t just disappear,” Emma said angrily. “He was missing in action; that’s very different.”

“And different means not normal too.” Mom was getting angry but started to weep. “I don’t know what I’ve done wrong.”

Normal; that was the first time I’d ever heard someone saying that I might not be normal or that I was different. What did that mean? I shouldn’t have overheard that conversation but I did, and it stayed with me. I couldn’t figure out what they meant.

It all washed over me. I knew what interested me and equally, I knew that Mother and I weren’t going to agree.

“Summer break’s coming soon,” Mother said. “He’s eighteen coming on his next birthday soon. He should have found a job or even gone to sports camp, but he hasn’t. I’ve no idea what I’m going to do with him for the break.”

“Why don’t you let him come and stay with me?” Emma asked.

I could hear the smile in Mother’s voice as she accepted the offer. With me out of the way, she’d be able to have Stan over more often.

I didn’t tell you about Stan. He was Mother’s friend. He didn’t like me much, and I didn’t like him. We rubbed along, but nothing more than that.

Aunt Emma was a bit older than my mother and lived a couple of hours drive away. I didn’t know her well when I was small. She’d always seemed exotic

and independent, with opinions that my mother never liked.

I think Mother didn't like that Aunt Emma looked years younger than she did. Mother never liked the way she dressed either.

"She's all flounces, frills and too much makeup," she said more than once. "And for goodness sake, why does she wear all that jewellery? You can hear her bangles jangling long before she comes into the room."

I liked Aunt Emma. I figured she was on my wavelength.

I knew she had some sort of business which kept her busy, but again I had no idea what it was. I was really happy that the invitation had been made and accepted. Maybe the summer wasn't going to be so bad after all.

Aunt Emma went back home, and I went to endure the last week of school. I knew I should be thinking about college, but I had no idea what would be the right thing for me to do.

The first day I possibly could, I said goodbye to Mom and set out for the local bus stop with my rucksack. All I had was a few of my clothes, and the best of my antique collection. I didn't want to leave it lying around.

Someone might have mistaken it for junk. It wasn't of course, but I wasn't taking any risks. I only left the things that weren't worth much.

Two busses and most of the day later, I walked across town, following the directions I'd gotten from the internet. Aunt Emma's address wasn't the small house that I'd pictured, although don't ask me where I'd got that impression from. It was a double shop on a street just off the centre of town.

The windows were covered by blinds when I arrived and the door was locked. I pressed the button on the doorbell, waited and a voice answered. I said

who I was and the door buzzed. I tried it and it opened.

It was dull inside and I stood, just inside the closed door waiting for my eyes to adjust to the gloom.

“I was wondering when you’d get here.” Aunt Emma came through a door at the back and enveloped me in a big hug. I felt the warmth of her body against mine and her perfume filled my nostrils. I wasn’t used to this kind of greeting, but I knew at once that I liked it.

“Come upstairs. That’s where I live.” Emma grabbed my rucksack and hurried ahead of me. “You have the west wing,” she announced, waving her hand towards another door on my right.

“West wing?” I asked.

“It’s your bedroom and bathroom through there.” She laughed. “I call it that for fun. Our living room and kitchen and, of course, my rooms are through there.”

She indicated another door.

“None of the rooms are locked, so if you’re doing something private, you’ll have to put a notice on the door, or sing loudly so that I know not to come in.”

I took my meagre possessions into my bedroom and unpacked. The wardrobes were full of all kinds of old dresses, and I had to use the dresser. It didn’t matter, I didn’t have anything that needed hanging, and what I had didn’t take up much room anyway.

We sat together in the living room after I’d eaten. Aunt Emma poured me a glass of wine.

“I’m not old enough,” I started.

“You’re here in my home and I’m Emma, not Aunt Emma. Calling me that makes me feel old. While

you're here, it's my rules; if you want to try it, I've no objection. Your mother may be strict, but I guess you can be trusted to be responsible. ”

“It's not only Mother all the time,” I said. “It's Stan who always gets on my back, even though he's only visiting.”

“Don't worry; you're here for the vacation. If your mother likes Stan, then don't worry. She's been on her own a long time, and she probably wants some company.”

“She's got me,” I said.

“Not that kind of company.” Emma wagged her finger and I knew what she meant. “Now, bring your glass and we'll go downstairs. I think you'll find it interesting.”

“I guess he's okay,” I replied as I followed her. “But we don't see eye to eye on anything.”

We emerged onto the shop area, and she clicked the light on. All around me were rack upon rack of clothes. I could tell that they weren't new by the range of lengths and styles, colours and fabrics.

“I buy and sell vintage ladies clothes,” Emma said, looking at me more closely than before. “It's a pity that you're not a girl. If you were, you'd love this place. It's like a giant dressing-up cupboard.”

“It sounds fascinating,” I said. “But it must be a lot of work on your own.”

“I really need a girl to help me, but I can't afford to employ anyone right now.

“I heard that you're interested in jewellery and I thought you might be interested in working here for the summer as well as having a break from home.”

“I'm not a girl,” I said.

“That's a real disadvantage,” Emma laughed. “But I don't have to pay you.”

“I’m so happy to be here. I think you saved my life,” I sighed. “I dread having to go back. If I can find a job, I may stay here and never go back.”

“Was it that bad at home?” She looked concerned.

“It was getting that way.” I changed the subject quickly. “Do you sell jewellery as well?” I asked. “You always wear such a lot.”

“I do. This is one way of displaying it.” She held out her hands. “I only use my middle and ring finger. Rings on the others get in the way. I have some thumb rings too. They’re a fashion these days.”

“Your hands look really elegant,” I said, holding them to admire her choices.

The nails were a good centimetre longer than her fingertips and came to a sharp point.

“I get my nails done every week, usually long and pink shading to pearl at the tips. The acrylics make my hands look longer. My regulars know everything’s for sale, even if I’m wearing it.”

“Do you have other jewellery? I asked. “I’ve specialised in my own very small way.”

“Of course but it’s stored badly and not sorted yet. I’m not sure any of it has any value. Most of it’s in the dresser in your room.”

“May I look?”

“I want you to do more than look,” Emma said. “There are some boxes that need sorting with an expert eye. I think some of it needs to be thrown away, but there may be some good pieces there.”

“Where did you buy it?” My interest was roused.

“Most of it comes from house clearance sales.”

“What are these clearance sales? I don’t think I’ve been to one.”

“It’s when contractors move in to clear a house, maybe when someone’s died or been re-possessed. They get everything out and sell it. The small stuff is more a nuisance and they’ll get rid of it quickly if they can, unless they know there’s some really valuable pieces, but that’s rare.”

“Why is it rare?”

“People have sold it off, maybe put it in a bank, or the relatives have grabbed it sooner,” she replied. “I think I’m getting too well-known though. The prices seem to go up when they see me looking.”

“Maybe I can look for you?” I said, not thinking of any possible consequences.

“I’d love you to.”

I told her that I bought things the same way, but I was more limited by the chances available and the money needed.

Emma indicated the clothes racks. “These are in size order and roughly in vintage order. The oldest ones are on the left, the newer on the right.”

“What about sizes?”

“You’re quick.” Emma indicated a size chart on the wall. The smallest are here, and they go progressively larger as we go round the room.”

“It’s such a lot of dresses,” I said. “How do you know what you’ve got?”

“It’s a bit hit and miss, I’m afraid. I try to remember what I’ve sold and what I have. I label things as they come in and when they’ve been here too long, I clear them out and sell them on.”

“Do a lot of people buy these clothes?” I fingered the skirt of a beautiful silver and black ball gown, marvelling at the way it glittered and floated. “This is lovely.”

“I wish it would fit me but I’m not tall enough.”

“You could have it altered.”

“I know, but I could end up with no stock and everything for myself if I started doing that.”

“There must be some things you don’t want to sell.”

There are; some of them are in that first wardrobe in your room. The second one is where the new stock goes to get sorted.”

“It must be awfully hard to keep track of everything.”

“I never really know what I have in stock. I have a lot of customers, regular and casual. I get the girls coming before their proms and when they want something different for a date. I get their mothers sometimes too, and the fashionable girls who like to say they’re wearing vintage.”

“That room’s your changing room?” I asked.

“I always ask people to try things on before they buy, because sizes can vary so much.”

“I thought you said they were in size order.”

“I did, but one manufacturer’s size ten may not be the same as the next one. They do vary so much.”

“There’s a lot to running this business,” I said.

“There is and I hope you’re going to be able to mind the shop for me,” Emma said. “I want to go to a few more sales this season. I can’t always get to as many as I’d like because I need to keep money coming in and can’t leave.”

“I’m sure I could do that.” I really liked the idea, not that I’d thought of it before.

“That’s settled.” Emma hugged me. “I’ll show you the basics. My first sale is in a few days.”

“I’m sure I’ll manage,” I said confidently.

“I’m going to show you the rest of the shop routine today,” Emma said as we had breakfast the next morning.”

“Don’t you want me to sort through your jewellery boxes?” I asked.

“You can do that as you’re minding the shop,” she said. “There are long quiet periods in this business. If it wasn’t for the internet sales, I think I’d have gone under a long time ago.”

“Why do you do it if it’s so difficult?”

“I love it and I don’t know how to do anything else. Finding something by Schiaparelli or even Gautier is wonderful, especially if there’s a provenance to say it’s been worn by a glamorous film star. An Audrey Hepburn is amazing, even if it’s so tiny that no one can wear it. There are collectors and one like that can sell for thousands and keep me going for ages.”

“I can understand, I think,” I said.

I made myself scarce when the one customer of the morning demanded to try on several dresses for a formal affair. I got the impression that this should be a female-only environment. I went to get one of the jewellery boxes and tipped it out gently onto a tray. It was a horrible mess of tangled chains and single earrings, some cheap rings, and a lot of dust.

I was so engrossed in sorting it out that I didn’t hear Emma come through from the shop, a smile on her face.

“That’s made it worthwhile opening this week,” she said, waving a credit card receipt in the air. “I do prefer cash, but sometimes I have to take a card.”

She looked over my shoulder. From the mess, I’d put one earring to one side as I looked for its twin.

“Is that any good?” she asked.

“If I’m right, it’s probably more than good. How much did you pay for this lot?”

“Probably about ten dollars.”

“If its twin is here, your profit could be a hundred percent.”

“You’re worth your weight in gold then.” She took the single earring and held it against her ear. “I think I like this one; the drop of white stones would look good anywhere.”

“The second is here.” I held it up. “The white stones are good diamonds. There’s one missing and it’s in two pieces, but if you can get it repaired with a stone that matches, it’s a good find.”

“You’re in charge.” Emma stood and picked up the earrings. “I’m going to take these to my working jeweller and get her to repair them.”

“Make sure the replacement is the same quality,” I shouted after her. She waved an acknowledgement and I was left alone in the shop.

There were three customers whilst she was away. One was only browsing, and even with my little experience, I could guess that she was wasting time. The other two were different.

One looked round the door and asked where Emma was. I said she’d be back soon and they disappeared.

The third was obviously looking more seriously. She was tall and elegant, with expensively blonde hair and impossible heels.

Her choices were all really the most glamorous of the lot. Strapless and slinky, sequined and plain, but all the dresses shouted glamour. She held one after the other against her in the mirror.

I was afraid to say anything. In truth, I didn't know what to say when she looked at me as if asking the question which was the best.

"Why not try them on?" I said.

"Emma usually models them for me," she replied. "We have such fun. She gets a wig that looks like my hairdo and does her makeup like mine and then I can see how I'm going to look in each of the dresses."

"She didn't say how long she was going to be," I said lamely. "She's taken something to be repaired at the jewellers."

"Couldn't you model them for me?"

"I don't know how..." I stuttered, alarmed at the suggestion.

"I'll come back," she said, obviously embarrassed, her face showing her discomfort. "Tell Emma that Mrs. Robinson was here. I'm sure she'll call me."

Before I could reply, she was gone.

Emma came back about five minutes later. I told her that Mrs. Robinson had been in.

"Oh, goodness, I hope you didn't upset her; she's a great customer."

"I don't think so, but she did ask if I could model some dresses for her to choose. She said you made yourself up to look like her and then she could choose."

"She always wants me to model and she usually ends up buying the lot. I'll have to call her later," Emma replied. "She's brought several of her friends who all expect the same catwalk show."

"That sounds fun. Do they all come at once?"

"Sometimes they do, and I do like the dressing up games they make me play." Emma looked at me. "You know, I think you could do it. A bit of padding and some makeup, and you'd fit their sizes easily."

“I’m not a girl,” I said.

“Fiddle-dee-dee; nobody’s perfect.” Emma smiled. “Seriously, I think it might be a good idea if you pretended to be a girl in the shop. Women expect a girl to be here.”

“I don’t look anything like a girl,” I said. “I couldn’t.”

“Not yet but I think with a little makeup and a better hairstyle, you could get away with it. You’re slim enough and your hair’s enough to make some girls jealous.”

“Don’t be silly.” I blushed, running my fingers through my shoulder-length hair. “Don’t even go there.”

She looked at me with a curious expression on her face and changed the subject.

“My jeweller says you have an excellent eye. That repair could be done later today, she thinks when they’re cleaned, they’ll be worth a lot.”

“I’m trying to improve my skills,” I said. “Mother hated me studying it; at least, Stan did. I find it fascinating.”

“I promise never to discourage you,” Emma said. “And you’re on commission from here on.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to.” She handed me a catalogue. “I may even ask you to go to the sales for me.”

“I don’t think they’ll accept me at a sale like this.” I recognised the name on the catalogue. “They’re for accredited buyers only.”

“You could be my accredited buyer.”

“They still wouldn’t let me in.” I pointed to their terms and conditions. “I’m too young and even with a false beard and moustache, I couldn’t look old enough that they’d let me in.”

“There may be another way,” Emma said and turned away thoughtfully.

I spent the next few hours lost in all that mess of old jewellery. There was nothing that I found as exciting as the earrings. There were some low-value thin gold necklaces, and old signet rings which looked to be gold.

A lot of base metal was fit only to be thrown away, but there were a couple of rings I put aside to look at in more detail later. I really needed a spectrometer to be sure, but I guessed they were garnets at best, not rubies of inferior colour.

“I’m going to the bank,” Emma said nearer closing time. “Look after the shop for the last half-hour would you please.”

She’d no sooner gone than a brown-haired girl came in.

“I’m Amelia,” she announced and then, seeing me looking blank, added, “I’m the jeweller. I guess you’re the genius who spotted these earrings.”

She held out a box, flipped the lid and there they lay, staggeringly brilliant and shining as perfect as the day that they were made.

“I tried them on,” she admitted. “I wore them all afternoon and they made me feel good. I didn’t want to take them off. I wish I could afford something so fabulous.”

“I thought they looked good when I spotted the first one,” I said. “The quality shone through the dirt. I was really pleased when I found the second.”

“I can’t understand why anyone would discard something so lovely,” Amelia said, looking at them again. “Maybe they didn’t know what they were worth.”

“They didn’t appreciate how beautiful they are,” I replied. “The quality shouts at you.”

“You’re strange,” she said suddenly. “I never met a boy before who could admit to loving jewellery like you do.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Yes, I love it too, that’s why I trained to work with these things,” she replied. “You have to come and see my workshop.”

“I’ve never been in a workshop before.”

“Then I’ll call Emma and tell her to give you the time off. I’m sure you’ll love it...and I’ll enjoy showing you ‘round.”

She went to the door and then turned. “If I’m hanging around the door about closing time, you could take me for coffee,” she said, closing the door without giving me time to think, let alone answer.

I closed the shop and did everything that Emma had shown me to do. She wasn’t back and when I peeped out through the window blinds, I could see Amelia standing across the road. I scribbled a note for Emma, and grabbed my old leather jacket.

“Hi,” she said, hooking her arm through mine and steering me along the street. “I was afraid you’d shut up and ignore me.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” I said, not really knowing what I was doing.

“You’re fascinating,” she said. Your ability to spot those earrings was a real coup.”

"I think they're Tiffany," I said. "Or they're a contemporaneous copy which is more likely."

"I agree," she said. "I couldn't find any maker's mark, but the age and the setting suggests 1920 or 1930."

"No wonder you didn't want to take them off," I said.

"I really didn't. You'd feel the same if you tried them."

"But I don't have pierced ears."

She looked at me and pulled at my ear lobe. "That could be remedied when you come to see my workshop."

I didn't reply but I think I went a little rigid at that suggestion.

"No excuses," she said. "I'm usually painless but if you're going to protest, I'll bite hard."

We walked on and she snuggled closer to my arm. "I'm older than you," she said. "I'm twenty two. Don't get this wrong, but I think I'd like to spend some time with you."

"Won't someone object if you do?" I asked, never having been in this sort of position before.

"I don't have a boyfriend, an ex-husband or a big brother to come after you," she replied. "You're the first boy with the slightest idea about the things that interest me."

"I'm nineteen, working in my aunt's vintage clothing shop," I said. "I'm not a good catch."

"That's for me to decide." She stopped and looked into my eyes. "I live above my workshop. I'm paying off all kinds of loans from my training. Let's see what happens. No promises, no demands."

When we walked into that coffee shop, I knew we were a couple, already at ease in our own world.

I walked her home.

“You can kiss me goodnight.” She stopped and turned to me at her door.

I leaned in to her and our lips touched. It was a tentative touch and I pulled back in the shock of the touch. She looked at me and then I felt her hand going to the back of my head and she pulled her face close to mine and kissed me harder and long.

I could feel how soft her lips were and when her tongue pressed against mine, I opened mine and let her in.

She broke the kiss. “Goodnight. Come and see the workshop.”

With that, she turned and let herself through the door. I stood and looked at it for a few seconds, wondering if that had really happened. Then I turned back to Emma’s shop.

“Did you like Amelia?” Emma asked when we were sitting together later. “She’s been such a good friend and the repair is beautiful.”

She pulled back her hair to show me that she was wearing those earrings. “I know I have to sell these on, but I’m going to be sad to see them go.”

“They don’t have to go this week,” I replied. “I’d like to see if I can find anything like them in the books. They could be Tiffany and if they’re not, they’re a good copy probably made at the same time as Tiffany.”

“Does Amelia agree?”

“I think so and she invited me to see her workroom.”

I tried to keep my voice even and not to betray my excitement. I didn't say that she wanted to pierce my ears either, although I wasn't sure about that.

"She said to call and I could go whenever you can spare me."

"Then I think you should go tomorrow afternoon. Mrs. Robinson called and she's coming back for a fashion show. That should keep me busy, and knowing her, I'll sell more during the afternoon than the rest of the week combined."

I set off as soon as Mrs. Robinson arrived. Emma put the snick on the door, with a notice about her temporary closure.

"Call me before you come back," she said. "I may be some time; Mrs Robinson likes to watch me make myself up to look like her. She says I help her to update her looks."

"A shop proprietor's life seems always a busy one," I said as I left.

Seeing Amelia's door in the daylight was a surprise. There was no indication that it was a workshop or what was behind it. I guessed it was for security.

I knocked on the door and waited for what seemed to be a long time. I was about to knock again when it opened. She was all flustered, like I'd interrupted something. She pulled me in and kissed me quickly.

"I'll have to finish this," she said, returning to her bench. "Sit over there and keep quiet."

I couldn't see what she was doing but she was hunched over a vice and used a gas jet and some tools which looked very delicate. Her hair was tied back. Her overalls were grey and stained.

There were beads of sweat on her forehead as she frowned in concentration with goggles over magnifying glasses.

“I hoped you’d come today.” She leaned back and took the goggles off, then started at the piece she’d been working on through the glasses. “I made these for you.”

She held out her hand, concealing what was in it until she dropped it into my hand.

“They’re earrings,” I said.

“Well spotted. I can tell you’re a jewellery expert.” She laughed at my bemusement. “They’re only zircons in a basic claw setting, but I thought you’d like them.”

“I don’t know if I dare,” I said. “I don’t have pierced ears.”

She held up something looking like small grips. “We have the means and I promise I’m painless. Sit there.”

She looked from left to right and marked each ear. She sprayed something on each earlobe, two clicks, and less than a minute later I was wearing a glittering stud in each ear.

“I can’t believe I let you do that,” I said, feeling my knees wobble a little. “I don’t know what Emma will say.”

“She’ll think they’re beautiful.” Amelia kissed me quickly. “I think so too.”

The workshop was really interesting. Amelia walked me through the things that she’s usually asked to do. Rings took a big chunk of her time as work came in from several sources.

“Rings seem to be family heirlooms,” she explained. “People want to wear Granny’s ring, or use an old engagement ring. Sometimes the gold wears thin after years of wear and I have to build it up again, or use a new insert. It always has to look like new and never like it’s been repaired.”



“I brought a few for you to look at,” I said, remembering the bag in my jacket pocket. “I don’t think they’re special but you could tell me whether to junk them or have them repaired to sell.”

“These are Emma’s?” she asked and I nodded.

“I’ve also this lot of Emma’s gold chains for you to weigh in for scrap.”

“I’ll look through them.” Amelia sorted through the rings. “It’s lucky; you’ll have to come and see me again, then I can tell you what everything’s worth.”

Before I left, Emma measured each of my fingers and my thumbs with a ring size gauge and wrote down the results.

“That’s so you can guess what size things are when you’re looking through them.”

“Wow, I love the earrings,” Emma noticed at once when I got back. “Maybe I can get you to model some in the shop like I do.”

“They wouldn’t look good on me.”

“With the right dress, you’d look stunning. Mrs. Robinson agreed.”

“I don’t think so.” I shook my head and smiled at the thought. “Mrs Robinson needs to get out more if she thinks I’d be a good-looking girl.”

“It might be an added attraction to the shop, and you might enjoy it,” Emma said. “I need more customers all the time. If you got your nails done like mine, you could model the rings too.”

Before I could answer, my eyes were drawn to a tray with several sets of earrings arranged roughly in pairs. I looked through them, then picked out what looked like an antique pair. I held them out to the light and looked again.

“Are these for real?”

Emma came over to look at them. “I think so; they were in an old wooden trinket box. I tipped it out for you to look through.”

“I need a glass to look properly.” I laid the earrings gently on a cloth, and looked them over carefully. “They look real.”

“Real as in what?” Emma peered over my shoulder.

“I’ve never touched something like this before,” I said. “I think we’d better ask Amelia to look before I say too much.”

I called her and Amelia arrived in a rush. “You sounded so excited,” she said, then saw what I had been talking about. “I think you’re right to be excited. How did these get here?”

“Don’t ask me,” Emma said. “I must have bought them somewhere, but it was ages ago. I think I had to pay twenty dollars for the box.”

Amelia looked from me to Emma. “You mean there’s more where this came from?”

“It’s all here on this tray,” she said. “There’s the box. It looks like an old cigar box. So tell me, what am I missing?”

Amelia looked at me and I looked at her, wondering which of us was going to be the first to speak. She nodded at me.

“I think they were made in France, probably a little before the revolution in 1789. These are diamonds and rubies. Earlier ones would have been all diamonds. They’re made in five sections, with the top one having the hook for a pierced ear.”

“It’s a style called girandole,” Amelia said and turned to me. “I think you’re right, they should be in a safe.”

“Can you tell me about them?” Emma asked. “You seem to know so much.”

“Women in those days wore their hair piled high, with low-cut dresses,” Amelia said. “Big earrings like these were fashionable for over a hundred years in different designs. Think of candlelight and how the facets would have glittered in the light.”

“Why are they French?”

“It’s a guess,” I said. “In Italy, they used pearls and diamonds. In Spain it was emeralds from Colombia. The French got rubies from the Far East.”

“They don’t look that expensive.” Emma touched them and held one out to her ear, in front of the mirror.

“They’re probably worth about six or seven thousand when they’re cleaned up,” Amelia said. “I’d love to work on them. I’m sure I could place them for a good price too.”

“Take them,” Emma said. “Clean them up and let me see them.”

“I’ll make sure the stones are secure too,” Emma replied. “I’m really excited to see them.” She looked at me. “You can model them for me when your holes are healed.”

“That would be fun,” Emma said. “We could put his hair up and get him into something low-cut. With a bit of effort and makeup, I think he could look like a rich French nobleman’s wife.”

“Or the modern version,” Amelia said. “I always wanted a beautiful girlfriend.”

The way they laughed told me that this jest had become a plan.

I was alone in the shop a few days later. I’d no idea where Emma had gone, but I knew enough about how things ran to be confident. After all, Emma was

probably at the other end of a call on my mobile if I needed help.

“Well, hello. Who are you, sweetie.” A flamboyant voice and a flamboyant character walked in, with a flounce. “You must be the new boy. Emma told me about you.”

I didn’t know how to take him. The voice was female, but this was no lady, dressed in a linen suit, shirt and tie, like he’d only recently disembarked from a cruise liner.

“I’m Desmond,” he announced. “Surely Emma told you about me?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Nothing,” I said, regretting it immediately. He expected that his fame would have gone before him.

“Well, I’m Desmond. My friends call me Desi. I’m Miss Desmond when I’m working.”

“Oh.” I understood. “You’re from the drag bar at the other side of town.”

“I am never in drag.” He stood tall and offended. “I am a female impersonator, not like those strange people on the television. When I’m dressed, I am a perfect lady.”

“I didn’t mean any offence,” I stuttered. “I’m new here, from out of town.”

“Apology accepted, my dear.” He started to shuffle through the racks. “Do you dress?” he asked. “You’d look stunning in one of these little black dresses, with heels. I can see you now; absolutely divine.”

“I don’t dress in anything here,” I said.

He looked me up and down with disappointment in his expression.

“You really should dress.” He touched my hair and looked at my hands. “You would turn out to be absolutely irresistible.”