



Peridot

a torquere press
birthstone
by parhelion

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by Parhelion

Torquere Press

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Chapter One

The night my old life was blown to pieces, I'd just returned from Mogok, where I'd bought some pigeon's blood rubies from a merchant who was a family acquaintance. I was staying at the Strand Hotel, which looked pretty shabby by 1958. Understandable, I suppose: the grand hotel had been a favorite of the British colonial administration and wasn't much loved by their successors, Burma's tottering civilian regime. Somehow, though, the phone call from the States still managed to get through to me.

Because of the time difference between Southeast Asia and the Pacific Coast, it was well after midnight when the twinned rings from the old telephone woke me. I answered with a curt, "Yes?"

"Mr. Steven Corvey?" My caller's local accent was diluted by a slight British tinge.

"This is he."

"International operator, sir. I have a phone call from the United States for you."

At this hour? Bad news, no doubt. "Please put the call through."

"Very well, sir."

We both hung up. From the other side of the bed, I heard a noise of protest, but I was too busy staring at the phone, willing it to ring, to pay much attention. Just as well for the state of my nerves that the phone sounded again after only a minute or so: amazingly fast. I snatched up the receiver. "Hello?"

"This Steve Corvey?" The soprano voice seemed familiar even when distorted by the crackles of an overseas connection.

"Yes."

"Okay. Winifred Jowlett here." Aha, a second cousin of my business partner. "We thought we'd better call you. Nate's in trouble back home."

Nate Jowlett was my partner, but he was also my friend. I waved a hand to shush my companion, who'd started on what was probably a complaint at being abruptly awoken. "What? How?"

"Oh, he's in jail down in San Agustin." There was a pause as we both contemplated the improbability of this. "Anyhow, he didn't want you to know, but Aunt Susie said we'd better call you."

"And she was right." I turned on the lamp and found the stationery and pen on the writing desk. "Has he made bail?"

"Uh, he's a little strapped for cash right now since he sent off Grandpa and Grandma to visit England. So we were going to pass the hat around—"

"Never mind that. Let Jimmy—" Nate's next-to-youngest brother —"get any money needed for the bailman from the green pouch in the lower drawer of the store safe." Jimmy didn't have the combination, but he could still get past the lock. "How about a lawyer?"

"Figured you'd ask that. Mr. Penrose, from out by Piney Lake."

I recognized the name: a shyster, as might be expected from anyone who'd take on a Jowlett as a client in a criminal case, but a competent one.

"Good." Then, the most important business taken care of, I finally asked, "Why, in God's name, is Nate in jail?" Which member of his family was he embroiled with this time, I meant.

"Well, now, they scooped him up down in San Agustin when they raided a sissy joint."

For a long few seconds, I stared up at the fan squeaking rhythmically overhead as it stirred the humid air of Rangoon. On the bed, the army sergeant who I'd hired under the table as my driver and translator had sat up and was now scratching his bare chest, expression turned curious. I asked, "We are talking about Nate?"

"Yeah."

"Being arrested?"

"During a raid, yes, sir."

"In a bar patronized by, ah, a certain kind of gentleman?"

"Yeah, we thought that was kind of odd, you being out of town and all, but—"

"Never mind that. I'm coming home. I'll telegraph the flight information and someone can meet me over at the airport in Los Angeles."

"You bet." Winifred didn't sound the least bit surprised. Jowletts not only knew who their allies were but who all the allies of their relatives were, to boot. Just because Nate had turned respectable didn't mean he wasn't still a member of

the clan. "Okay, I'm going to hang up now. This call's expensive." She did. Jowletts also tended to be decisive.

Hanging up as well, I turned to the sergeant. "Ko Min Hla, I apologize for disturbing you. I must leave for the United States as soon as possible. A young relative is in trouble."

After gesturing his understanding, Min Hla got out of the bed and reached for his uniform trousers. He was an amiable man and one to whom I hadn't lied in any but the most literal of senses. As close as I came to having a family these days, the dumbfounding Jowletts were it. As for Nate, I'd attended his graduation from Arboleda High and been best man at his wedding to Brenda. He was like a little brother to me.

That's probably why I, whose other unofficial family sprang from ancestors like Walt Whitman and Oscar Wilde, would soon try my hand at marriage counseling. But given the situation I walked in on, given that Jowletts were involved, I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised by the results.

* * * *

Everyone has one great friendship that, in the larger scheme of things, should be impossible. Mine was with Nate.

Nate's people moved into the decaying former resort lodge across from my family's house back in August of 1947, when he was freshly fourteen and I was closing on twenty-six. They were a notable lot, the Jowletts. I was never sure how many of them there were; they were migratory by nature, and even during those first few months, their household population fluctuated.

Matters were further confused by the similarity of the family members both in appearance and personality. Although they'd come to Arboleda from somewhere in the Ozarks via a timber town in the Pacific Northwest, the majority of Jowletts had dark complexions, hazel eyes, well-developed muscles, and chiseled, weather-beaten features. Jowletts were friendly. They were loyal. They were warm-hearted. They never held grudges. They were, in their own fashion, honest. They were also the biggest bunch of volatile, trouble-seeking, pleasure-lovers our quiet neighborhood had ever seen. It was like living near a herd of centaurs intent on a spree, although I doubt that centaurs had employment histories as car mechanics, lumberjacks, and Wobbly agitators.

A typical Jowlett would rather scheme than argue, rather argue than fist-fight a sibling inside with the curtains open, rather fist-fight than fix a car previously disassembled on the front lawn, and rather fix that car than mow said lawn to the exacting middle-class standards of the day. Jowletts also liked floppy dogs and cowboy music, the sort with abundant yodeling, played loud. Three minutes after it appeared, they discovered rock and roll. My other neighbors, mostly members of San Agustin's long-established professional class who'd moved upslope to enjoy the ponderosa pine forests, were appalled. I was delighted.

There wasn't much to be said for being a homosexual in a small California town in those days, even in a resort community as beautiful as Arboleda. I wouldn't have returned after my war service and a stint at the Gemological Institute if Father hadn't been ill. Since I was an only child and my

mother was long dead, no one else would care for him, would manage his investments as he preferred, would run the small store he had opened after marrying and quitting Harry Winston's in Hollywood. But, as was so often the way with sons, I desired what he rejected.

I loved our store, which both sold to affluent visitors and fronted a mail-order business in custom cuts and designs. But I needed to be away from Arboleda and the San Bernardino mountains. After it became clear Father wasn't going to get better, I made plans to move elsewhere after he died, before the local matrons' matchmaking became too noticeably fruitless or my irritation with the conformity of my middle-class neighbors became too obvious. However, that was before the Jowletts arrived.

Nate himself showed up a few weeks after the great Jowlett migration with a well-worn push-mower and an offer to attack our front lawn. He half-comprehended that I was "one of those." However, the naive, if surprisingly charitable, Jowlett understanding of "sissies" had left him believing I was safe, both unlikely to be violent and easily fought off if I presumed. For my part, if I hadn't seen that he was even chunkier than he was homely of face, I wouldn't have accepted Nate's proposition. I was well aware that an invisible sword was hung over my scalp by a thread, that thread being the ignorance of my other neighbors about my true nature. Still, Nate's complete lack of looks disarmed me, his bumptious intelligence charmed me, and I really did want my lawn mowed.

Soon, hedge trimming followed lawn mowing, and weeding the flowerbeds followed both. After a month or so his mother, Sarah, a woman who refused to think the worst of anyone including the man who had irregularly sired Nate, sent me over a cake. Nate ate most of it. Lulled by Devil's Food, we found ourselves talking at length. By the end of that afternoon, I had both given him some clues about interpreting Mark Twain for his high school English class and consented to store his collection of pulp magazines and comic books in a spare bedroom, in order to protect it from the depredations of his siblings.

I admit I initially tolerated Nate largely for the sake of the more scenic male relatives who would drop by often to make sure that all was well with him. But soon, some subtle chemistry of personalities brought me around to enjoying his company for its own sake. By the time handsome Uncle Rory genially offered to sodomize me, an offer that I think of even to this day as a Jowlett version of tipping the babysitter, I found myself refusing because I worried that Nate might find the resulting situation too complicated for his peace of mind. Unlike a typical Jowlett, under the usual, volatile surface Nate preferred a quiet, conventional life. He must have inherited an instinct for respectability from his unknown sire. Even my own father approved of him.

Because of our friendship, rather than laboring outdoors as most of his male relatives did, Nate spent his high-school summers working in our family jewelry store. Soon after my father died, I was trusting Nate to mind the store while I went on my weekend trips to Los Angeles and San Francisco,

ostensibly to market the pieces I'd finished and buy more material, but actually to have a private life. I taught Nate what my father had taught me about the business. I also taught him about geology, gems, and jewelry. The only knowledge I reserved was what I was teaching myself, the hot pleasures of another man's hands, mouth, cock, and ass. Nate knew there were parts of my life that I didn't share with him, parts that were taboo, but some diluted strain of Jowlett let him not care.

It made sense all the way around for me to sponsor Nate when he attended the Gemological Institute in his turn. Once he'd finished his course work, he took over the store and ran that part of the business with a flair I'd never shown. Then he had the quiet life he wanted in a mountain town he loved, with a respectable profession to support him and his wife. When he grew restless he hiked in the wilder corners of California, collecting mineral samples, or turned to the escapades of his larger family for entertainment.

For my part, I was finally free to wander the world as I would, searching for stones, inspiration, adventures, and company. If I was homesick, I could linger for a season or two in Arboleda, working on unique pieces and with Nate. All in all, even allowing for his Jowlett blood and my perverse tastes, ours was a serene partnership and a well-organized life. At least, both our lives were serene until Nate's wife Brenda walked out on him, sparking one hell of an eruption.

* * * *

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I'd traveled for three days by the time I reached LAX, in large part on redecorated war-surplus cargo airplanes, so I was in no real shape to deal with a Jowlett, let alone three of them. But there they were to greet me: Hannah, Jimmy, and Pete. They caught sight of me, waved, and whooped.

Customs had been a treat. Because I'd left Burma so quickly, I hadn't disposed of the wad of U.S. money I'd taken abroad with me, anticipating the attraction of a hard currency in an unstable political climate. However, the good sergeant turned out to have family connections that spared me paying much of the squeeze I had expected. Since I carried my gem samples back from Burma with me, duties helped reduce the resultant excess. Even so, if I hadn't had the proper import/export licenses, I would have been in trouble. A visit to an unaligned nation in 1958 was automatically good for an extra half-hour of searching and questions. By the time I cleared my single suitcase, I was both annoyed and weary enough to hand it over to Pete without complaint. He heaved it up and onto his shoulder, and we made our way toward the terminal doors.

Jimmy talked for a while before I managed to comprehend what he'd been saying. "—brought you the keys so you can chase him if he calls."

"What? Excuse me?"

"Told you he was too tired to sort out your yakking, Jimmy Jowlett," Hannah said. Then she turned to me and said, in much the same way she addressed her two toddlers, "Nate took off, Mr. Corvey."

Ignoring the hurrying crowd, I stopped for a moment and closed my eyes. Then I opened them and asked, "So, you got him out of jail?"

"Yeah," said Pete.

"Charges dropped," Jimmy added. "Nothing like a good lawyer with some dough to play around with."

My money. Well, Nate's and my money, really. He could claim a lot of the credit for the way our business was expanding. We had a staff of ten up in Arboleda now, even if I had to count two more Jowletts. "So where did Nate go, exactly? And what did Brenda have to say about all this?"

They all looked at each other. At last Hannah spoke, still much like she would have to her children. But now she was telling them the vile truth about Santa Claus. "Brenda lit out for Reno last month."

"Christ." Oh, did I need coffee now, lots of coffee, black and strong. Instead, I started walking again, my pace brisker this time.

"That's why you'd better take a run-out after Nate. He's flipped off his wig," Jimmy said with mournful relish.

I asked, "She wants a divorce? But I thought she was still Roman Catholic."

"I guess she's not all that Catholic—" Pete started.

"She's a b—" Jimmy chimed in.

Hannah interrupted both of them. "You two shut up." Now she was walking backwards in front of me, smiling apologetically. Clumps of the crowd would stream toward her, notice Pete and Jimmy, and part around us like the Red Sea spotting Moses. "Nate kept his mouth closed about the

details, as well he should. So we thought he was doing fine, but I guess he was just simmering. Next thing we knew, he's calling Jimmy from jail."

"He probably got scooped up by accident while he was out painting the town. Nate doesn't drink enough to know the bars around San Agustin well," I said.

Hannah considered. "Could be. That's what he said." Her tone told me she was only being polite. "But that doesn't matter now. After that lawyer got him cleared, Nate disappeared."

Come to think about it, I could use a cigarette, too. Turkish, by preference. "But you found him again."

"Well, now, no."

"Las Vegas," Pete said.

"No soap." Jimmy was scornful. "He wouldn't want to be in the same state as Brenda right now. Nah, Nate's so square I bet he went to Disneyland." Now we all looked at him. He continued, "Bet you a dollar."

Pete growled, "You don't got a dollar."

This time, I was the one to interrupt. "Are you sure he didn't go field collecting?"

"His kit's still at the house," Hannah said.

"Second car's in the driveway. Was in the driveway," Pete added. "Rory borrowed it when he went off sniffing around, looking for Nate."

"But—Oh, never mind." Nate didn't have a second car. He used mine when I was out of the country. So Nate's first car must be with Brenda in Reno, which meant I was sans transport. On the tail of that thought, we finally got out the

terminal doors, only to be confronted by yet another Jowlett, Flo, and two automobiles. One was Pete's Bel Air. The other was a brand new Corvette with the top up, probably in deference to the three or four sunset-tinted clouds drifting to the west. The car was red, too: candy-apple red with a white racing stripe. In Arboleda the car would stand out like a fireman in a florist's shop.

Pete said, "Know you like tiny cars, so we borrowed this for you."

Borrowing again. I couldn't help it. My lips quirked. "And where will I be driving? This is a big country and I'm tired. That's why I wanted someone to meet me in the first place."

Pete was slinging my suitcase into the trunk. I was glad I traveled in gems and not in porcelains.

"Take your time," Hannah said soothingly as she handed me the keys. "We left Cindy by the phone at the store in case Nate calls. But we figured you might want to stop in San Agustin on the way home."

I raised eyebrows at Hannah and she lowered her own brows right back at me. Don't try to top a woman who can deal with Jowlett toddlers. She added, "You probably have some friends who don't want strangers about when you visit."

I did, as a matter of fact, but not in San Agustin. I'd grown up in the mountains, so I knew that twenty miles down slope was too close for juicy gossip not to get back to Arboleda. When I made my special friends, I made them farther away from town. That meant I would have to talk to some people who could talk to other people in San Agustin. Or I could show some sense and ask Nate what had happened. When he

showed back up, that was. Which, if he was reverting to familial type, might take a while.

Too weary to explain all this, let alone risk more Jowlett debate, I settled for saying, "Thank you." I had gotten some sleep on the last leg of the trip, the flight from Hawaii, so I thought I could drive back to the mountains, especially if I got the coffee and cigarette that I badly wanted. "I'll take it from here."

"You bet," said Pete.

Jimmy added, "Stay loose. I figure we can go to Disneyland next, so we'll look for Nate there."

"Do be quiet, Jimmy," and "Mousketeer," his fond relatives chorused. The resulting argument was well and truly underway before I drove off.

I didn't drive far. I wasn't capable of traveling any real distance. As I usually did when I needed to recover after a flight, I crossed Century Boulevard to the Hyatt House's coffee shop, still focused on getting some black coffee and a cigarette. But somehow I wasn't surprised, when I finally looked up from my cup at the counter, to see that Nate was sitting two stools down, patiently waiting for me to notice him.

* * * *

We stared at each other for a while without speaking. I stubbed out my cigarette in the embossed glass ashtray: Nate didn't smoke. Slowly, he smiled at me.

Sensing something, the well-bred co-ed seated between us finished up her hot fudge sundae and left. She'd probably

only been stalling for time before meeting some hep young crowd for dinner and dancing over at the Flight Deck Restaurant. Nate moved onto her vacated stool, bringing his own coffee—one cream, one sugar—with him. He looked as neat and natty as usual. His shirt was fresh, his silk tie unwrinkled. His handkerchief matched his socks. He'd obviously shaved. But the piece of fresh strawberry pie on its plate had been demolished rather than consumed. Nate pulled his pie from his old place to in front of him and then, changing his mind, pushed it away.

I waited for the prop roar from a DC-7 taking off to die down before I asked, "Why didn't you tell me Brenda left? You could have sent a letter. For that matter, you could have sent a wire."

Nate shook his head. "Are you rested up enough for conversation? Usually you aren't quite this snide."

"Probably not. Rested up enough, that is. Hannah, Pete and Jimmy were waiting at the gate, which burnt the little fuel I had left."

"Yeah, I thought family would show. And that you'd ditch them and come over here, like usual, for some coffee before you went anywhere else." Nate looked back down at his own coffee. His eyelids seemed swollen. On second glance, he was sporting some fading bruises, probably courtesy of the arresting officers in San Agustin. Forget his clothes, he wasn't doing well.

"We do need to talk. But I also need to sleep." All at once, I was so weary that I wanted to press my cheek against the

countertop and contemplate its Formica surface at point-blank range. "Consider a compromise?"

He snorted. "I wasn't planning on taking off again, if that's what you're worrying about."

"Should I be worrying? No, don't answer. We're agreed that I'm tired enough to be stupid. And blunt. Stupidly blunt. Sorry, now I'm babbling."

Nate shrugged. "Look, why don't you rent a room and get some rest. I promise I won't run." His smile turned wry. "I could use the break myself, in fact. For some reason I haven't been sleeping well the last few days."

That pried a reluctant chuckle out of me. "Okay, deal." I signaled the waitress for our bills.

As I look back, any memory of checking into the hotel is suspect. I was too far gone, and I've registered too often in too many places for yet another competent, disinterested desk clerk to make an impression. My next clear memory is of splashing cold water on my face in an effort to stay awake long enough to get into pajamas. Straightening up from the sink, I said, "All right, that should buy me five minutes."

"Before you're back to starring in *I Was a Middle-age Zombie*?"

"I'm as far away from being middle-aged as you are from being a teen-ager, wise guy." Going over to my suitcase and opening it, I contemplated the contents without favor.

Nate came out of the bathroom with his suit coat draped over one arm. Seeing the open suitcase, he paused and said abruptly, "Thanks for flying back."

I waved this away. "You think the Jowletts would give me a choice?"

Nate snorted. "You, they would. I'm the one in the doghouse. They're all mad that I didn't talk to you before I went bar crawling." He neatly hung his shirt on a hanger, added the suit coat, disposed of the result in the closet, and sat down on the edge of the bed to remove his socks and shoes. Muscles visibly shifted under his T-shirt as he worked. Nate wasn't chunky these days. Heredity, growth, clean living, and frequent field collection trips had seen to that. Now he closely resembled a hazel-eyed Sherman Tank. He had to have his suits custom-made.

Pulling my brain back to business, I asked him, "Talk to me? Why me? Was I supposed to stop you? Your people know perfectly well I've patronized homosexual bars."

"Sure, but all Jowletts believe that a foreman never gets into trouble in his own logging camp. And when it comes to this stuff, they've decided that you're the big pineapple in the fancy fruit basket." At my incredulous glare he elaborated, "Oberon, King of the fairies. Star tenor of the Men's Choir. Top—"

"*Thank* you, I do comprehend." And I did. If Nate had suddenly decided to steal diamonds rather than sell them, his family would have expected him to speak first with his Great-Uncle William, a man who'd supposedly been a sort of robber chief during that amorphous era between outlaws and gangsters in the Ozarks. I imagine that only luck had kept me from being consulted about some miscellaneous Jowlett's

twilight difficulties before this. "But whatever tutoring I skipped, I'm not making up for it tonight."

"Okay by me. I'm in no state to listen to you." He got up and removed his trousers, snapping a crease into them before he draped them over another hanger. Nate turned out to be a boxers man. I don't know why that surprised me.

Giving up on the pajama tops as a bad job, I pulled the covers back and got into my bed. "Sorry if I played Dutch uncle; we'll talk on the drive home tomorrow. You can borrow my toothbrush if you want. Sleep well, Nate."

"Night, Steve." He swatted gently at where my feet rested under the covers on the way back into the bathroom, which is my next-to-last memory. My last is of the single, vague thought that drifted through my darkening mind: how the clientele must have perked up when Nate walked into that bar. That recollection goes to show just what kind of explosion can begin with one tiny wisp of smoke floating above a long-dormant volcano.

Chapter Two

The ringing of the alarm clock got us both up and stumbling around early the next morning. We were sleepy enough to lower the top on the Corvette, in hopes that the chill air would help to keep us awake. But, sleepy or not, I worked us through the morning commuters up Lincoln Boulevard and onto the Mother Road, old Route 66, with no real problems. Ten o'clock saw us past Santa Monica Boulevard, past Elysium Park, and headed east between the rows of palm trees lining Colorado Boulevard in Pasadena. Along the way, Nate and I filled time with the sort of talk that makes up nine-tenths of amiable conversation, the sort that some see as transitory and others know is the true foundation of friendship.

After debating water politics, the recent spaghetti-tree hoax, and when they'd bring a decent baseball team to Southern California, Nate asked how I'd done out at Mogok.

"Very well, considering how chaotic the situation is over there. However, the run-down state of the region, the way the colonial mine machinery's all fallen apart, is the only reason that, for once, we can buy gemstones from small companies where the miners are shareholders."

Nate had enough scraps of Jowlett radicalism left to produce a baritone rumble of contented agreement that I could hear even over the engine and the airflow.

"Father's old acquaintance plays broker for several companies from all around the region. You'll be happy with the rubies even if they are native cut, and I bought some

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wonderful sapphires, too. But the rough material—" I laughed. "Seemingly, everyone thinks Occidentals only want corundum. No matter what I tried to buy, they started by offering me rubies and sapphires, treating the other stones as incidental. So I laid hands on some wonderful bits and pieces. Wait until you see the nephrite that's coming. Spinel, of course, lots of them, in the fine reds and pinks."

I caught his nod out of the corner of my eye.

"I also purchased several large, unheated aquamarines and picked up some flawless moonstone with an interesting blue Schiller."

"Any Barnardmyo peridot?" His tone was elaborately casual.

Nate had an unfashionable love for peridot. Shaking my head, I said, "Nothing worth carrying back with me, I'm afraid." But that was a lie. Buried in my wallet was a padded envelope holding one of the true prizes of my trip: a pair of beautifully matched peridots, luminous bottle-green, a little over eight carats each. Almost everything else I'd bought was more valuable, but for these I'd searched with the greatest care. The stones would make a wonderful pair of cufflinks for his next birthday this August. I'd already sketched a rough design one stifling night in Mogok as the rain pounded on the corrugated iron roof above my bedroom, making me restless.

"Maybe you can ask your acquaintance about the peridot again later."

"Of course."

I caught his smiling assessment. He may have suspected I was fibbing, but he was willing to wait and see. As for me,

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when I saw how he let out a small grunt of contentment, how he settled deeper into his seat and turned up his face to the warm sun and clear blue sky of a Southern California morning in April, I was willing to wait, too. Call it cowardice if you will, but I couldn't tax him with his personal life just then, not on the heels of that moment. We talked about native-cut versus house-cut gemstones instead.

The east-west interstates weren't even done in 1958, and already Route 66 was starting to die. There was enough local traffic to hide the wasting disease, though, until we got out toward the Inland Empire. By then we weren't squinting into the sun anymore. The city buildings were giving way to long stretches of open fields and orange and lemon groves occasionally studded with empty garages, boarded-up orange-shaped juice stands, and closed curio shops. Those isolated buildings looked as doubtful as I was starting to feel. Now, all through our continuing conversation, I kept having sudden, small moments of tension. With a moment of dread like missing a stair, I'd remember that the drive up to Arboleda was far from done, and Nate and I had yet to chew over his arrest.

Since we'd skipped ham and eggs at the Hyatt House in favor of trying to miss rush hour on the Los Angeles roads, by the time noon approached we were ravenous. Without discussion we stopped at the Magic Lamp Inn in Rancho Cucamonga, an artsy pile of brick and adobe tile that had once served good Italian and now served good beef. I'll freely admit they cooked the steaks right, even if the look of the place was all too Hollywood. My appetite, though, wasn't

piqued by the smells coming out of the kitchen. I was too preoccupied. By the time Nate had a T-bone in front of him, I found I couldn't put off our little discussion any longer.

Clearing my throat, I made myself look him in the eye. "Do I need to ask what happened again?"

"No. I'll talk." He examined his steak, the potatoes, the green beans, and shook his head. "I'm not very hungry."

"Eat."

"I'd rather talk first. I came home from the store a little over three weeks ago and found a note waiting for me. Brenda had left for Reno that morning."

Arching my eyebrows, I said, "Rather abrupt on her part."

"We'd fought." He shook his head, shrugged. "I didn't think over anything serious, but maybe that's why she left."

I waited.

"It was the same argument we'd have every so often. She said she was sick of coming fourth all the time. After the job and family."

"That's coming third."

"And after you."

I had to stop and think that one over. To tell the truth, I didn't know Brenda as well as I should have, considering how often I'd sat at her dining room table. As near as I could tell, Brenda hadn't been the brightest student at Arboleda High. But her blonde good looks and cheerful nature had made her one of the most popular girls there. She'd been president of her high school chapter of Future Homemakers of America and secretary of the Senior Class. All told, she'd seemed to have what most men found appealing in a wife during those

years. I'd thought of her as being much like Doris Day without the sense of humor, and I'd kept her at a distance.

That gulf hadn't been filled in from her side, either. I was fairly sure that Nate was the one who wanted me invited for dinner and drinks so often. Brenda fought shy of me in the subtle way good fifties housewives held off personable but presumptuous bachelors. I'd played to her wariness in a lot of small ways, by smiling at her too much and too warmly, by deliberately holding her drink one second too long before I passed it over to her, by springing up to light her cigarettes a touch too fast. I'd been too busy worrying about her being repelled by the real, homosexual me to worry if she disliked the false, heterosexual me. Now it seemed that I should have paid more attention.

Still, I was confused. Nate was a very nice guy and, these days at least, a handsome one. He and Brenda had never struck me as dramatically unhappy together, or even unhappy. Had she really left Nate only over the Jowletts and me? I said, "Brenda going to Reno to fix her complaint seems like curing athlete's foot with an axe. What else did her note say?"

"Not much."

"What?" Straightening, I asked, "No 'you have put me fourth for the last time'? No 'I saw you with that floozy over at Frank's Bar and Grill'? No 'I've run off with my true love, the man who came to fix the plumbing'?"

"No. But that wasn't unusual, her not explaining." Nate was looking harassed. "Brenda's not a nag. Mostly she keeps

bad feelings to herself. I don't know. She seemed happy enough."

Amazing. I could gauge Brenda's mood better than that, and I didn't even live with her. "So." I leaned back in my chair, and ticked off the points on my fingers. "You don't know if she left because of your work, your family, or your friends. You don't know if she left because she was unhappy or you were doing something wrong. You don't know if she left because another man's involved. In fact, you damn well don't know why she left at all. What the hell, Nate?"

He scowled at me. "Her note said not to come after her."

"And you took those words as gospel? Even I know better. Maybe she meant it. Maybe she meant the reverse. In either case, what about you? You need to know for your own peace of mind." I narrowed my eyes. "Sure. You need to know. If that means your finding some dramatic way to get me home from Burma, so I can punt your ass in the right direction—"

With short, neat, vicious movements, he was cutting his steak.

"I didn't think you'd suddenly been hit by a top-secret stupid ray, even if that's how you've been acting." I shook my head. "You could have just asked me to come along when you go to Reno, you know."

He almost choked. Steak doesn't breathe well. When he'd calmed down and had some water, he said, "Considering I got arrested in that bar by mistake, your implication's pretty fresh."

"You think Jowletts have a monopoly on fresh? We can stop at home to get more changes of clothes for you, and then leave again tomorrow."

He blanched, and I reconsidered, all at the same time. I held up a hand. "No, you're right. Let's leave now before we find ourselves with twenty-one Jowletts saluting us." I turned the hand to point at his plate. "After you eat something, that is."

In San Agustin, we paused to gas up. Then I went to use the payphone, with Nate trailing after me once he'd made sure the gallons of water we'd bought for desert travel were wedged into the trunk. Personal mission or no, we were business owners and someone had to know where we were. To be specific, that someone was Cindy Jowlett, one of the clan members employed by the store. She was a neat and efficient worker, if occasionally odd in her tastes. Whenever I'd talk to her, for example, a young woman much like Katherine Hepburn would start sounding like Marilyn Monroe.

After the initial exclamations, and her report on the business, I told her, "We won't be back for a few more days, probably until Tuesday."

"All right, Mr. Corvey." I could hear a faint sound of pencil scratching paper.

"I'll check in twice every day until we're back. Are you comfortable with that?"

"Yes, sir. Do you have any idea of where you're headed?"

"Reno."

"Tell Nate good luck from me." Suddenly her voice lowered and my eyebrows rose. "He's already lucky, of course."

I didn't ask why. If Cindy had heard something about Nate's marriage I hadn't, I didn't want to know it right now. I was worried how I'd behave when I saw Brenda again. She'd walked out on Nate, after all.

"Anyhow," Cindy was back to normal, "like usual between Valentine's and Mother's Day, business is a little slow right now. So don't worry: we can keep things going without help. Is Nate doing okay?"

"He was the one who decided we should go to Reno." In a sense that was true.

"Oh, that's wonderful, Mr. Corvey. I'm sure Nate can sort matters out." She paused, and her voice lowered again, but this time with feeling. "With you along he can, I mean."

I was still shaking my head when I hung up the telephone. "Why does Cindy always get that tone in her voice when she talks to me?"

Although I was asking some guardian angel roosted in the power lines over the gas station, Nate answered instead. "Because we never tell the youngsters about you. We let them figure it out, if they're going to. And so far all she says is that you look exactly like a movie star. Ray Milland, in fact." I examined him with disfavor. "Don't worry. You don't. At least, not exactly."

"Get back in the car, Nate. Just get back in the car."

* * * *

We left San Agustin well before the afternoon breeze from the Pacific could push the usual wall of smog from Los Angeles east toward the Inland Empire. If we'd headed home

we would have driven up out of the chaparral and into the clean pine forests of the near slope, twisting back and forth up the curves of narrow state highways until we reached the lake and groves of Arboleda. This time, this trip, we went with Route 66 over the Cajon Pass and into the San Bernardinios' rain-shadow, dropping down the shorter north slopes of the mountains toward the floor of the high desert.

Route 66, which had arced back and forth below cliffs and talus slopes as it followed the pass, was about to start measuring miles-long legs from dry mountain range to dry mountain range. Before that, though, we left the Mother Road and turned the Corvette onto the 395, speeding up as the road stretched straight across the desert.

Highway 395, a two-lane blacktop, was the back route to Reno. It ran north between the great basin and range deserts on the east and the formidable precipices of the Sierra Nevadas on the west. The highway was a geologist's library, a jeweler's theater. Along the road, in every direction, the native rock offered a thousand tales for those who had eyes to see. This time, though, their tales would have to compete with Nate's story.

First, though, we needed to cross the Mojave. Back before efficient automotive air-conditioning, sensible men didn't make that drive by daylight, but I'd lived without common sense for years, and Nate was a Jowlett. Even in April the air was hot, if not the head-in-the oven hot we would have endured two months later. Before we'd left San Agustin we'd both pulled off our jackets and ties. Sweat was soon staining our shirts. Nate was driving with sunglasses on, and he'd

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by Parhelion

reach over from time to time for a swig from my bottle of Bubble-Up or a pull from the jug I'd filled with water for us. He was in his own country now, an area he'd wandered across on many of his field collection trips, and he seemed somehow to stretch. As the dark lenses stayed steady on the road and his features shifted subtly from time to time, I felt something gather in him and wondered what it was.

We didn't talk during that part of the trip. We both knew the dry air streaming past would steal the moisture from our mouths if we spoke at any length. Instead, we'd stop once an hour to walk around, usually by an outcrop, a cliff face, or some cluster of boulders washed down from far-off mountains by a now-dry arroyo. We'd look at the rocks. Nate would rub soil between his fingers and examine the color and shine left on the tips, study where the Joshua trees or the creosote bushes grew. I'd pick up a pebble or two, of basalt, feldspar, or sandstone, and then cast them back into the desert to continue their million-year journeys to the bottoms of unborn seas. Then we'd get back into the car and drive.

The sun set behind the Sierras as we worked our way north, and we could have continued, covering more miles in their great shadows. Instead, we broke our journey in Lone Pine at the Dow Hotel, which had once been a favorite roosting place for the movie stars shooting on location out amidst the sculptured rocks of the nearby Alabama Hills. We were newly dusty and still tired, me from the abrupt end of my last trip, Nate from emotions I didn't have the experience to gauge. So we ignored the fact that, like us, the hotel seemed weary, and got a room with a view of Mt. Whitney.

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by Parhelion

Then we ate. Once again, we talked of friendly matters in the local cafe over chicken fried steak: the rocks we'd seen, the minerals we knew could be found within them, the wildflower season we'd just missed. When we returned to the room, though, our chatter changed. What was building up in Nate finally surfaced.

* * * *

I'd brought out the Burmese gems to show Nate, spreading them across the black cloth I always carried in my luggage for the purpose. He'd exclaimed with pleasure at their quality and pulled out his jeweler's loupe. But after he'd finished admiring a green tourmaline of particularly fine color and clarity, he removed his loupe and shook his head.

"Steve, I confess. As gorgeous as the stones you hooked are, I'm still hungry for the peridot that got away." He turned his face toward the far wall, back toward the south and the route we'd traveled that day. "Did you know that there's an obsidian flow down by Sugarloaf Mountain with crystalline olivine in some of its cavities? It must have been some eruption, to blow out rock formed that deep. Anyhow, I've always wanted to see for myself if any of the crystals were big enough to cut for peridots. But now the lava's out of reach on the China Lake bombing range." His tone had turned wistful.

So, call me a sucker. Or maybe I was just caught up in an eruption myself, something that would make any man lose his balance. I reached for my wallet.

Peridot
by Parhelion

When Nate saw those matched peridots come out of their envelope he lit up like a Nevada casino. Putting the loupe back into his eye, he shifted the table lamp slightly. Then he examined each stone in turn. "Very slightly included, it looks like. In fact, I'd bet they're damn near internally flawless. So beautiful. And matched." He drew in a sharp breath. "Just how long—" Then he stopped himself and instead asked, "Cufflinks?"

"Happy early birthday."

"I'll look forward to seeing what you do with these." Reluctantly he put the peridots back in their envelope. Then we both packed the other stones away, cleaning off the oils from our fingertips and double-padding the gems with low Mohs' hardnesses to protect them from scratching. For some reason, though, the familiar, almost domestic, task was making me restless.

Nate must have felt restless, too. When we were done, he went over to one of the windows, pulled aside the curtain, and looked out past the street toward the mountain. "My favorite, peridot. You brought me back peridot from Burma. That's kind of ironic." He chuckled, and my skin prickled. The laugh hadn't been his usual happy one. I moved away from him and covered my retreat by sitting on one of the beds to untie my shoes. He asked, "Remember when you taught me the stories about birthstones?"

"Yes." I wasn't much interested in the old legends about the magical properties of gems. But ever since the 1912 list of birthstones was publicized again by the Jeweler's Association a few years back, many of our customers wanted

to hear such tales. "Peridot. Evening emerald. The sun's gem. Peridot protects against enchantments and night terrors, and soothes the restless heart. Peridot brings peace." There was something else. I couldn't remember.

Perhaps I didn't want to remember. Nate said, "Maybe that reputation is why peridot is also supposed to be the protector of marriage."

I'd sensed he hadn't fed me the whole story about Brenda along with our lunch. I wished he wouldn't finish it now. "Put a peridot under your tongue when you have a fever, and the ancients claim it will lessen the thirst."

No good. Nate kept going. "The protection sure didn't work for me." He turned around. "Brenda's gone."

"You'll get her back."

"I don't think so." Nate walked across and stood over me, scowling. Assessing him, I put my other shoe down on the worn carpeting. "She did write one other thing in her note."

I wasn't asking.

"'Serves you right.' That's what else she wrote." He ran both hands through his hair. "What the hell did she mean?"

"How would I know? Ask her."

"Serves me right? I hadn't done anything. With anyone. Even when I could have."

"What, no luck in the bars?" Yes, I know he said that arrest was a mistake. Yes, my tone was much too snide. I hate being loomed over, hate it so much I got stupid again. In any case, I paid for my mistake.

All at once, as if he'd only been waiting for this excuse, he clasped my face between two brawny, calloused hands and

leaned over to kiss me. He smelled fresh from his shower before dinner. His lips were a little chapped. I could tell how he'd been with his women by the way his mouth started asking, not asserting.

I sat there giving him nothing back. Not easy, not at all. Nate knew how to coax.

After he pulled away I frowned up at him. He was breathing hard, and I had a suspicion it wasn't from passion. When I reached out one hand and placed it on his waist, I felt the muscles jump under my grip through the shirt. But Nate's eyes were clouded, angry. When I got up from the bed, still holding on, his gaze followed me, and something shifted in the little muscles around his eyes. He wasn't really angry at me, he was just so angry that he didn't know what to do with himself. What he shouldn't do while in this mood, in my opinion, was have sex. But very soon now he'd remember an alternative, the favorite Jowlett method for purging anger.

Speed and surprise have always been my two advantages over Nate. Moving fast, I grabbed and yanked with the hand on his waist, and threw my weight to one side, hard. He spun around, hit the edge of the bed and, as I'd hoped, lost his footing. Later I'd be thankful the bed was sturdy because I followed him down, wrapping myself around him so there was no way he could start throwing punches. He could grapple but, given his weight and build, he'd pin me in under a minute. That wouldn't fuel his desire for a fist fight at all.

Sure enough, I soon found myself buried beneath two hundred pounds of mostly muscle, my right arm trapped, his legs wrapped around mine in a mockery of an embrace.

Nate's head arced back from me in a gesture almost agonized; if I hadn't known him I'd have feared that forehead would swing down in a sling-blow. But instead he froze, staring into space, before he slowly, very slowly, lowered his head onto my shoulder. Then he wouldn't look at anything.

There was no noise, of course, no soggy outburst. Only his movements gave away his latest, truest desire. He was shivering a little, tense in a different way as if he was storm-lashed and I was shelter. I didn't say anything even though I was having trouble breathing and my right arm was painfully announcing that it hated this position. Instead, left-handed, I slowly tucked his shirttails back in.

When I was done he rolled us both onto our sides, but he didn't let loose or raise his head from my shoulder. Still using my free hand, I switched to straightening his collar and then thumped his shoulder. The whole thing was awkward as hell even if he was relaxing a little. That, of course, had to be the moment when my body decided to notice just how much Nate had grown up.

"Damn," I said, voice soft.

He said something in reply, muffled into my shoulder. Absently, I moved on to thumping his back. When he repeated himself, I could just make out the word "—dumb."

"Who'll know? You're going to tell someone about this? Don't make me laugh."

His head came up and almost caught my nose. "Steve, she left me."

"I'm afraid so, yes. It does sound like you screwed something up."

"Ah, crap." He squeezed a little harder, and I wondered if he was going to take refuge once more. Then he frowned and I wasted a wry grin over his shoulder on the bureau drawers. I'd wondered how long it would take him to observe my interest.

I wasn't kidding when I wrote that Nate's a friend. Tentatively, he flexed his hips against mine. Well, at least I got a nice feel for his ass when I reached down and grabbed his trousers to stop him. "Can that. You're married."

Confused, he finally let loose and moved away from me on the bed. "You don't screw around with married guys?"

"Not when I was his best man, *Herr Professor* Einstein. Not when he's furious because his wife just walked out without explanation, and he's been looking around for a nasty way to score off her."

"Oh." He flushed a little. "Yeah, of course." Then, "But in three more weeks Brenda means to throw my wedding ring into the Truckee river."

I shook my head. "Please tell me you're only trying to win this debate."

A pause, and then, "Maybe." Another pause. "You'd be worth the effort to win over, though."

"Salesmanship, at last. Given the last twenty-four hours, I'm glad you reminded me of how you can coax all those customers into buying our work. Now I merely need to find some tactful way to tell you to go soak your head."

The grin came quick, considering. "But why would you switch over to tact this late in life?"

"Wise guy." Getting up, I reached out, grabbed his hand, and heaved. I must have been in okay shape; I got him off the bed and onto his feet.

He wouldn't let go of my hand, though. Laughing, he hauled me close and wrapped a now-affectionate arm around my shoulders. "Steve, you're a pal."

"Do you have to be so wholesome about it? Sure, I'm a pal. I'm a pal who just grabbed your ass."

"Oh no, the horror, the horror! Does this mean I'm corrupted for life?" Nate leant down, his lips pursed like Marilyn Monroe's, his expression all mockery and mischief. More aware of danger than he was, I tried to push him away, but the near-struggle was close enough to horseplay to amuse a Jowlett. In what was probably meant to be a smacking mess of a kiss, his lips met mine again. But he was caught in the middle by a laugh, and that was his undoing. This time what happened between us was warm and sweet, and somehow I found myself seeing his kiss and raising. I pulled back before I lost the remnants of my common sense.

Nate blinked, obviously surprised, and at himself if I was any judge. Then he touched his lips, checking. At that gesture, I shook my head and said, "Careful, boy. See what happens when you try to score off your wife for free? You find out the price you could have paid."

"Hell, some price. Tasted good." He paused, thinking, not moving from where he stood. As I'd learned to do all those years ago, I waited him out. And, as he almost always did, he repaid my patience. Rather than hostile, his tone approached

plaintive when he said, "I didn't actually think I had any of that, uh, stuff in me."

I shook my head again at his euphemism. "Aren't you glad I 'accidentally' let you read my copy of the Kinsey Report all those years ago? At least you already know that one taste doesn't mean you'll eat the whole meal." Relenting, I added, "Given your love life to date, I wouldn't worry about persistent homosexual impulses unless you're slated for a year-long Antarctic expedition." I skimmed knuckles across his cheek. "Besides, we've known each other for a while. You like me. That does makes a difference for a guy of your sort when it comes to sex, no matter what the gents in *Playboy* write."

Nate grabbed my hand. "Steve." Then, seemingly realizing he didn't know what to do with it, he let go again. "Thanks."

I gave him my best Sergeant Joe Friday. "Just doing my job, sir."

"Me too. At least helping me out gives you something to do when you're not busy cutting more notches in your holster." My reaction to that particular grin would have warned me the ground was still rumbling even if I hadn't already felt the tremblers beneath my feet. But he sobered quickly enough. "Hope we haven't screwed up. Sorry, I mean between you and me as friends."

"You're telling me you find you need another room?"

"Another room?" His echo was indignant. Then, "Okay, I take your point. I'm a big boy now, able to control the inner man. That means I pick my own bedtime and everything, like

sometime around now." He grimaced. "Tomorrow's going to be a busy day."

You wouldn't think the crisis would end as easily as that, but it ended exactly as easily as that. We both got ready for bed, Nate regaling me along the way with the details of what his nephew Joey had done two weeks ago to the Arboleda High chemistry lab.

I'm not a complete idealist, though. When I ducked into the bathroom for my own shower, I made it long and loud, long enough to take matters well into hand, loud enough to drown out any noise I might have made as I did so. After those lips of Nate's, I wasn't spending a night alone in a bedroom with him without making sure biology was on my side.

Chapter Three

What a waste of spectacular scenery that next day's journey was. Five hours of driving to Reno, and I spent more time worrying about Nate and jawing about international exchange rates than enjoying some of the better views that geology has given to man. By the time we got to Reno we were hungry, tired again, and beginning to realize how much work might be in front of us before we found Brenda. Nate suggested that we start by asking at the county courthouse, and I agreed. However, it was right after we'd passed under the gaudy sign on Virginia Street reading "The Biggest Little City in the World" when a very familiar Jaguar driven by an all-too-familiar Jowlett crossed at the intersection in front of us.

We both spoke at once.

"That was Rory!"

"There's my car!"

Nate wheeled us around the corner, and then he spoke for both of us. "We've been had."

"Yes, once again your family has put rings right through our noses. I wonder where we're being led off to now."

It only took us three turns to find out. Rory drove into the parking lot of the Riverside Hotel, parked, leapt out of my car, and bolted. In fact, it took us longer to find our own parking place. I turned to Nate. "Want to bet on who's checked in here?"

Nate didn't even have time to refuse the bet. A small but good-looking man, informally dressed and vaguely familiar,

had suddenly emerged from the rear door leading from the hotel to the parking lot. Ignoring the remonstrance of the woman following him, he charged in our direction, waving his arms. When he realized we were parked, he stopped abruptly and yelled, "Hey, you! What are you doing with my car?"

I turned back in time to see Nate's gaze move to him, pass on to his female companion still waiting by the hotel, and then double back. "Gosh, I'm not sure. What are you doing with my wife?"

I gave Nate a dirty look. What a time to start responding like a Jowlett, when we probably didn't have a legal leg to stand on. Borrowed me a car? The Jowletts had borrowed me time behind bars, more like.

While steaming, I'd almost missed developments. The man was saying, tone hot, "Get out here and repeat that."

"Sure." Nate opened his door and stood up. It wasn't only the height that made you wonder how he'd fit into the Corvette, it was also the mass. Resigned, I, too, got out of the car and looked over at Brenda. Now she'd folded her arms and was tapping one mule-shod foot. Obviously, she was waiting for the masculine posturing to end, as it probably would, without bloodshed. She seemed to know her husband much better than he knew her. Leaving Nate and what's-his-name to work matters out in whatever way they chose, I removed my suitcase from the trunk, threw the keys to the Corvette onto the driver's seat, and walked over to her.

"Where are they?" she asked me.

Good question. I looked around, and then shrugged. "Somewhere around here, I'm sure. Rory still has my car

keys, and he's never one to miss an opportunity for drama. Brenda, what did you mean when you wrote that this served Nate right?"

She flushed a little, but she met my eyes. "Maybe that note was a little mean. But I meant the surprise would serve him right. He never knows when I'm really mad."

I raised my eyebrows, but made sure to keep my voice mild. "You could tell him when you're really mad."

"He doesn't want to hear. He's more interested in living like some sappy T.V. show than he is in me."

Hmm. I still doubted that the entire fault lay with Nate, but she had a point. When it came to his home life, Nate did tend to ignore trouble until you shoved it under his nose: some economy of attention developed by growing up placid among Jowletts, I'd imagine.

Brenda briefly bit her lip before giving proof of some brains I'd ignored. "I thought I'd learn a lot if I watched what he did after I left that note, by seeing if he came out here or what. And now, when he finally shows up, he brings along you, George's stolen car, and a bunch of Jowletts. I should have known when we got that call about the car on the house phone." She looked past me. "Oh, poor George."

I glanced over my shoulder. Nate was easily holding off short, dark, and handsome, who was trying and failing to take swings. Was that Flo Jowlett, with the scarf over her hair and the sunglasses, over there by the Cadillac, looking on with interest?

Brenda's voice pulled my attention back. "We haven't done anything, George and I. We're waiting. But he loves me." She

raised her chin. "I need more from a husband than just—nice. Nice is enough for men who have interesting jobs and can run around doing whatever they want. I don't have any of that. So I need my life to matter a lot to my husband, upsets included. I don't light up otherwise."

"I never noticed your being murky."

Her nostrils flared a bit. "Don't even pretend you know how I can be. You weren't in love with me."

Well, no. Love hadn't been the attitude that I'd been faking toward her, no. I studied the two men next to the Corvette. Somehow I very much doubted this George person was in love with her either, but Brenda wasn't the sort of woman who could leave Nate just because Nate was too distant. She'd needed a better excuse.

Her voice now reflective, Brenda said, "I think Nate expects me to light up before he pays attention. Maybe that's how he knows to pay attention. Maybe I'm not, I don't know, loud enough for him. And I've been thinking that with kids around, his in particular, things would be even worse."

"You're telling me all this so I'll talk to Nate."

"It's either you or those darn Jowletts." She pointed an oval-shaped, red-lacquered fingernail. "There. There's Rory Jowlett."

And there he was indeed, lounging on the trunk of someone else's T-bird. I felt my eyes narrow. "Brenda, would you excuse me for a minute, please?"

"Oh, sure, take all the time you want. Me, I'm going up to my room. Anyone who cares to can find me there." She turned and walked off.

She'd implied she was willing to wait, and Nate and George still weren't actually fighting. So I started toward my other difficulty. "God damn it, Rory." His face went from complacent to wary, and almost instinctively his fists clenched. But hands were a Jowlett weapon. I used my tongue. "If I had gotten thrown in jail for possession of a stolen vehicle, I would have made bail and promptly told every gossip in Arboleda about you, eight beers, that skunk last November, and the confessional over at Our Lady's."

Hastily, he unclenched his fists and made soothing gestures. "Now, Steve. Just calm down."

"But forget about jail. You know what really makes me mad? That you went and pumped Cindy, our employee, for exactly where we were."

"Cindy didn't want to tell me. I had to claim that Brenda was going to cite you as correspondent in the divorce case. Um, I mean cite you as evidence of Nate's mental cruelty in not kneeing you off of her. Brenda, that is. You and her."

I hope the look I gave him scorched. "Hand over my keys, Rory."

Mute, he held them out. I took them, picked up my suitcase, turned, and stalked off. And here, stalking on an intercepting course, came Nate. After all, there were only so many practical routes we could take to cross the parking lot. For that matter, there were only so many practical routes we could take to cross Reno, as Rory had just demonstrated.

I looked at Nate. He looked at me. "We need to talk. Again," I said.

"Yeah."

"Not in the midst of all these borrowed cars, though. Let's see if they have a room available at the Riverside."

This time we were both nursing bruised tempers after pulling our punches with the men who'd infuriated us. So maybe retiring from the field and into a hotel room together was both our mistakes, and not just mine. That's my theory, at least, and I'm sticking to it.

* * * *

When two of you want to rent one room in the world's most infamous divorce hotel, it's helpful to both have business cards with the same firm's name on them. The desk clerk even mentioned how he'd found some gem-quality opal near a certain playa. It's a sign of how tense we were that neither of us fished for details. Instead we got ourselves and our luggage into that room and locked the door behind us.

I took the first shot. "Nate, why didn't you ever tell Brenda about me?"

"You didn't want me to." His words were startled. Then he asked, slowly, "Besides, why would she care?"

Hell. Brenda hadn't been exaggerating. This next bit would be delicate. "Thank you. However, I think you just focused on the internal flaw in your marriage, and I don't specifically mean me."

Nate took a deep breath. He let it out. "Okay, Steve. What did she have to say?"

He heard me out. He always did. Then he paced up and down the room without speaking for a few minutes. Forget the coffee and cigarettes; this time I wanted gin.

When Nate stopped pacing, he asked me, "Do you still have all that cash from your trip on you?"

"Yes."

He held out a hand. I shook my head, pulled out the extra wallet, and started counting. Two minutes later, with most of my money tucked into a trouser pocket, Nate went to talk with Brenda.

I've spent hours that felt longer waiting in my lifetime. Not many, though.

When Nate came back, he was quiet and thoughtful, and he looked five years older. Without speaking, he went and sat down on the edge of one of the beds, one hand clenched into a fist and one hand cupped loosely over a knee. Somehow that posture—half-placid, half-Jowlett—seemed symbolic.

I didn't try to make him talk. Instead I offered him the scotch on the rocks I'd gotten from room service along with my Manhattan, and he downed it in a couple of swallows. Then he spoke. "She didn't want to take the money but she did. Brenda knows she has nothing much in the way of a work history. Once the divorce is through, she'll call Pete to come and pick up the car."

"That's fair."

"Maybe I can still get her to take it, too." He grimaced. "I swear that George fellow smirked when I tried."

As I shrugged, I made a mental note to mention that smirk to the next Jowlett I saw who wasn't Nate. However, what I said was, "If he can't tell the difference between honorable and a sucker, too bad for him."

"At least I was right about one thing. She was going to throw my ring into the Truckee." He uncurled the fist. There, amazingly intact given the pressure he'd put on it, was her wedding ring. Engraved eighteen-karat gold in an antique design that I knew well, having crafted it and its male twin as my wedding gift. "I told her the toss would be a waste when the rings could be disposed of and the money given to charity. She agreed." He snorted. "Jesus, why can't she simply be an adulterous bitch?"

"Mistakes or no, you're not that stupid."

He shook the ice in the glass in his hand, and then looked vaguely about.

"Refill?"

"No. I already rolled the dice by drinking. I landed on 'go to jail.'" His chuckle was harsh. "Even though my heart was pure. I only wanted a sympathetic ear to listen while I sung the blues and got plastered, maybe not in that order."

I winced. I also didn't bridle my tongue. Contrary to what I'd just said, for once Nate had been that stupid. "We're not all your fairy godfathers, Nate. You might have gotten a hearing. You probably would only have gotten your crotch groped."

"So? That's never done Rory any harm."

After careful consideration, I took his glass away from him. "Why do I keep thinking Brenda's parking lot lothario, George, looks familiar?"

Nate let me change the subject. "Because he is. He's that guy from down slope whose firm we had working over at the store two years back."

I shrugged.

"The plumbers." He let that sink in. My goddamned, over-aware, under-communicating subconscious and its idea of humor. "George has a summer cabin over in that new development by the lake. George and Brenda met at the butcher's. George is a fellow member of the library guild. George loves her very, very much." He snorted again and tossed the wedding ring toward my open suitcase. Suddenly, almost violently, he screwed off his own ring and sent it sailing after its twin. Then his shoulders slumped. "What a crappy day."

"At least we didn't get arrested by the cops for possession of a stolen vehicle."

"Fuck Rory. He always sticks his nose in—" Abruptly, Nate got up and walked over to me. "Forget about that. Let's do something."

"Gamble? I don't know if either of us is calm enough to do well at the tables downstairs."

"No, not that." He tugged at his tie. "Something more distracting."

I'm not an idiot. But my own preoccupations could have been misleading me. "The local movie houses are—" Nate was shaking his head, chin jutting out, thumbs tucked in pockets, all very Jowlett.

Oh, I knew that look of old. I said, "Okay, cards on the table. Nate Jowlett, do you really have the gall to be angling for pity sex?"

"Uh." For the first time since he'd come back into the room, he smiled. "Yeah." The smile faded a little. "So maybe

I'm still curious from last night. Satisfying curiosity is distracting."

I examined him with care. He wasn't really mad anymore. He'd been hurt, he was blowing off steam, but he wasn't actually mad. I was the one who was furious at the world, present company excepted.

Nate still had all the family in the world. He still had friends. He had a job, a house, a community. He had merely been scooped out with an emotional grapefruit spoon after carelessly losing the one person supposed to be just his. Unreasonable or not, he'd always wanted someone to be just his ever since I'd known him. I'd heard that in his voice the first afternoon we truly talked, as I listened to him chatter about *Huckleberry Finn* while he tried to edge further into my life.

I've never been good at applying my safety rules to myself, especially when I'm in the midst of a disaster. Shaking my head, I got up, reached over, and finished untying his tie.

His eyes widened slightly, and then he smiled again. This time it was a little shy.

I smiled back, and I'm afraid it may have been a little cynical. I hope the expression was also as fond as I was feeling. "Don't say anything yet. I can still change my mind."

The smile widened into his grin, and he held out his hands for me to undo his cufflinks.

All other considerations aside, Brenda had left him weeks ago and Nate was still young. By the time I'd stripped him down to bare skin he was hardening without his even being

touched. But I wanted to be sure what we were about to do wouldn't leave him disgusted with himself. I might be a willing body on a bad day, but I was also an older male, and I would be that still when this bad day was over. So, instead of undressing myself, I kissed him aggressively, quite deliberately pulling him close, letting him feel all the differences from the softness he knew.

Oh, me of little faith. Nate took my kiss as a challenge. He wrapped one big arm around my back, slung the other arm lower down, and settled in to find out whose tongue was the cleverer. I swam in warmth, the taste of scotch, and the scent of desert dust and Nate's cologne. I'll admit that his kissing was fairly sophisticated. The way he was groping at the seat of my trousers was not. But both the groping and the kissing seared me like lava.

I pushed away, and he let me go. Then I took two steps back and had a good look at him. Nate grinned and threw a Venice Beach pose: muscles flexed, one wrist to forehead, other arm tensed and bent behind him. Thank heavens his cock wasn't as massive as the rest of him. I wanted to be able to walk downstairs to breakfast tomorrow if matters went that way. But it was impressive enough to please me, of a fine, dusky color, and standing high from his groin with his anticipation. His balls were large, even when pulled up tight and wrinkled. When I touched the tip of him and rubbed a little along the slit, he sucked some air and lost the pose. So I got down on my knees and ran my lips along the underside of his shaft. Cool skin, a taste of salt, a slight bitterness: he

strangled a grunt and his cock gave more proof of how close he was to spending.

Part of me had been debating what to do, what would be most pleasurable for us both, like trying to pick only one chocolate from an untouched box of your favorite brand belonging to a good friend. The way Nate was pearling, if I used my mouth on him the way I wanted to—the way, for that matter, that he deserved—he wouldn't last. So it looked like I'd finally be getting sodomized by a Jowlett.

I leaned back on my heels and raised eyebrows at him. "Time to get my clothes out of the way."

"Sure." When I got to my feet, he reached for my belt buckle. He obviously wanted to undress me in his turn. Feeling indulgent, I let him. He was eager, maybe a little clumsy, but determined. Getting my belt out of its loops, he hesitated. Then he rubbed me through the cloth of my trousers, at first tentatively and afterwards, seeing how I responded, confidently. However, when he tried to work my shirt off my shoulders, he ripped two seams. So much for that tailor in Hong Kong, and so much for lyrical grace as well, but I didn't care. His enthusiasm trumped every suave erotic fantasy I'd ever had. I got what was left of my shirt off and yanked the flower-patterned bedspread and sheets back. Then I tugged him back down on the bed next to me. For a few minutes we halfway tussled and halfway necked. This time I don't think he'd considered when his hips started working against me.

"Off, off," I said, half-laughing. He let me go, but he watched as I got up and went to my suitcase. I saw his gaze

drop to my groin and then his tongue sneak out to moisten his lips, probably drying from nerves. When I opened the jar of lotion that I always carried, supposedly to keep my fingertips as sensitive as a jeweler's need to be, his eyes widened a bit. Then I tossed a towel at him, and he blinked.

"Do you know what happens next?" I asked.

"Yeah, roughly."

"Hmm. Some of the details you'll enjoy." Suddenly, I found I was the one grinning. "Don't worry. You'll be on top, playing rider."

He looked both deeply relieved and sheepish. "Okay. Bet I'll do better there anyhow."

"As a first-timer? I'll take a piece of that action." I'd been rubbing lotion between my palms to warm it as we spoke, so I was ready to stroll over and reach out to where he lay, putting a period on my sentence by taking him in hand. He tensed all over, and his expression went a bit wild. In my fist I felt a slight, familiar movement. I stilled my hand.

"Deep breath. Try reciting the Mohs scale backwards."

He got himself under control and narrowed his eyes.
"Asshole."

"That's next, yes."

All right, it was puerile, but he laughed. More important, he stayed relaxed while I got ready. He also kept watching. The intent expression on his face was the one he wore when about to make the first cut on a gemstone rough. After a bit, his hand crept down and he stroked his cock. What a lovely sight he was. I was having no problems maintaining my own

enthusiasm even without taking into account what my fingers were doing.

When I got onto the bed on hands and knees, he got up onto his own knees, before, at my coaching, he straddled my legs. I leaned forward and braced myself against the headboard, fixed to the wall, thank heavens.

I felt his hands on my ass and wished I had time to pause and savor the sensation, but we were getting to the point where that would have been unkind. I settled for enjoying the feel of his cock between my ass cheeks and the groping strength of his hand as he got himself set. He was a bit uncertain when he found me, but once he got a ways in I could sense the effort it took him to pause. Then I was fiercely glad for my experience because all I needed was for him to keep going. "Fine. Finish it."

With a grunt, he pushed forward, and I took the full measure of him. I'm amazed that I managed to get out, "Good?"

"Oh. Yeah."

"Then let loose."

I worked myself a little, but I didn't need much help. Nate's thrusts were brutal, glorious. His hands, though, were mild, even trembling a little toward the end. He wasn't a talker. That was no problem. The deep noises of pleasure were distinctly Nate's, wonderfully familiar and yet new. All the willpower I'd been using to bring us both to this point frayed away, and I gave myself over to the sounds, the scent, the sweet, sweet feeling of him fucking my ass. At the end I wasn't thinking about anything at all.

I'd come back enough to sense how he felt when he spent, though. I'm glad I was able to savor the fine points of that.

Afterwards he half-collapsed onto me, panting, sweating. But he was careful when he worked himself out, and he stayed on the bed next to me, an arm thrown across my back. So I pulled him close, held him as the sweat cooled on both our skins. By the window, the air conditioning vent rattled and hummed. The tick of the pulse in his throat slowed. Long, comfortable minutes passed as we both half-dozed. At last, skimming fingertips down his back, I made myself ask, "So?"

Nate's baritone grunt was pleased. He added, "That was great."

Great, but the sex was no revelation for him, no eruption from some huge magma chamber deep below the surface. As I'd thought, Nate had already discovered his preferred sexual pleasures before we'd broken law and custom together. No, I was the one looking out over a new landscape. Trying to delay a bit longer what I now knew was inevitable, I ran my hands over him, enjoying the feeling of taut skin over firm muscle.

He arched under my touch, as relaxed as a grizzly scratching against a pine tree, obviously taking as much pleasure from my affection as from his own sexual satiation. I, too, felt the pleasing warmth between us as I caressed him. My Nate, my dear boy, my partner, my best friend. I shook my head. But not my wife. Nothing peaceful, nothing respectable lay along this back highway: no sun-tanned, terrifying Jowlett toddlers running through the pines, no seat

on the P.T.A. board, no place of prestige in the Arboleda Chamber of Commerce, no well-mowed lawn for the neighbors to admire. Not even honor. As a friend, I was loyal. As a lover, though—Nate was faithful by nature. I, either through temperament or lack of opportunity to practice, was not. With a sigh, I ruffled his hair.

"I know that sigh." He said the words without opening his eyes.

"Really?"

"That was the one Anne Maddox gave right before she returned my varsity pin after the junior prom." Now he looked at me and his hazel eyes, the brown-green of Arizona peridots, were both amused and sad. How I liked the way he'd turned out. I wished that I could take more of the credit. "Now that you've had your wicked way with me, I'm about to be shown the door, right? Alas. Alack, even."

There were no words to tell him of my affection right then. I had to settle, once again, for "Wise guy." Not being one to court sentiment, I added, "And who had whose wicked way with whom?"

He closed his eyes again and relaxed back against me. "Just because I agree with you doesn't mean I have to like being dumped twice in one day. Or dumping once, for that matter. Even if, this time, we both know all the reasons why. One more round?"

"Compromise?"

"Let's hear."

"Fine. Tomorrow I leave again so that we can both cool off. I'll hit the May trade show in Australia I usually skip and pick

up some opals. But this time you'll write until things are straightened out, and I mean every damn day."

"Every day? Only if, this time, you show me something really twisted and taboo. And fun."

Half surprised, I snorted with laughter.

"Hey, I have the honor of the Jowletts to uphold here. Deal?"

"Deal," I managed to get out. Then, between the chuckles, I made him roll over onto his stomach before I showed him what a truly practiced tongue could do with virgin terrain. It took some time and some work, but I made him blush before I made him whimper. For my part—

Oh, how I needed those months in Australia and New Zealand afterwards. Nate did write, though. And I came home in time to give him his cufflinks on his birthday.

* * * *

Brenda learned the truth about George soon enough, but she never did return to Nate. In retrospect, I'll say this much for her: when it came to her decisions, she paid her own share of the bills. No, the name of Nate's second wife was Katharine.

Kate was dark, clever, very expressive, and a librarian over in Wolf Lake. I'd learned my lesson. I never tried to lie to her and was rewarded by a rather puzzled friendship with a delightful young woman. Eventually I merged gently with the furnishings of her life, an exotic curio to be lovingly tended, pointed out for the admiration of strangers, and carefully

displayed on holidays. There are worse fates even now, and were much worse fates in those bad old days.

As for the Jowletts, just like they always had, they came and went. As the decades passed, more and more they went.

There were exceptions, of course. Nate's somehow-still-Jowlett granddaughter, sweetly feral and tattooed, calls me Uncle Steve when she visits my retirement community "situated amidst whispering pines." She clatters around my condominium complaining about and rejoicing over the mishaps of her chaotic existence, checks the refrigerator to make sure it's well stocked with the bland delicacies suitable for her ancient, bohemian host, and then teases me for stories of the decades whose dissipated exiles are now renamed pioneers and pilgrims. From time to time I indulge her.

In the meanwhile, in the drawer of the nightstand by my bed is a jeweler's box with cufflinks in it, each link set with a single peridot, separate but paired. I thought to be buried with them right after his will returned the links to me, but years later I determined to give myself to the flames instead. Beauty shouldn't be burned, though. I'll pass the box on to the girl and let her exclaim over them when I won't have to be there to hear. Vintage Corvey pieces are quite collectable these days, or so I'm told. Because of my qualm about beauty, I'll also leave her this story, even though she won't entirely understand.

Compromises, even ones for the sake of peace and protection, are no longer in fashion. I like that about the youngsters of my other queer family, the one not named

Peridot
by Parhelion

Jowlett. Theirs, though, is not the life I led. Mine was a life of making do, of half-measures, and of hard decisions for the sake of social mores in which I didn't believe and by which I wasn't rewarded. But don't ever think that I suffered. I demanded my payment in pleasure—or joy—for each hard choice that I made.

Nate knew that. How could he not know? He's the one who sent back my cufflinks wrapped up in a note, a note that was all Nate: "From the right peridot, who always knew what the left peridot was doing. Always. With love."

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