

# DEADLY NIGHTSHADE

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## PROLOGUE

Tanya had a job to do. That's all this was. Nothing personal. Just a job. Or, really, a prelude, the first step to the real thing. But it was an important first step. She had to do it right.

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*It was unreal, like a dream, a fantasy date. Gordon Hartman was drunk, a little too. Not so drunk he didn't know she was beautiful, in a cheap kind of way. That was okay. He liked them cheap. He liked them petite, too, with long dark hair that spilled, like hers, all the way down to that pouty little butt that was practically in his face. She was ahead of him on the stairs.*

*He could have leaned a little forward and taken a bite out of her buns if he wanted. Her skimpy skirt lifted with each upward step she took on those skyscraper heels, giving him off and on glimpses of lace edged panties. Pussy pink. A favorite of his.*

*His impatient hand reached for her butt, fondled it. When she looked over her shoulder, grinning down at him, that long hair tickled the backs of his fingers. His cock tented his trousers, so hard it was almost painful.*

*She paused near the top of the stairs, turned toward him. Excited, he took her in his arms and kissed her, pushing his aching dick against her, his hands getting bolder as his breath got more ragged. She reached down to give his throbbing erection a squeeze.*

*Jesus, she was as hot as he was. He almost shot a load there and then. He loved it when they got all hot and bothered over him, over his dick. His hand got bolder still, felt between them.*

*Suddenly he took his mouth from hers, his eyes wide, surprised. "Shit, you're not a real—" he started to say, but she jerked his head down, kissed him again, stemming his words. He felt something against his chest, something hard wedged between them, but there was scarcely time for it to register before she shot him.*

*The gun was small caliber, only a twenty-two, but at this close range, aimed as precisely as it was at his heart, it was enough to kill him instantly. The sound was muffled between their bodies, came out little more than a pop, hardly any more noise than a balloon bursting.*

*She held on to his jacket to keep him from toppling down the stairs, let him drop slowly, almost noiselessly to the tiled steps, on his back, his chest with the bullet hole and the blood beginning to flow turned upward, before she let go. She didn't want him tumbling to the bottom, messing up her handiwork. Finally, she turned, stepping over his body, hurrying down the stairs.*

*She was in the building's central atrium, a long rectangle open to the sky. It was a big, sprawling apartment complex, apartments on three levels, tiled walkways past the doors, stucco half walls overlooking the atrium. The building's main entrance opened from the street into a foyer off the atrium, and hallways ran from the foyer in both directions to the side gates at the opposite ends of the complex. It was the sort of building in which delivery people and new tenants got lost.*

*"Break out the bloodhounds," the manager said a lot. It was an old building joke.*

*She was halfway across the atrium when she heard the front gate in the foyer close with a wrought-iron clang. Someone coming in from the street. She stopped dead-still by the gently splashing fountain, waiting, heard footsteps cross the foyer in her direction.*

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Jeremy Clark came through the open arch into the atrium, was halfway across the atrium, looking down, before he became aware of her and looked up. She still had the gun in her hand. His eyes went straight to it, and widened.

She burst into movement, ran past him, her heels clattering on the tile floor. He was too startled, or maybe too frightened by the gun, to try to stop her. He only stared after her. The tattoo of her heels faded down one of the side corridors. A metal gate clanged.

Above him, at the top of the stairs, a door opened, and Jake Acheson said, "I thought I heard a shot..."

## CHAPTER ONE

Stanley Korski was small for a cop, five eight max, with oversized hands and feet that gave him an almost clownish look. His face was babyish, framed with hair the color of wheat ripening, his eyes wide, ice blue, innocent looking. He had a kewpie doll mouth, so red it didn't look natural.

*Jesus, he must get carded every time he steps into a bar, Tom Danzel thought. And how did he get on the force in the first place? You could take one glance and know the kid was as queer as a three-dollar bill.*

As if he'd read his thoughts, Stanley said aloud, "Affirmative action."

"Huh?" It caught Tom off guard.

"You were thinking I looked queer. I am. I was part of the last affirmative action hire."

“Well, yeah, Stan, see, I already knew you were queer.”

“Stanley. Stan sounds too, oh, I don’t know, too blue collar, don’t you think? And you aren’t happy about it. About my being queer, I mean. About being partnered with me.”

Tom let out a noisy sigh. “Bingo,” he said. “You hit the nail on the head, Stanley.”

Stanley shrugged. “You’ll get over it. It’s not like we’re on a date, or anything—although I wouldn’t mind, if the idea appeals to you. You’re kind of cute, in a Neanderthal way.”

“Please don’t start telling me I’m cute, Stanley, and what the fuck is that anyway, a Neander-you-call-it?”

“It just means you’re a big hairy brute,” Stanley said with a grin, and winked.

Which really pissed Tom. He hated fags. Well, no, he didn’t exactly hate them, live and let live, the way he saw things, but he hadn’t jerked off with the other guys when they were kids—except for that one time, and they’d all been stoned, so that didn’t count—and he hadn’t even thought about that sort of thing since then. He didn’t care what fags did, particularly. He just wanted nothing to do with them himself.

Especially, he didn’t want to be partnered with one. It was one of those things he felt sure he would never live down in the department. You work with a queer, other guys were going to get funny ideas. It was inevitable, wasn’t it? And that was what he really hated, the idea that the other guys on the force would think he was queer. How had this happened to him, anyway? What had he done to deserve it?

“What, you want me to say pretty please?” the Captain had asked when Tom protested, grinning the kind of grin at Tom that suggested he already thought there might be something there.

“How did the guy get a homicide, anyway? There’s guys wait years for the job. How long has this guy been on the force?”

“A week.”

“Well...?”

“He’s uniquely qualified for the assignment. The word came down straight from the chief. Who got it direct from the mayor. Just do it, Tom. That’s an order.”

Which had totally rubbed him the wrong way. Now, here he was, with a fag wannabe detective grinning at him like he was waiting for a big, smoochy hello kiss.

“Knock it off,” he said to Stanley. “You’re right, it isn’t a date, and it’s never going to be, and get any fucking ideas like that clear out of your head, right from this moment, okay? Don’t talk about anything but business when we’re together. Don’t even think about anything but business.”

“That’s what I was doing,” Stanley said, eyes innocently wide. “I’m betting you have a really nice business.” He gave the bulge in Tom’s crotch a meaningful glance.

“That’s it, I’m out of here.” Tom turned toward the door. “They can put somebody else on the case. They can can me, if they want. I don’t give a good rat’s ass.”

“Jesus Christ in a hand bucket, get a grip, why don’t you?” Stanley said behind him. “You fucking straight guys, you’re a howl, you know that? What in the Sam Hill makes you think I’d be interested in you, anyway, you dumb shit? You think I wanted to be partnered with some ugly goon? There’s a Labrador Retriever in my building that turns me on more than you do.”

“Yeah, well I don’t do dogs, either. You know what I mean? I like pussy, period.”

“Hooray for you. There’s a Siamese in the building, too. I’ll see if I can fix you up. Meanwhile, there’s a murder everyone wants solved, *Partner*. A county supervisor. The supervisors don’t like that, it interferes with their graft collection. Plus, this one was a cousin of the mayor’s. And according to the witnesses, the supervisor was killed by a drag queen. That looks bad for all those closet queens on the board. So everybody’s in a lather to see this cleared up in a hurry. And they thought I might bring some special insights to the investigation.”

“Let me guess. Because you wear dresses.”

“Only when I’m cleaning. Actually, if you want to know, it’s because for five years I was liaison between the Gay Lesbian Council and the police department. Send a queer to catch a queer, is how the brass sees it.”

“So how about me? How did I end up on this case?”

“I asked for the best detective on the homicide squad. Your name rose to the top, like cream—oh.” He put a hand to his cheek in mock dismay. “I’m not supposed to talk about cream, am I?”

“You’re pretty cute, aren’t you?”

Stanley winked again. “Some men think so. The ones who don’t drag their knuckles when they walk. Look, sweetie, we have been assigned to a case together. I don’t know about you, but my interest is in solving it, quickly, efficiently so I can move on to something—and someone—more interesting. Why don’t we both just focus on that, okay?”

He extended a hand. Tom looked at it for a moment, as if he thought it might be there for some purpose other than shaking. Finally, reluctantly, he took it.

“Okay, deal,” he said. “Just don’t go trying to cop any feels, all right?”

“Oh, dear, I just washed my hands, and I can’t do a thing with them. Come on, we’re in luck, lover boy. I’m told we’ve got witnesses, two of them. How often do you strike it rich like that? It never happens in the movies. Let’s go see what kind of song they sing.”

The other detectives in the squad room had been ignoring their exchange with thinly disguised interest. Tom shot a look around the squad room. Most of them looked away, although he got a couple of quick smirks before they did so.

*Man, what a load of crap.* Anybody started making cracks, someone was going to be eating a knuckle sandwich. He glowered around the room but no one noticed.

“Let’s go,” he said. They left the room, starting down the hall, Tom walking fast, marching, actually, Stanley trailing slightly behind. Tom was afraid to look, afraid he’d catch the fucking faggot checking out his buns.

Which was exactly what Stanley was doing, in fact, thinking that they were quite splendid indeed, such a lovely baroque shape to them, not the little melony type that did nothing for him. He liked buns with some substance to them, something to hang onto when the action got going. And they were hard, too, you could see that just looking at them, like they were carved out of granite.

Plus, he’d bet everything he owned that this lovely butt was virgin. And he was equally willing to bet that some lucky guy, some lucky day, was going to change its status. He could always tell, at a single glance. More often than not, it was the super macho type, too. He usually knew long before they did. Had many times gambled the bank on it, in fact, and pretty much always won. Okay, one loss, two draws. Not bad when you considered the number and quality of the wins.

Of course, he wasn’t about to tell that to the Neanderthal, nor mention what an incredibly sexy hunk he was, with those mile-wide shoulders and that big chest with the hair thick on it where his shirt lay open. To say nothing about what might have been a large salami in his pocket.

None of which he intended to say anything about, *period*. This gig was going to be difficult enough, without complicating it. He sighed aloud. He really hated homophobes. Especially killer hot ones.

This was his first homicide, his first case, period. He’d spent a week as a uniform, and hated it. He really wanted this one. He had to prove himself. If he solved it in record time—and *how difficult could that be?*—maybe they would actually let him stay in homicide instead of sending him back to the beat. He felt pretty sure he could get Tom’s drawers around his ankles if he put his mind to it, but he was equally sure that would end up making things more difficult. Which, really, was too bad. He sighed aloud.

Tom steadfastly ignored him.

§ § § § §

They didn't talk again until they had checked out a company car, a Ford Crown Victoria.

"You want to drive?" Tom asked.

"Oh, I think that's the man's job, don't you?"

Tom grunted and got behind the wheel. The silence fell again. He drove out of the garage, onto Van Ness, merged with the endless stream of early morning San Francisco traffic. It was a bleak, rainy day, the lights from the buildings they passed—offices, store fronts, apartments overhead—bleeding into the gloom, spilling in puddles on the wet sidewalks. The windshield wipers tsk-tsked monotonously. The air in the car was damp, over warm. Stanley cracked a window.

"You married?" he asked.

"Divorced."

"Sorry."

"I'm not. It was a long time ago. High school sweethearts sort of thing. You know, the first piece of ass you get... well, I guess you wouldn't know about that..."

"I might."

Tom shot him a sideways glance, decided not to pursue that line. He fumbled in a pocket for a pack of gum, managed to unwrap a stick one-handed and popped it into his mouth, chewing noisily.

"You didn't love her?" Stanley asked. Tom shrugged. "What about her?"

"She was a poor little rich girl. She loved the idea of marrying a cop, hated being a cop's wife. All those nights at home alone, me never there. Women hate that."

"Policemen work long hours."

He snorted, chuckled faintly. "I was fucking around on her. Almost from the start."

"Was that fair?"

"I don't remember asking you to rate my marriage, Stanley." The gum popped angrily. "Anyway," after a minute, "it was a long time ago. Besides, she fucked the best man the day of the wedding. It wasn't a marriage made in Heaven." He looked across at Stanley again. "I guess you're single. Any family?"

Stanley hesitated for so long, Tom thought he wasn't going to answer. "A sister," he said finally. "She lives in Sacramento. Husband, three kids. We don't see each other much."

"Your parents still around?"

"My mom's dead." The pause this time was even longer. "My dad's still alive—if you can call it that. Lives in a so-called rest home. Home Gardens, up in Petaluma. I doubt that he gets much rest. Or that he knows the difference."

Tom grunted. The silence crowded back into the car.

"You from around here?" Tom asked, the effort of sociability sounding in his voice.

"Petaluma. Before that, the Midwest. Iowa. You?"

"Missouri."

More silence, the kind that just sits there between two people who don't know one another and don't know what to do about it.

"You into sports?" Tom asked.

"I've done a few laps."

"Stanley..." in a warning voice.

"Swimming," Stanley said. "I was on the swim team. Dive team, too, but I never lettered. I did a beautiful pike, though."

"What's that?"

"You lift your legs in the air, touch your toes with your fingers, butt turned up. I could demonstrate it for you some time. It's a useful position."

Tom glowered across at him.

"For diving," Stanley added, smiling sweetly. "Jeez, you have a dirty mind. I never could manage a swan dive, though. Almost missed the pool. A total belly smacker. You have to float to do a good swan. Like a butterfly, sort of."

"Sounds like a natural for you," Tom said.

Stanley giggled, sounding more like a little kid than a would-be homicide detective. "I'll bet you were football, weren't you?"

"Quarterback."

"Mister Touchdown." Stanley sighed. Like everyone else in his high school, he'd had a crush on the team quarterback. He was one of the few, it seemed, who had done nothing about it. "I never did get that swan dive."

More silence. After a bit, Stanley asked, "Are you happy?"

If Tom thought it a peculiar question, he didn't say. He gave another of his grunts and a shrug. Stanley was beginning to realize he did that a lot. "Okay. You?"

"I'm not happy, but I'm not unhappy about it."

Tom chewed on that for a moment. "I'm not a philosopher type," Tom said. "I'm a cop."

They were turning onto Market, slipping through traffic around a rattling green-and-cream F car, a taxi honking impatiently at them, when Tom asked, casually, like it had just crossed his mind and not been bugging him since it had been said:

"So, you really think I'm ugly?"

## CHAPTER TWO

The police photographers were just finished, the crime techs dusting the wrought iron railing that ran up the stairs.

"Waste of time," Tom said. "All the tenants here must use these stairs every day. We're just here to look, Stanley, don't touch anything yet."

For the moment, Stanley wasn't interested in touching; looking was as much as he was ready for. He had never seen a dead man before. Not, at any rate, a corpse, homicide victim type of dead man. He didn't know quite what he had expected but somehow this wasn't it.

"He looks so, I don't know," he said, staring down at the body. "So dead."

"Well, fuck, yeah," Tom said. He took his gum out of his mouth, rolled it up in a piece of paper and looked around for somewhere to toss it, deciding finally to drop it into the pocket of his jacket. He looked at Stanley. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"You look funny, all pasty white. You're not going to start puking on me, are you?" The coroner, kneeling by the body, looked up at him and moved a couple of inches to the side, as if getting himself out of range.

"Don't be ridiculous," Stanley said. "It's not like I haven't seen corpses before. Well, not like this, exactly, but I've been to funerals. Plenty of them."

"That's not the same thing."

"Dead people are dead people, aren't they?" Stanley snapped, but the exchange had done him good. He felt less nauseous than he had a moment before. He took a deep breath, pulled his shoulders back, and said to

the coroner, “So, what do you think?”

“I think this guy’s dead,” the coroner said, scooting another inch or two, to be safe.

“There’s something wrong here,” Tom said. They both looked at him.

“No, I’m pretty sure of it,” the coroner said. “That bullet hole, for one thing. Plus, he’s not breathing. That’s the kind of thing we look for.”

“The way he’s laying,” Tom said. They looked questions at the dead man, as if he might offer an explanation, and back to Tom.

“Well, say, we’re standing here, at the top of these stairs, the two of us. Turn facing me,” Tom said. Stanley did. Tom took hold of his arm and tugged him a step closer. “And, say I shoot you in the chest,” he made a gun with his fingers and poked Stanley in the chest with it, “like this guy, bang—so, what do you do?”

“I fall down,” Stanley said. Tom nodded and looked expectantly at him. After a moment, Stanley got the message and let his legs collapse under him—and nearly toppled over the kneeling coroner. Luckily, Tom still had hold of his arm.

“I fall down the stairs,” Stanley corrected himself, taking a firm grasp of the metal railing that ran up them. “Some of them, anyway. Maybe all the way to the bottom.”

“Right. Only, this guy’s laying nice and neat on his back on the top step. Like he was on display.”

“So? What do you make of that?” Stanley asked. He hated to admit it, but he thought this had been a clever observation. He wouldn’t have thought of it. Maybe the Neanderthal wasn’t as dumb as he looked. He did wonder, though, how many wads of gum he might have in his pocket.

“Some kind of message?” the coroner suggested.

“Probably,” Tom said.

“But for whom?” Stanley asked.

“Us, most likely.”

Stanley waited. When Tom didn’t say any more, he prompted him. “So, what’s the message?”

Tom stared down at the dead man. “I don’t know,” he said, and added, “yet.”

The coroner signaled to the waiting techs. “You can cart him away,” he said. “Unless you guys want to see anything more?” He gave Stanley a cursory glance, looked more intently at Tom.

“No, I’ve seen enough,” Tom said.

Amen, Stanley added silently. Somehow, it hadn’t really ever quite sunk in before—homicide meant bodies. Dead bodies. Maybe this job wasn’t going to be as much fun as he had thought. They almost never showed the bodies in the Miss Marple movies he especially enjoyed. Not in so much detail, anyway.



Their first witness, Jake Acheson, was in the apartment nearest to the stairs, waiting to talk to them. Downright eager to talk to them, it seemed to Stanley.

“It was a drag queen,” he told them right off. “Just like I told the first cops.”

“What makes you so certain?” Stanley asked. “Some of them are pretty convincing.”

“Well, she looked like a woman, at a distance, at night. At first, I thought she was.” He paused. “Until he said that, about, she wasn’t real.”

“Not real?” Tom said. “Who said?”

“Hartman. He said, ‘Hey, you’re not a real woman.’”

“You’re not a real woman?” Stanley repeated, puzzled. He was taking all this down on a portable tape recorder—far more dependable, he’d discovered long ago, than writing notes. If you wanted, you could go back over every word. You didn’t have to worry about whether you had missed something, writing fast, or

forgotten something. He'd learned that in school.

"Right. Well, what he said was, 'You're not a real...' and that's when she shot him. There was this noise, anyway, I didn't realize at first it was a gunshot. It was kind of muffled, you know."

"So, what did she look like?" Tom asked. "This woman who wasn't real—whatever that means."

"Pretty." He screwed up his face. "Now that I think of it, though, she mostly looked like a drag queen."

"What does a drag queen look like?" Stanley asked. "And the correct term is transgender." He thought of the lovely Ru Paul and the grotesque Rae Bourbon; hard to generalize there. "As a rule."

"Oh, she had that, what would you say, that overdone look that drag queens—excuse me," his voice arch, "that transgenders sometimes do—you know, when they try too hard."

"Excuse me," the willowy blond seated on the sofa said. He was wearing a silk robe patterned overgenerously with roses, more like a woman's peignoir, really, but not a particularly good one, in Stanley's opinion, and sipping from a tall glass, despite the early hour. There was a bottle of Chivas on the table beside him. He crossed his legs, the silk whispering insinuations. Acheson looked at him, at the leg showing through the parted silk, ran a tongue unthinkingly over his lower lip.

"You know what I mean," Acheson said defensively. "Some of them, it's pretty convincing, but a lot of them, it's like they don't know when to stop. A little too much makeup, that kind of thing. Actually, this one was wearing way too much makeup, almost a clown face, except she was still pretty." He paused. "Yes, now that I think about it, everything about her was exaggerated. Even the way she ran across the atrium afterward, knees tight together, like she was afraid her dick would fall out. You know how they are." He looked at Stanley and then at Tom, who only stared back at him blankly.

"You must have gotten a good look," Tom said. "They were just coming up the stairs, you said."

The witness grinned a little sheepishly. "Hartman—that's the dead guy—he didn't always wait to get them home. Sometimes he put on a real show, right there on the landing. Whenever I heard his voice, I always took a peek through the blinds, just in case something was going to happen." He caught the looks the two cops exchanged. "Hey, that's entertainment. The guy had a dick on him like a baseball bat. Seeing a chick giving him a blow job was a sight to behold. Better than watching a porn flick, right?"

Stanley thought about that for a minute. *A baseball bat? Jeez, and someone had shot him dead?*

"Some people have no sense of propriety," he said aloud. "I mean, if you think about all the starving queens in the Castro..." he saw the look Tom gave him and lowered his voice an octave. "So, Mister Acheson, if we fixed you up with a department artist, do you think you could help with a sketch?"

"What, of his dick?"

"The drag queen."

"I guess," Jake said with a shrug.

"Honey," the blond on the sofa said, "Would you get me some more ice?"

"Sure thing," Acheson said. He looked relieved at the interruption—an odd interruption, it seemed to Stanley, it seemed more than incidental. He and Tom waited while Acheson went into the kitchen, came back with an ice cube, which he dropped into the young man's glass.

"And take that away," the blond said, waving a much ringed hand at a small plate with a half eaten tuna sandwich on it. Acheson hurried to remove the offending dish. Tom looked after him impatiently, and turned to the blond.

"What about you? Did you catch the show too?"

Gaylord Huston took a moment to look Tom up and down. Stanley bit back a smile. In the kitchen, the dish dropped into the sink rather too loudly and Acheson came back into the room, hurrying.

"I didn't see or hear anything," Gaylord said, "until Jake came back in and dialed 911. I said, 'what's the excitement,' and he said, 'Hartman's dead. Somebody shot him.' So, I went out to look, and sure enough,



there he was, dead as a doornail. Seems a shame, doesn't it? A guy like that. With a baseball bat. Too bad he was straight."

"You're sure about that?" Stanley asked.

Gaylord turned a pair of wide baby blues on him. "About what? The baseball bat. It's just what I heard, is all. I never saw it for myself." His expression was filled with regret. "I guess I won't, now."

"Gaylord," Jake started to say in a pleading voice.

"I'm just joking, lover," Gaylord said. He screwed up his face. "Of course, I could visit the mortuary, I suppose. Does everything stay intact, or do you think they cut them off? Like trophies, you know, something to take home to show the little woman? I heard a joke once..."

"I meant, are you sure about the straight part," Stanley said. "It can be hard to tell sometimes."

"Oh, please. Not for me it isn't. My gaydar is state of the art," Gaylord said. He took another sip of his drink, looking Stanley up and down dismissively. "Anyway, there was that parade of chicks in and out. That's generally a clue." He turned to smile brightly at Tom. Who resolutely ignored him.

"You said," Tom said to Jake, "somebody shot him." If the gunshot was muffled, the way you described it, how were you so sure he'd been shot?"

"Well, you guys are the detectives, of course," Jake said in a somewhat condescending voice. He paused as Gaylord got up off the sofa with a disappointed glance in Jake's direction and sashayed toward the kitchen, the flowered silk swishing. All eyes followed him from the room. They heard the tinkle of ice, and then he was back, his glass full, passing close by Stanley and closer still by Tom, before seating himself again on the sofa, like a scattering of rose petals settling. *All the perfumes of Arabia*, Stanley thought—the cheap ones, anyway.

Tom turned his attention back to Acheson. "You were saying?"

"You guys are the detectives, of course," he picked up where he had left off, as if the interruption had never occurred. "I saw that hole in his chest, and I had a glimpse of the drag queen running across the atrium with a gun in her hand. I just kind of put two and two together, if you know what I mean."

Stanley had been studying Gaylord intently. "You ever go in drag?" he asked.

Gaylord gave him a sly look in return. "You ever been to the Boom Boom Room?"

"I thought I recognized you. Gaye Dawn, right?"

"What's that mean?" Tom asked. "What's a Gay Dawn?"

Gaylord gave his head a toss, put a hand over his heart. "Gaye Dawn, the queen of romantic drag, two shows Friday and Saturday, matinee on Sunday. Stop by Saturday night, sugar. I'll buy you a drink."

Tom's face went red. "Thanks, but no thanks," he said. "Not my style."

"You never know till you try it." Gaylord winked.

"I know."

"Men have been known to change their minds."

"Gaye..." Jake started to say.

"I'm just being hospitable, honey," Gaye said.

"What do you do for a living, Mister Acheson," Tom asked.

"I'm a bartender." He looked a little sheepish.

"At...?" Stanley raised an eyebrow. He found himself resenting Gaylord. He didn't like the blatant way he was ogling Tom, plus the entire apartment reeked of that cheap perfume, something flowery and feminine, almost sickeningly sweet.

*He must just dump the bottle over his head.* And the room they were in was seriously over decorated, way too much imitation period furniture. To his way of thinking, there was nothing tackier than a tacky queen. He was

glad to see Tom ignore Miss Gaye Dawn's crude flirtations. The ape had some taste, at least.

"The Boom Boom Room," Acheson said, as if he were embarrassed by the fact.

"Ah." Stanley nodded.

"The pay's good," Acheson said, defensive. "I was working at a straight joint before that. Made about half the money."

"Queens tip big." Stanley gave him a nod and a knowing smile, and stood up. He handed each of them one of his new cards, the first he'd made use of them. It felt good, like a real homicide detective. He was beginning to get the hang of this.

Acheson took the card. Gaylord looked at his as if it might be tainted. For spite, Stanley let it drop into his lap, glad at least that the color clashed with the peignoir.

"I guess that's everything," Tom said, standing too, eager to be gone. "If we think of anything else, we'll let you know."

"We'll call you about the artist," Stanley said, and paused. He had turned in time to see a funny expression flit across Acheson's face. "Think of something?" Stanley asked.

Acheson thought for a few seconds and shook his head. "No, I... I don't know, really, it came and went, like one of those things on the tip of your tongue."

"I'm sure the nice policemen aren't interested in what you might have on the tip of your tongue, darling," Gaye said. He winked at Tom.

Tom scowled at the door, and at Stanley, who scowled back at him, and at the door again. "Well," he said.

"Don't be strangers," Gaye called after them.

"We won't," Stanley promised, and added, to Tom, in a voice just dripping with honey, "will we, sugar?"

The door closed after them. Acheson and Gaylord exchanged looks.

§ § § § §

"Listen, you," Tom started to say. He was in the lead, practically running. He looked back over his shoulder at Stanley and almost collided with a woman coming up the stairs. She was overdressed for the warmish day: calf length sweater over some kind of sheath dress, big floppy hat, oversized glasses so dark you could only guess at eyes behind them.

"Did you just come out of Jake Acheson's apartment?" she asked, pausing on the top step.

"Bingo," Stanley said. "That's where you're headed?"

"I was," she said. She looked from one to the other. At least, the head turned. Stanley surmised that, behind the dark glasses, she was looking at them. "Let me guess," she said. "You're cops, right?"

"That's two points. You should be on Jeopardy," Stanley asked. "And you are...?"

She took a minute to consider answering. "Mrs. Acheson," she said.

Tom's mouth fell open. He had been thinking he liked her voice—low, throaty, what he liked to think of as a "blow job voice." He had been wondering what she looked like under all that regalia. She'd caught him by surprise.

"He's married? The pansy... uh, the guy in there?" He found another stick of gum, did the one-handed thing with it, and popped it into his mouth, his jaw working overtime.

"I know. Hard to believe, isn't it?" she said. "What can I tell you? He wasn't always like that." She looked past them. "Is Princess Twinkletoes with him?"

Stanley bit back a laugh. "Gaylord? Yes, he's there."

"Shit. That little placenta." She looked undetermined whether to go or stay.

"I'm Stanley Korski," Stanley said, offering a hand. "This is Tom Danzel. San Francisco homicide."

“Moira Acheson,” she said. “And since you’ve already told me Gaylord is in there, presumably alive and well, I will assume that particular prayer of mine has not been answered. So, who died?”

“The neighbor,” Stanley said. “Gordon Hartman.” He liked her. Of course, he was prepared to like anybody who didn’t like little Gaylord.

The dark glasses turned toward the apartment across the way. “The baseball bat?” she asked.

“That’s the one.”

“Pity. I was hoping to meet him one of these days.” She made up her mind about her visit, apparently, and stepped around them, on her way to Acheson’s door. “Excuse me. I think I’ll spoil everyone’s fun.”

Stanley took a card out of his wallet and handed it to her. “My numbers,” he said. “In case you think of anything that might interest us.”



She let herself into the apartment without knocking. Gaylord—The Bitch Queen—was seated at one end of the sofa, Jake leaning over him. They turned toward the door as she came in, looking surprised, and embarrassed, like she’d caught them at something. Probably, she thought, they had just shared a kiss. It made her want to gag. That, and the reek of Dollar Store perfume. She waved a hand in front of her face and wrinkled her nose.

“Moira,” Jake said.

“It’s good to know you still recognize me,” she said. She tossed the oversized hat on a chair, slipped the dark glasses into a pocket of her sweater. “Hello, Gayborg, hanging around with the humans again, are you?”

“One thing, at least, we have in common,” he said. The look he gave her was almost as loathing-filled as the one with which she regarded him. Almost, but not quite.

“We have nothing in common,” she said. She looked at Acheson. “You had company.”

“Cops,” Jake said. “Someone shot the guy next door.”

“Hartman. I heard.”

“I didn’t know you even knew him.”

“You’re kidding. The wang of the western world? I’m surprised people in the building didn’t sell tickets. Anyway, I talked to the cops. What did they want with you?”

“I saw it,” Jake said. “Sort of. I heard him coming in and went to look out the bedroom window...”

“Ever the peeping Tom,” Moira said. She picked up an empty glass from the pass-through counter, held it up to the light to examine it and gave it a quick wipe with her sleeve before half filling it from the Chivas bottle.

“I was looking out the window when she...”

“She?” She downed the Scotch in one long draught.

“One of his hookers. I thought they were getting ready for some action. She kissed him and then he said, ‘hey, you’re not a real woman,’ and, bang, she shot him.”

“You’re not a real woman?” She laughed aloud. “You’re telling me Mister Footlong picked up a drag queen? You must have heard it wrong.”

Jake smiled with her. “No, I swear it, that’s what he said. Well, what he started to say, anyway, but she shot him before he finished, boom. Then she takes off down the stairs.”

“So you must have gotten a good look at her,” Moira said, giving him an appraising once over, as if she had just discovered something interesting about him. She set the glass aside. “I take it nobody you knew? Like, one of his regulars, or something?”

Acheson looked away from her, glanced at Gaylord. “Never saw her before. I’m going down to the station in a little while and work with the sketch artist.”

“Good for you.” She paused thoughtfully. “I wonder why anyone would want to shoot the poor bastard. I mean, hell, he was Mister Saturday Night around this place, wasn’t he?”

“Well, he’d found out her secret. The drag queen thing.”

“He’d have found that out soon enough anyway, wouldn’t he? I mean, if he was fucking her, he’d almost certainly have noticed a dick standing in his way. Not that I’d know exactly, but I should think.”

Jake grunted. After a moment, he said, “So, what brings you by, Moira. Not to talk about our neighborhood murder, surely.”

“I need some money,” she said.

He looked a little embarrassed. “Actually, I’m kind of short...”

She glanced meaningfully at the Chivas bottle on the table and at Gaylord. He lifted the bottle to pour a generous drink into his glass and sipped from it, smiling across the rim at her.

“I’ll get my checkbook,” Jake said with a sigh.

She left two thousand dollars richer, blowing kisses as she closed the door after herself. Jake, two thousand poorer, blew no kisses.

“She could get a job, couldn’t she?” Gaylord said when she was gone. “Why should you have to support her?”

Jake laughed bitterly. “What kind of job do you think would suit Moira?”

“They use pigs to find truffles in the woods, don’t they? I’ll be she’d be killer at that.”

§ § § § §

Jeremy Clark lived directly across the way from Acheson, the other side of the atrium. He was even more sure of the woman he had seen dashing across the atrium than Jake Acheson had been.

“I told the guys in uniform. Drag queen, absolutely,” he said. “I can always tell. Most of them can’t resist the eyelashes like feather dusters. The only real women you see wearing them are strippers and the occasional hooker.” He paused and screwed up his face. “Actually, now that I think of it, most of the hookers these days are drag queens, aren’t they? Plus enough eye liner to paint a boat. Mick Jagger lips, or Goldie after one of those injections, looked like they could suck the coconuts off the tree. The way no real woman makes up.”

“So, you stopped in your tracks and she ran right past you.” Tom said. “A drag queen. Aren’t we supposed to say transgender?” He looked at Stanley, who shrugged.

Tom looked at his notes. “You said she was little. Five two, five three, right? You didn’t try to stop her?”

“Hey, she had a gun. And I didn’t know right off the bat that she’d killed Hartman. All I saw was a drag queen running, with a gun in her hand. Mostly, I was too surprised to do anything till she was gone.”

“Which way did she go?” Stanley asked.

He thought for a moment. “You know, now that you ask that, it’s kind of funny. She didn’t run out the front gate. That’s where I came in, and that was closest, you’d think that’s where she’d head, wouldn’t you, get out quick, but she didn’t. There’s another gate at the side of the building.” He pointed in the direction of 17<sup>th</sup> Street. “She ran out that way. But that’s, what, sixty, eighty feet further away.”

“You saw her go?”

“No, not exactly. But the floor in that hallway is tile and she was wearing high heels, they made a lot of racket on the tile. I could hear her, and then the gate over there kind of sticks, it bangs when it shuts. I heard that.”

“Maybe that’s where she parked. Did you hear a car?”

“No. But I wasn’t listening for one, either. That’s about when Jake upstairs came out of his apartment. He said something, I don’t remember what, exactly, and then he said, ‘Holy shit,’ and I said, ‘What?’ and he said, ‘She killed him.’ So I came over to the stairs, and there was Hartman...”

“Did you know him?” Tom asked. “This Hartman guy, I mean.”

“Not to talk to. A couple of times I peeked out my bedroom window and watched him getting blow jobs from his dates. He was pretty impressive. The chicks got real excited when they got a load of what he had on him.”

“Did this guy have any friends in the building?” Stanley asked, “or just a lot of non-paying audience?”

“Hey,” Clark said in a defensive voice, “he was the one putting on the shows. If he didn’t want people watching, he could always have waited till he got inside his apartment.”

“Don’t get excited,” Stanley said, making a placating gesture. “Hell, I’m just sorry I missed the performances. Sounds like they were pretty hot.” He ignored Tom’s disgusted scowl.

“They were,” Clark said begrudgingly. He glanced at Tom. “Really,” he said. “I mean, I’m not queer, but, hell, this guy was something to see. And the way the chicks got all turned on... well... To tell you the truth, I took things in hand a time or two while the show was going on. You know what I mean?” He pumped his hand up and down in front of his crotch and gave Tom another defensive glance. Tom avoided it.

“So,” Stanley said, “did he have any friends in the building?”

Clark had to think about that. “Try 310, next door to Hartman,” he said. “Andrews is his name. Terry Andrews. Jerry Andrews. Something like that. I think they used to sometimes grab a beer together.”

They set Jeremy up with the artist, too.

### CHAPTER THREE

Barry Andrews was a little man with a shiny head and a white goatee. The thick lenses in his glasses made his large eyes look even more owlsh.

“Gordy Hartman?” he said when they went to interview him. “I don’t know if he had any really close friends. His ex wife, maybe. They remained friendly, seemed like. He’s got a kid, a son, grown up now, he’s back on the East Coast, I think. So’s the wife, as I recall. Or maybe she’s in the east bay, I don’t remember. Hartman was pretty much a loner, though.”

“We’re told the two of you sometimes hung out together,” Tom said.

Andrews looked surprised. “Not really, not what you’d call hanging out together. I’ve got this big screen television, HDTV. Sometimes he’d come over to watch some baseball. I think for him it was like looking at a mirror.” He looked at Stanley. “The baseball bat, you know what I mean?”

Tom sighed. “That seems to be the one thing everybody knew about this guy,” he said. “What a way to be remembered.”

“There’s worse things,” Stanley said. He looked meaningfully at Tom’s lap. Tom shifted his legs, thinking he’d have to switch to jockeys if he was going to be working with queers. Boxers showed too much. Sometimes it got a woman’s eye, but he didn’t like that it encouraged the boys. Andrews seemed to find the remark funny, until Tom scowled at him.

They were leaving when Andrews said, “We did go out for a beer one night, though, me and Hartman. It was kind of funny, actually. I mean, he had never suggested anything like that, we weren’t even that friendly, really, and then this one night, it was a Saturday, he said why didn’t we go out and tip a few, and I had nothing on, I’m not much of a social butterfly myself, so I said sure, why not.”

“Where’d you go?” Stanley asked.

“Well, that’s the funny thing. He said he’d found this bar, he thought it was kind of a riot. That’s how he described it. ‘A real riot,’ he said, and I should have a look. In retrospect, I think he was, sort of, like scoping me out, how I’d react to it, you know what I mean?”

“React to what?” Tom asked.

Andrews got a sheepish look on his face. "It was a drag bar."

Stanley's eyebrows went up. "A drag bar?"

"Totally. I mean, there was a stage, and a show going on—but, really, the whole thing was about drag. The waitresses, the bartenders, just about everybody. They were mostly all chicks with dicks. You know, guys in dresses."

"And how did you react to this?" Stanley asked.

Andrews managed a pallid smile. "I didn't like it, to tell you the truth. It's okay, I guess, if that's your bag, but, well, it doesn't do anything for me. I like real women, you know what I mean?" This time it was Tom he looked to for support.

"Exactly," Tom said.

"I mean, hell, I guess if it came right down to it, I could probably make it with a guy. I mean. I like women, but probably, the right time—if I was super horny, say, and there was nothing else available. You know, a blow job is a blow job. You close your eyes, how could you tell the difference? You can fantasize whatever you want. But, the funny thing is, if something like that happened, I'd want it to be a guy, not one dressed up like a chick. I don't think I could do it with someone in drag. I mean, knowing it was really a guy under the dress and the makeup and all. I'd want to look and I wouldn't want to, either. I think it would mess up my fantasies. Does that make sense?"

"No," Tom said, and Stanley said, at the very same moment, "Absolutely." Andrews looked from one to the other.

"You guys are a funny pair," he said. "Kind of like Abbot and Costello play detective."

"We're rehearsing for the school play," Stanley said. "So, what happened? At your drag bar?"

Andrews shrugged. "Nothing, really. I think we were both kind of embarrassed by the whole situation. He could see I wasn't comfortable, and I guess he was sorry he had taken me there. We had a drink. Just one, even though we had to pay for two. Cover charge, you know. He paid. It was his idea to go there, so I figured that was only right. And we left and came home. Or, I came home, anyway. He was driving. He dropped me off, said he had someplace to go. I kind of figured he was going back to the same place but it wasn't any of my business, the way I saw it. Live and let live, I always say."

He looked from one to the other again, seemed to be waiting for one of them to say something. When neither of them did, he added, "That was the only time we ever went out together, though. He never asked again. To be honest, I was kind of glad. Now that I think of it, he never stopped over again, either."

"This club you went to," Stanley said. "What was it called, do you remember?"

"Oh, sure," Andrews said. "Carla's Web. It's down in the Mission."

"Thanks," Tom said.

"The odd thing is, like, I've been wondering, who'd want to kill Hartman? He was kind of a funny guy, but he seemed pretty harmless to me. Who would want him dead?"

"Good question," Stanley said. "That's what we're trying to find out."

"I mean, half the building was in on the fun." Andrews gave them a lewd kind of grin. "Well, it was something to watch. Beat Leno, most nights. He could have sold tickets, made some bucks."

§ § § § §

"Two real witnesses," Stanley said when they were in the corridor. "You don't often get that kind of break, do you? And both of them got a good look at the perp."

"Cops don't say 'perp,' Stanley, that's on TV. And their stories don't exactly mesh. Acheson said he saw her running across the atrium with the gun, Clark says she was already running down the side hall when Acheson came out of his apartment."

"Probably nothing. People get sequences mixed up, don't they? That kind of detail. That was the whole

point of *Rashoman*.”

“So, what do you think?” Tom asked.

“*Rashoman*? It’s a classic, you mean you never...?”

“About our case. You know, the homicide. What do you think, as a *homicide detective*?” He gave the last two words a sarcastic inflection.

Stanley seemed not to notice the sarcasm. He was flattered to be asked his professional opinion, as a homicide detective. “I think we should get a damned good sketch,” he said cautiously, not sure what was expected of him.

“I mean, about the murder.”

“I think the building’s lost its chief source of entertainment.”

“Yeah. What a bunch of sickos, huh? Everybody hanging around their windows to watch this guy get his tool lubed.”

“What? You’ve never watched?”

“Me? No way. Oh, well, sure, a porn movie every now and then.”

“Guys and girls?”

Tom shot him a look. “Totally,” he said.

“Well, this Hartman sounds like he put on a pretty good show. Sorry I missed it, to tell the truth. I’ll bet Saturday nights won’t be the same around the old hacienda.”

“Uh, Stanley, not to keep harping on it, but, about the murder...”

“Oh, sure, the murder. Well, we just started. I don’t have it solved yet, exactly. Do you?”

“What about Miss Nancy?” Tom said.

“Nancy Drew? You dig her, too? I started reading her when I was twelve. *The Secret in the Old Clock*. That’s still my personal—”

“Miss Boom Boom,” Tom interrupted him. “She’s a drag queen—”

“Transgender.”

“Why is it transgender if I say it, and drag queen if they say it?”

“You’re a police officer. You’re supposed to be politically correct.”

Tom snorted. “So, as I was saying, she’s a drag queen, and a drag queen killed this guy. That’s a big coincidence, isn’t it?”

“Her boyfriend alibis her,” Stanley said. He liked the way that sounded when he said it, like real cop-speak. He thought he was handling this very professionally. His future as a homicide detective was looking more secure all the time. “She was with Acheson, according to both of them.”

“Might not mean anything. Think about it. The boyfriend likes to ogle the guy next door. Miss Trés Gaye gets jealous. Or, maybe old Jake did more than just watch from time to time. Maybe he was going over occasionally to borrow a cup of sugar, you know what I mean.”

“Hmm. Or maybe it was the other way around,” Stanley said. “Maybe it was Gaye Dawn who was paying neighborly visits. She strikes me as the sleazy sort. Did you see the way she looked you over? And her husband right there in the room.”

“So, why would she shoot Hartman, then?”

Stanley shrugged. “I didn’t say she did. Doesn’t seem likely, really. Think about it. This Jeremy guy heard the killer run out the other end of the building...”

“She could have circled around, come back in another way. That apartment building, what’s it called?”

“Casa Sanchez. Because it’s on Sanchez Street,” he added—unnecessarily, he thought.

"Well, it's a maze. You could get lost in the place without a map. Plus, there's a bunch of entrances. There's one at the other end of the building, too, on Dorland Street, I noticed that when we drove past. Probably one through the garage, too, maybe a tunnel up to one of those queer bars in the Castro for all we know. That could have been just to throw us off, the perp running all the way down to the side entrance like that. So we'd think he didn't live in the building."

Stanley thought a moment. "Maybe," he said, unconvinced. "I'd be happy to pin it on her, but to be honest, Gaye Dawn doesn't seem like the gun type to me."

"Whatever that is."

"Acheson, though. There was something funny about him."

"You picked up on it too? He was lying about something. Or there was something he wasn't telling us."

"Exactly. If there's one thing I know, it's when a man is trying to hide something from me. My ex—"

"Maybe something about the boyfriend. They're an odd pair, aren't they?"

"They have one thing in common," Stanley said. Tom raised an eyebrow. "They're both in love with Gaye Dawn."

Tom snorted. He was silent, thoughtful for a moment. "What do you suppose an apartment costs in a place like that?"

"That apartment? Three grand a month, probably. Maybe more."

"Pretty rich for a bartender. And it was furnished pretty grand."

"Oh, please, lots of money, no taste. You didn't think that was a real Aubusson, did you?"

"No, 'course I didn't," Tom said too quickly. "Still, like you say, lots of money. Do they make that kind of tips?"

"She works." Stanley screwed up his face. "Only, you can just bet she's a selfish little bitch. I can't see her spending her money on anyone but herself."

"I think you're right about that." Tom thought for another minute. "This last guy, Andrews, he had a good question. Who'd want to kill this guy Hartman?"

"That's always the sixty-four thousand dollar question, isn't it? Figure out the motive, according to Agatha Christie, and more often than not you've got the case solved. All we have to do is figure out the motive, right?"

Tom gave him a suspicious look. "Stanley, you've never actually worked a homicide investigation, right?"

"No, but how hard can it be? You collect all the clues and you put them together, and, *vóila*. I have read a lot of mystery novels."

"Great," Tom said. "So, now what? Got any ideas where we look for these clues?"

"Well." Stanley thought for a moment, and brightened. "Now we take a good look at Hartman's apartment, don't you think? Maybe we'll find the motive there."

"Maybe we'll find a baseball bat."

"You think Gaye Dawn was right? You think they cut them off for trophies?"

"Don't look so eager, Stanley. They wouldn't do home delivery with them."

§ § § § §

The apartment manager provided them with the key to Hartman's apartment.

"Should we wait for the techs?" Stanley asked.

"At the moment, it's not a crime scene," Tom said. "She shot the guy out there. If we find any more bodies inside, then we call the techs."

They both donned rubber gloves and let themselves in. Tom shook out a plastic evidence bag. A black



and white spotted cat ran out to greet them, purring and rubbing between Tom's legs.

"Uh oh, what about him?" Stanley asked.

"We'll call animal control. Unless you want some pussy?" He raised one eyebrow.

*Was that supposed to be a joke?* Sometimes you couldn't tell with these straight guys. "I'm into two legged pets."

The cat meowed plaintively and followed them down the short hall that led past the single bedroom—unmade queen sized bed, a dresser with a couple of drawers not quite closed. On the far side of the room, an open door gave a glimpse of the bathroom.

Past the bedroom, a small kitchen, with a sink full of dirty dishes, and beyond that, a gray Formica table with a laptop sitting on it and a wooden chair at either end. The rest of the apartment was living area—a tweedy brown sofa sagging on one end, a small screen television sitting on a book shelf unit, a pile of newspapers and magazines on the floor next to the sofa. The air was stale, like Hartman had already been gone a long time, or like the apartment already knew he wasn't coming back.

"Bachelor pad," Stanley said. "Straight bachelor pad."

"What's the difference?"

"No queen would live like this. Look at the curtains, for Heaven's sake, they don't match anything. And that sofa." He wrinkled his nose.

Tom glanced around the room, at the curtains and the sofa, his expression uncomprehending. "Looks okay to me." The look Stanley gave him was withering.

Tom shrugged. *Who understood fags?* "We'll take the computer down to the station," he said, unplugging it and dropping it into the bag. "Find anything?"

Stanley was already looking through the kitchen drawers. In his experience you could tell a lot about a person from their kitchen.

"Not much. He didn't do a lot of cooking. Nothing but TV dinners in the freezer. Wonder how he kept his strength up. Sounds like he was pretty athletic."

"Hey, check this out," Tom said, "An address book."

"Anything interesting?"

Tom flipped through the pages, pausing now and then to read. "Maybe a dozen names, that's all, with phone numbers. Huh. Lana La Rue. What kind of name is that?"

"Drag queen, I'll bet," Stanley said.

"Transgender."

"We already knew he hung out at that club, what'd Andrews call it—Carla's Web."

"Probably all drag queens." Tom shoved the address book into the evidence bag. "This him, you think?" he asked, picking up a framed photo from atop the television—a man in a sailor's uniform.

Stanley came to look past his shoulders, noticed his scent, something masculine and spicy. *Nix that*, he told himself firmly and focused on the photograph. "A few years ago, probably."

"Nice looking guy."

"Hot, really."

Tom gave him a look and added the picture to the bag. "Seems funny, doesn't it. Good looking guy, that big dick, you'd think he'd have women crawling all over him. Why'd he want to pick up drag queens?"

"Some guys dig it. A lot," Stanley said. "*Chacun a son gout.*"

"What's that mean."

"Each to his own. I like a little foreign tongue now and then."

“Jesus.” Tom grimaced. He stood one fist on his hip and pivoted slowly, his eyes doing a quick survey of the room. “No bodies. And doesn’t seem to be anything missing.”

“What makes you say that?”

“No dust-free spots where something had been sitting. No marks on the wall where pictures might have hung.”

“Golly. See, I’d never have thought about that.”

“I’m a homicide detective, Stanley.” *Meaning, Stanley thought, you’re not.* “What about the bedroom?” Tom said.

They went in there together. The walls were mirrored, and the bathroom door. Stanley glanced up. So was the ceiling.

“Kinky,” Tom said.

“Looks like the neighbors weren’t the only ones who liked to watch.”

Stanley went to the dresser and rifled through the drawers, found nothing but shirts, socks, underwear. “He liked thongs,” he commented. “Guess they’d show off the package better.” He held one up and eyed it wistfully.

Tom found a box of condoms in a nightstand. “Busy guy,” he said. “This is half empty.” He looked at the box. “Extra large.”

“What do you wear?” Stanley asked without thinking, because it was something that had been on his mind, and quickly added, “just as a matter of curiosity?”

“You don’t need to know. Ugh.” Tom had picked up a towel from the floor by the bed. It was stiff to the touch. “Jesus, it’s like a board. You wouldn’t think the guy would have any energy left for whacking off.” He dropped the towel and rubbed his hand down the leg of his trousers despite the rubber gloves he wore.

Stanley peeked into the bathroom. Like the rest of the apartment it was messy, not disgustingly so, not “pig sty” status, but not pristine, either. Towels on the floor, a kitty litter box, in need of cleaning, behind the door. “He didn’t spend a lot of time or energy on housework,” he said.

“Guess that wasn’t what the ladies were coming home to see,” Tom said. “Besides, he had to save his energy, didn’t he? Lucky stiff.” To Stanley’s surprise, Tom gave him a big smile. A funny kind of smile, as if he’d done it accidentally, before he remembered to frown. It made something do a little jig inside Stanley’s chest. Incongruously, it made him think of the sunlight, when he was a little boy back in Iowa, the way it rippled through the wheat on a summer day.

“Especially stiff,” Stanley said, suddenly embarrassed by how much the smile had pleased him. Police investigators didn’t think about sunny wheat fields, he felt pretty sure. He needed to keep himself focused on the job at hand. He was a homicide detective now. Or, he was going to be, as soon as he had solved his case.

Back in the living room, they found a collection of video tapes on a shelf under the television. “‘The Opening of Misty Beethoven,’” Stanley read labels. “‘Betty’s Big Night.’ ‘What The Maid Saw.’”

“Porn flicks,” Tom said. “What about these?” There were two cassettes by themselves on a lower shelf. “Looks like home videos.”

Stanley took them. “‘Our First Anniversary.’ ‘Weekend in Palm Springs.’ ‘Jay’s birthday.’”

“Probably nothing we can use. Better check them out, though.” Tom dropped the tapes into the evidence bag.

Tom gave the apartment a cursory glance. “Maybe we’ll have the techs take a look, just to be safe. I doubt they’ll find anything of value.”

“She shot him before they even got inside.”

“Yeah. Unless she was a regular. That Lana La Rue, maybe.”

"In which case, he'd hardly be surprised to find a dick on her," Stanley said. "If they'd done it before, he most likely would have noticed that."

"For sure I would have," Tom said, shaking his head. "Uh, so, Mister Detective Movie, now what do you think we should do?"

"I think..." Stanley screwed his face up for a moment. "I think now we see what the crime scene technicians found outside."

"Techs. And I'm betting not much there either."

Stanley noticed that before they left, Tom emptied a can of tuna into a dish for the grateful cat, and filled a companion bowl with water.

"No telling when the animal people will get here," he said gruffly.

§ § § § §

Tom's prediction turned out to be accurate.

"A few drops of blood on the landing, not much," the tech told them, "And all of it the victim's."

"It was raining," Stanley said. "Maybe it washed away?"

"Roof over that spot," the tech said.

"No reason why the perp would be bleeding, from what we've heard," Tom said. "Anything else?"

"I thought we didn't say 'perp,'" Stanley said.

"A shell," the tech said. "Twenty-two. If we get a gun, we can run a match on it. The victim had lipstick on his collar, some on his mouth, looked like they'd been doing some heavy smooching."

"Maybe we can track that down?" Tom said. "The lipstick, I mean."

"Unlikely. It's a common brand, you can get it at any Walgreens or Rite Aid, probably a million or two tubes sold every year. Every month, maybe. There were a couple of long, dark hairs on his lapel, we're checking those. Nothing under his nails. Didn't look like he'd put up any kind of fight. He was shot at close range. Very close. Poor bastard probably didn't know what hit him."

"That fits with what the witnesses have to say," Tom said. "The gunshot was muffled."

"Probably she shot him while they were smooching," Stanley said.

"Sounds pretty cold," Tom said. "What do you make of the body's position, at the top of the stairs like that? Could she, say, have dragged him back up the stairs for some reason, after he'd tumbled down them?"

The tech shook his head. "No bruises to suggest that. Nothing but the usual lividity underneath. It looks as if she caught him before he fell, by his lapels—they were twisted—and laid him out nice and neat like that."

"But why would she?" Stanley asked.

"A statement of some kind," Tom said. He thought for a minute. "Maybe they weren't strangers. Maybe they were old friends, lovers even. And she shot him on the spur of the moment, but she didn't want..." He shook his head. "No, that doesn't fit with what that Acheson said. The poor sap was surprised to find out she was a drag queen. If they were old friends, he'd have known that."

"Wait," Stanley said. "If they were smooching when she shot him, what about saliva? In his mouth, I mean. Maybe get some DNA? I saw that on a television show."

The tech gave him a funny look. "We did swabs. Waiting for the results."

§ § § § §

"But that's like the gun, isn't it?" Tom said when they were back at his desk. "It'll give us a match if we find the perp."

"I thought we didn't say 'perp.'"

"It's not against the law, I just said it's a television thing. Suspect, okay. If we find the suspect."

"Oh."

"So, like I was saying, the gun is evidence if we go to trial, but we'd have to come up with the perp first."

"Right," Stanley said. "You know, we're really thinking alike on this." He looked altogether pleased. Tom looked decidedly less so.

"So, the sixty-four thousand dollar question is, how do we do that?" Tom asked. "Come up with the perp? The suspect?" He lifted a challenging eyebrow in Stanley's direction.

Stanley thought for a minute. "You know, I keep thinking about that Acheson. Something still bothers me about him."

"Gaye Dawn bothered me," Tom said.

Stanley regarded him for a moment. "Not as in hot and bothered, I hope."

"Christ." Tom made a disgusted grimace. "What'd you want to go and say something like that for?"

"I catch that slut poaching on my turf, she won't need to strap her balls down, I'll pull them off."

Tom stared at him open-mouthed.

"What?" Stanley said, all studied innocence. "No one messes with my man."

"Uh, just for the record—I'm not your man. Plus, I didn't know they strapped their balls down."

"Well, sure, their dicks, too. Otherwise, they'd show, wouldn't they?"

"Doesn't it hurt?"

"Beauty is painful. Come on," Stanley said. He started for the door.

"Where are we going?"

"Field work. I know some people who hang out at The Boom Boom Room. They've got to know Acheson, and Gaye Dawn. Maybe they can tell us something."

"Acheson bothered me too, now that you mention it. There was something he wasn't telling us."

"Fine. It's okay being bothered by Acheson."

"Just as a matter of curiosity, what's the difference?"

"He's a dork. She is a total bitch. And a man stealer if I ever saw one."

## CHAPTER FOUR

The house Stanley took them to was in Diamond Heights, in the hills above the Castro, with a view that stretched all the way to downtown, and a glimpse of the Bay Bridge and Oakland in the far distance.

"How the other half lives," Tom said while they waited for someone to answer the doorbell.

"Or pretends," Stanley said.

A thin Asian man in a fuchsia silk shirt opened the door.

"Hi," Stanley said, "we came by to see Peter."

"Uh, come in." He looked Tom up and down, apparently liked what he saw. "I'm Lotus Blossom. Peter's in the kitchen."

"We'll wait," Stanley said, and added, "Marvin."

"Did he say Lotus Blossom?" Tom asked in a whispered aside to Stanley. "What kind of name is that?"

Marvin heard him. "Lotus Blossom. The Star of the East, Jewel of the Orient, The Bright and Morning

Sun.” He smiled at Tom. “Stanley,” he added, the smile fading. “Would anyone like a drink?”

“We’ll pass,” Stanley said, and Tom said, at the same moment, “Yes. Bourbon. Straight. Lots of it.”

“Peter, we need a couple of clean glasses in here,” Marvin called in the direction of the kitchen.

“Isn’t that just like a fucking faggot,” a voice came back from the kitchen. “Suck cock all night long and won’t drink out of a dirty glass.”

“I’m out of here,” Tom said.

“Oh, don’t go off mad, it makes mean kids,” Marvin said, reaching to take Tom’s arm.

Stanley swatted the hand away, none too gently. “Come along,” he said to Tom, steering him toward the living room and well clear of Marvin.

“If you like swimming with barracudas,” Marvin mumbled, following in their wake.

“Fear not, you’re safe with me.” Stanley glowered over his shoulder at Marvin. “I’ll kill the first queen that lays a hand on you.” His eyes swept the room. Its occupants were too obviously happy to see Tom. “That goes for all of you. Hi, girls.”

“Stanley,” Peter cried, carrying two drinks in from the kitchen. Peter looked like a college linebacker and walked like a ballerina. He air-kissed in the vicinity of Stanley’s cheeks, balancing the drinks carefully. “What brings you to my little salon? And what’s this, an early birthday present?” Approving eyes quickly surveyed Tom’s substantial frame.

“Peter, Tom, Tom, Peter. And it’s business, I’m afraid,” Stanley said.

“Some business,” Peter said, leering.

“Police business,” Tom added, turning red. He glanced briefly at the men strewn about the living room. He thought of an aquarium filled with brightly colored tropical fish. The fish eyed him in return like a handful of brine shrimp.

“Ah, I heard you were a policewoman now,” Peter said to Stanley.

“Homicide detective.” Stanley beamed. Tom shot him a scornful look.

“Well, I’m flattered that you’ve come to me, of course,” Peter said, “but I do hope this isn’t about the white lady, I’d hate to see her go. Shoo, girls, make room for our guests.” He waved a hand at a trio seated on an ecru-colored leather sofa. Its occupants sighed and shifted, two of them moving to chairs and one scooting to the far end. Tom and Stanley sat, Stanley carefully directing Tom to the opposite end and parking himself between him and the sofa’s other occupant. Tom popped a stick of gum into his mouth, chewed vigorously.

“The Boom Boom Room,” Stanley said. “Tell us about it.”

“What a dump,” the young man at the end of the sofa said, in a surprisingly good imitation of Bette Davis.

“It’s one of the bartenders we’re interested in, actually,” Stanley said. “Jake Acheson. Know him?”

Peter nodded. “Jake the fake? Sure, I know him.”

“Why do you call him that?” Stanley asked.

Peter glanced around at the others. Lotus Blossom Marvin shrugged and blew him a kiss. “It’s your party, you can die if you want to,” he said.

“It’s what we all call him. It’s just... well, he never seems to know what he is, I guess is why. He was married, you know? To a woman, I mean.”

“We knew that,” Tom said.

“Only, it wasn’t a real marriage, if you know what I mean.”

“Hmm, I’m not sure I do,” Stanley said. “You mean, it was just for appearances sake? Like, she was his beard?”

"No, not even that, exactly." Peter tented his hands together, rested his chin on them. "I think it was real, on her part, maybe, and from the way he talked, he really seemed to want to make it work. He wanted kids, I think, not for his own sake, so much, more like, to make his family happy, but... well, we got really tanked one night after closing, and I asked him, kind of, like, are you really bisexual, and he said—I was drunk too, so I may not be quoting him exactly—he said he thought he was, he wanted to be, but, when they got down to the deed, he couldn't do it. He said he'd be stiff as a rail. I got the impression she gave great head, or maybe he was just one of those minute men, you touch it and up it springs. Only, when he tried to get in the saddle, it died on him, went soft as fast as it got hard."

"That must have been tough on his bride," Tom said.

"Oh, she knew about it before they got married. They tried it on before. A lot of times, I think."

"So why would they get married, you wonder," Tom said.

"Well, I think it was like, that didn't matter to her. And there was this family thing. His family. Shaker Heights, you know. Old money, proper society."

"Ah," Stanley said. "She married him for the money."

Peter shook his head. "I don't think it was that either, not exactly. I don't think they were, well, what you'd actually call rich. Not super rich, anyway. Daddy's some kind of political figure, conservative, and Mommy's very religious, family goes back to the Mayflower, or maybe it was the Santa Maria. Anyway, the folks may have had an inkling that junior was queer. I gather they encouraged the marriage, for whatever reason. And, they may have been generous with the newlyweds."

"Like, paying their rent?"

"Maybe. That place they're living is pretty expensive."

"So, Mommy and Daddy pressure them, and they get married," Tom said, "even though he can't do the deed."

"I guess a time or two, she watched him jerk off, and she seemed to think that was okay. So, he figured, if she was cool with that. And I think maybe he thought in time it would get better."

"But it didn't?" Stanley was trying to fit the image of the limp-dick husband to the Jake Acheson he'd met earlier. If anything, you'd think Gaylord would make him go limp.

"I don't actually know," Peter said with a shrug. "I can't really say. The problem was, he met someone."

"Gaye Dawn?" Stanley suggested. Peter nodded.

"She used to be called Gaye Sunset," Marvin said. "But she did such a rotten job going down, they had to change it."

"And that's when they got divorced?"

"Not right away. See, she was back east. The wife, I mean. Back in Shaker Heights. And he came to San Francisco to look for a job, and he ended up at the Room. They were still married then. That's when he and I got drunk together. He's kind of cute, in a way." He looked from Tom to Stanley. Tom looked back at him blankly, but Stanley nodded.

"In a nerdy way," he said. "Personally, I prefer someone a little butcher." Peter glanced in Tom's direction again. Tom stared stonily back at him. Peter looked away first.

"Anyway, that's where he met Gaye. For a while, I didn't realize anything was happening. The management kind of frowns on that between employees."

"The girls are supposed to hustle the customers," one of the group said.

Peter frowned at him. "Maybe you ought to remember who we're talking to here," he said.

"What, Tillie Law? They'd have to be pretty stupid not to know that already. Nobody pays their rent on what they make singing and dancing in a drag club."

"Not in that dump, for sure," Marvin said.

Peter turned away from him. “After a while, though, I could see what was happening. And one night, Jake told me he’d written the wife a Dear Jen letter. It wasn’t two weeks later when she showed up at the bar, looking fit to kill. They had a big ruckus, the three of them. Gaye’s got a fierce temper, throws things... one of these days...” He paused to shake his head.

“I wasn’t actually there that night, so I can’t say what all went on. The wife stormed out, so I heard, and Jake and Gaye got a good dressing down. But later the bosses decided it was okay if the two of them wanted to play on the side—Gaye’s one of the more popular entertainers...” Marvin snorted, but Peter ignored him. “And Jake’s a good bartender. They just had to cool it at work, was the thing. No more scenes, and no screwing around on the job. Sort of like, what they did after hours was their own business.”

“But Acheson and the wife stayed married,” Tom said. “Wonder why.”

Peter shook his head. “The family, maybe. Might have been some money involved. Maybe she was still trying to figure out how to get some out of them. I don’t think it was love.”

Lotus Blossom tittered.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Back at the station, they ran Gordon Hartman’s home movies. They were the usual family thing, of interest to the people in them, maybe a few relatives. Terminal boredom for anyone else.

For the most part, it was Hartman and a woman Stanley assumed was his wife, and their son—Jay, wasn’t it?—a little boy in the oldest scenes, growing up before their eyes as the tape ran, eighteen or nineteen years old in the last of them. Scenes at a party—presumably, to judge from the label, their wedding anniversary. The son was youngest in this one, maybe four years old, so, logically, their fifth anniversary. And other domestic scenes, a few with an older couple, presumably the grandparents. Shots of the family cavorting around a swimming pool, father and son diving, splashing one another, flipping towels, mother watching with tolerant affection from a lounge chair.

Stanley studied Gordon Hartman intently. He was a reasonably good looking man, not breathtaking, but the type who was probably far more attractive in person, chatting with you, than he would appear in pictures. He had a nice smile, good teeth—and a basket that was hard to miss, particularly in the swimming suit. But even in loose fitting slacks you could see its outline swinging to and fro when he walked toward the camera. You had the impression that he was altogether aware of the showing. Like, he could have worn jockeys. Despite himself, Stanley smiled. He kind of liked a cocky man. He could see how that might have helped Hartman get elected to the board of supervisors. In San Francisco, especially.

It wasn’t much of a clue, though, to why he’d been murdered.

“See anything?” Tom asked.

Stanley shrugged and put the tapes back in their sleeves. “Not at first showing. Let me take these home and play with them a bit. Maybe something will jump out at me.”

Tom said, “I want to take another poke at that Acheson. Gaye Dawn, too.”

“I’ll bet she feels the same.”

Stanley’s cell phone rang, a snippet from Can-Can. It was Barry Andrews, Hartman’s neighbor. “I thought of something,” he said. “You probably know this anyway, but Hartman and Acheson were chummy.”

“Acheson? The guy across the way? Like, they were buddies?”

“Umm, not buddies, I guess, more like...” he hesitated, sounding embarrassed. “I think they had something going, kind of. I saw Acheson leaving Hartman’s apartment a couple of times late at night, you know, kind of slipping out, the way a guy does when he’s catting around. I figured it was just some boom-boom stuff.”

“As in room?” Stanley said.

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Thanks for telling us.”

He shared the information with Tom, who said, “I knew it. We should go back there.”

Stanley considered that briefly. “No, I think we need to get him alone. If he was really slipping around, getting a little action on the side...”

“I thought him and Gaye Dawn were a thing,” Tom said.

“Give me a break. What’s love got to do with anything? Acheson was practically drooling over Hartman’s wang. My guess is he decided to see if he could get a close up. But I doubt he’s going to tell us about that with Gaye at his side.” He smiled sweetly. “Unless you want to distract her while I question him. Maybe take her in the other room, find some way to occupy her?”

“We can catch him at work, can’t we?” Tom said. “So, now we...?”

“Now, we go find our drag queen,” Stanley said. He added, before Tom could say it, “Transgender.”

“Well, you’re the expert on that subject,” Tom asked. “Where do we look?”

Stanley glanced sideways at him. “If you’re looking for a bear, you go to bear country, right? So where would we look for drag queens, Mister Detective?”

Another silence. “You mean, drag bars?”

“Wow. They were right,” Stanley said. “You are quick.”

“No way. I’m not hanging around any fag bars. Especially not with any chicks with dicks.”

Stanley might not have heard his objections. “We’ve got two places already, although God knows there’s no shortage of drag in San Francisco, this is the sequin capitol of the world.” He thought for a moment. “I think we’ll save the Boom Boom Room for last. I still haven’t altogether written off Miss Gaye Dawn either.”

“I’m not going...”

“Tom, honey...”

“Don’t call me honey.”

“Sugar, we’re looking for a drag queen killer. We aren’t going to find her at a baseball game, right?” He giggled. “Despite the frequent references to baseball bats.”

Tom huffed resignedly. He had to admit, Stanley’s “special insights” might be of some use in this investigation. “So, where then?”

“Carla’s Web. We’ll start there. Pick me up at eight. And, Tom? Try to look butch, okay?”

§ § § § §

Tuesday was Petaluma day, when Stanley visited his Dad. He had lunch first with his friend, Chris. He and Chris went way back, to high school. At one time, briefly, they’d been an item, and had decided things worked better for them as friends.

“This way,” as Chris put it, “we can talk, without our mouths full.”

Chris was eager to hear all about Stanley’s first homicide case. Stanley filled him in on what they knew so far. “Which,” he said when he was finishing his narration, “Isn’t much. Yet.”

They were at their usual hangout; a little coffee shop in the Castro called *The Cove*. The owner, Solange, came to fill their coffee cups, chatted for a minute, and drifted off to other customers. Chris had just finished a shift on his nursing job, was still in scrubs.

“So, this cop you’re working with,” Chris said, “the straight one. What’s he like?”

“A fag hater. Total Neanderthal. Carries a big club. Wears a loin cloth.”

“What’s he look like?”



“An ape, sort of.”

“He’s really ugly?”

Stanley avoided his glance. “No, I don’t think I’d say that, exactly. I mean, he’s got these big shoulders, massive chest, kind of short in the legs—and he’s hairy. Like a gorilla. It’s more the impression you get of him. When I called him an ape, I mean.”

Chris puzzled over that for a moment. “Like, an attractive gorilla? Is that what you’re trying to say?”

“Well, yes, sort of. Sort of attractive, I mean.”

Chris narrowed his eyes. “Stanley, this isn’t going to be another one of your swan dives, is it?”

“Swan dives?”

“You know, like those belly smackers you did in high school. You remember.”

“I do remember them,” Stanley said in a frosty voice, “I don’t see what that has to do with my Neanderthal.”

Chris gave him a wry smile. “It’s the way you always go at men, honey, like you were doing one of your swan dives. You leap at them, and land on them, kersplat. You totally crush them before anything gets going.”

Stanley glowered at him. “That is so ridiculous,” he said. “I’ve never crushed anyone. And for your information, my relationship with this man is strictly business. We have a crime to solve together. There is absolutely, positively nothing beyond that.”

Chris shook his head sadly. “Oh, dear. He’s hot, isn’t he?”

“Furthermore, for your information, that particular store is closed, the doors nailed shut, the windows boarded over. I am out of the romance business, completely and absolutely.”

“He *is* hot,” Chris said.

“Totally. To kill for.”

“Another swan dive,” Chris said in a weary voice. He waved a hand. “Solange, honey, could I have some more coffee?” And, sotto voce, “I’m going to need it.”



It was an hour’s drive to Petaluma, to Home Gardens. Stanley had always thought it sounded so much cozier than what it really was—an ugly post-Victorian building dropped down in the middle of two or three badly landscaped acres—a few scraggly trees and some shrubs in the front, crying out for water. The building’s façade was painted a ghastly almost-pink, like raw chicken thighs. The gray columns on the front porch showed signs of dandruff.

The nurse at the front desk sent him out back—the “Gardens” part of it. At least there was grass here, in clumps that separated the plain cement terraces, cement because the patients who didn’t shuffle around with canes and walkers were in wheelchairs, and the bare cement made it easier for them to move about, although they had to do a kind of checkerboard jitterbug to get from here to there.

Peter Korski was in one of the wheelchairs. Stanley found him sitting with an attendant, a little plump nurse dressed in the same gray and unhealthy looking pink. She looked glad to be relieved of her charge. There was a TV tray nearby with some dishes stacked on it.

“You’ve just missed lunch,” she told Stanley, “but if you’re hungry, I think there’s some compost left.”

“Umm, which is what, exactly?”

“Oh, it’s just canned fruit salad. They call it a compost of fruit because it sounds dressier.” She glanced at the older Korski, who so far had taken no notice of them. “He’s quiet today. You take your time now, dear, have a nice visit. I’ll check back with you in a bit.”

*He’s always quiet with me*, Stanley wanted to say, but he only smiled at her and stood waiting until she’d gone

away, already lighting up a cigarette as she went. Watching her go, looking like an overworked wad of bubble gum, was a way of stalling, of putting off looking at his father, knowing what he would see.

When he turned back, his father was watching him, staring stonily, the same aggrieved expression with which he always looked at his son. Even when his mind was still functioning properly, he'd looked at him that way. Everything else about his thought processes seemed to have changed, everything but that. He still hated his son. Ever since the night Stanley had confessed to him, told him he was queer.

"I brought you some chocolates, Dad," Stanley said, holding the box out to him. His father glanced at it, and away. Stanley put the box gently on his lap. "The ones you like so much," he said, "with the mint centers."

He sat down on the chair the attendant had vacated. "I'm sort of celebrating," he said. "I got promoted to homicide. A murder case, a really high profile murder case. A supervisor. This..." he started to say "drag queen" and caught himself. His father hated anything to do with homosexuals, anything that even suggested them. "...This woman shot him. They want it solved yesterday. And they especially wanted me on the case. My first one. Isn't that great?"

His father gave no sign that he'd heard him. Paid no attention to him at all. Past the last concrete patch of The Garden's terrace, a rusty iron fence enclosed an old cemetery, the irony of the proximity seemingly unremarked by the residents of either site. Peter Korski stared in the direction of a stone angel that stood on a rise in the distance. The box of chocolates sat untouched on his lap. There was no sign that he was even aware of them. Or of Stanley.

When Stanley left an hour later, his throat dry from the running monologue he'd kept up throughout his visit, the box of chocolates was on the ground, slipped off his father's lap, or pushed there, it was hard to say which. After that first angry glower, his father hadn't even looked at him, not even when Stanley had stood up and said, "Well, I've got to go, Dad, I'm working tonight. On my murder case. I'm in homicide now, did I say?"

He picked up the chocolates, started to put them on his dad's lap again, and changing his mind, tucked them under his arm instead. He put a gentle hand on his father's shoulder, was painfully aware of how thin and bony it was. "You should try to eat more," he said.

The attendant saw him leaving and hurried up. "Had a nice visit, did you, dear?" she asked.

"Lovely," Stanley said. He handed her the chocolates. "He didn't seem to want these," he said. "Maybe the staff..."

"Oh, he'll change his mind, I'm sure," she said. She looked back at the senior Korski, still unmoving. "Makes you rethink how you live your days, doesn't it?" she said. "When you see how you're going to end up."



He called his sister, Irene, on the way back to San Francisco, although he already knew just how the conversation would go—how it always went.

"Stanley, I can't just take off anytime I want," she said, "I've got a family, a husband and kids. And it's a long drive for me. You're so much closer, it takes you, what, an hour, forty-five minutes, to get there?"

"Irene, it isn't like you'd have to travel for weeks in a covered wagon," Stanley said. "You could make it in one day, down and back. Besides, he's your dad. I'm sure he would love to see you."

"He's your dad, too. And I know he loves it when you visit."

"He doesn't, Irene," Stanley said. "You know he doesn't. He never cared for me. You were the important one."

"Oh, now you're just feeling sorry for yourself. All those old quarrels, can't you just let them go? Why do you hang on to them like this?"

"He called me a sissy. A queer. He said I disgusted him. I still do."

“Well, maybe that’s because you never tried. You never made any effort to change your lifestyle, Stan.”

“It isn’t my ‘lifestyle,’ Irene, it’s who I am. What I am. I’m queer.”

“And you don’t have to use that word, either. You could say homosexual, that’s the proper term, isn’t it? And there’s no law that says you have to stay that way, I’m sure. People can change themselves if they really want to. You chose to be what you are. You’re still choosing it. Why blame your father for that?”

It was the same old argument they had every time the subject came up. His sister was an intelligent woman. She had a PhD in English. It was just common sense she lacked, he supposed.

## CHAPTER SIX

Back in his apartment, Stanley ran Hartman’s home videos again, fast forward, looking for anything he’d missed the first time through. Hartman hadn’t changed much over the years covered by the tapes: pale yellow hair that would probably never really turn gray, and the kind of reedy body that, even if he didn’t work at it, would never run to fat.

Of course, he’d change now. Dust to dust. Or ashes, maybe. He made a mental note to see if arrangements had been made for the body. Not because he thought it made any difference to the case, more out of curiosity than anything else.

Mrs. Hartman—Dora, according to the tapes label—hadn’t fared quite so well. She’d put on pounds, started out slim, got plumper and rounder with each segment. She was little, dark hair and eyes, a Mediterranean complexion—she could have been Italian or Spanish. Or the other side of the pond, for that matter. Even plump, though, she was still pretty, in a blowzy kind of way.

The son took after her in size—he was on the small side, too young to say if he’d follow her into plumpness. He’d gotten her coloration, too, and his father’s crotch. And a manner somewhere in between the two.

Stanley found himself wondering where the son was now. He had that look about him, not feminine, exactly, but on the journey from little boy to young man he had acquired a way of holding himself, of moving about, that suggested tea dances rather than soccer games.

Stanley rewound the tape a bit, looked again at a couple of shots of him, tried to imagine him in drag. He could see it, the possibility. But so what? He couldn’t think of what motive this unknown young man could have for killing his father. Even harder was to imagine how father and son could have found themselves in the scene staged outside Hartman’s apartment. Anything was possible... He’d mention it to Tom.

But, apart from that, he couldn’t see anything here that was even marginally useful. Stanley booted up his computer and started a search for Gordon Hartman.

He’d been working at the keyboard for half an hour or so when the doorbell rang. It was Tom. He had followed instructions—or maybe it was just the way he normally dressed when he was off duty. Whatever, he looked butch indeed, Stanley was pleased to see, very butch, and good enough to eat—north to south, east to west and all points in between. Leather jacket, battered motorcycle boots, tight, faded Levi’s all too conspicuously crowded in the front.

Stanley found himself flashing on Gordon Hartman in an obviously too skimpy bathing suit. He wondered if Tom qualified for the baseball team as well. Wondered how much of his showing was accidental and how much deliberate. He too could have worn jockey shorts. On a bet, Stanley thought there was probably nothing between him and the jeans but a thin film of sweat. Salty to the tongue. If a tongue got so lucky.

“Hubba hubba,” he said, stepping back to take inventory.

“Knock it off,” Tom said, blushing, although Stanley did not miss that he looked pleased, too. Well, even straight men liked compliments. “This isn’t for your benefit.”

"There's no law says I can't get some peripheral pleasure out of it," Stanley said. "Oh, if you're wondering about that big word, peripheral—that just means rim. You've heard that term, haven't you?"

"Rim? Sure. There's a town up near Arrowhead, called Rim of the World," Tom said, deadpan. He handed Stanley a stack of photo copies. "Our suspect," he said.

Stanley took the copies, looked long and hard at the sketches of their drag queen. "I've named her Bella Donna," he said.

"Bella... uh... Why?"

"The villains always have cute names in mystery novels. It means Beautiful Woman." He crooked a finger in Tom's direction. "Let me show you."

There was a vase on the kitchen counter, a large sprig of foliage with blue-purple flowers, bell shaped, and shiny black berries. Stanley took the stem from the vase, handed it to Tom.

"That's belladonna," he said.

Tom looked at it. "It's pretty," he said. He plucked one of the shiny black berries from the plant, rolled it in his hand. "Are these edible?" he asked, popping it into his mouth.

"Not if you want to live a long life. It's also called deadly nightshade. Deadly is the operative word."

Tom spat the berry into the sink next to Stanley. "Jesus, if it's so deadly, why do you have it around the place?" he asked. He filled a glass with water, swished it around in his mouth, and spit, did it again just in case.

"Because it's beautiful. Like Gaye Dawn. Like our drag queen. The witnesses said she was beautiful. And we know she was deadly." He took the stem back from Tom and returned it to the vase. "Come on, butch, let me show you what I've been doing with my hands while I was waiting for you."

"I'm not sure..."

"On the computer," Stanley said. He led the way into a small front room mostly dominated with a widescreen television, a couple of chairs arranged in front of it for maximum viewing, and a computer against one wall.

"You'll notice, everything's color coordinated," he said. He went to the computer, played with the keyboard. A face appeared on the screen.

"Hartman," he said. "I've been checking him out, looking for some kind of clue."

Tom nodded, impressed despite himself. "Good idea," he said. "So, what did you find?"

Stanley shook his head. "Not much, to tell you the truth. Aside from that monster wienie, there is almost nothing remarkable about Gordon Hartman. He was a bookkeeper, before his supervisor gig. You don't get much more ho-hum than that, do you? He was married, like Andrews said." He played with the keyboard. A woman's face replaced Hartman's on the monitor.

"The wife, Dora. They separated about a year ago. She was in Sacramento, quit her job about two weeks back. Seems to have disappeared since then."

"Maybe something there?"

"No, she was a real woman, we're looking for a drag queen. Unless she hired one to kill her ex."

"Doesn't seem likely."

"And here's their son, Jay. He's kind of pretty, and he's little. If I had to bet money, I'd say he's gay. So, it's remotely possible that he's our drag queen."

"Doesn't seem likely, either, does it? Wouldn't hurt to check him out, though. Where's he live?"

"San Diego. Goes to school there. Theater major." The screen changed.

"Who's that?"

"Acheson. A while ago. Looks like it was taken at the wedding, or the reception, maybe."

“Huh.” Tom studied the picture. There was a woman next to Acheson, and an older couple on his other side. They were standing outside in a tree filled yard, people milling in the background.

“He looks different,” Tom said, studying Acheson’s image. “Not just younger. Different.”

“You’re right.” Stanley scrutinized him too. “More, I don’t know, more hopeful, maybe. He’s got a, what, an angry look today, doesn’t he? Or disappointed, maybe. That’s the parents. And the wife.”

The photographer had caught the others standing in bright sunlight, but Moira Acheson was off to the side, in the shade of a tree.

“Hard to tell much about her, isn’t it?” Tom said. “She didn’t strike me as shy.”

“Some people don’t like having their pictures taken,” Stanley said. “Not much on her. She lives in Noe Valley. That’s just over the hill from the Castro. I’ve got her address, phone number. That’s about it.”

“Nothing on Miss Gaye?”

Stanley raised an eyebrow at him. “What, you want cheesecake? She’s not that big a star. Come on, let’s go trolling.”

He switched off the computer, took a necktie off the back of his chair, and started to knot it around his throat.

“Uh, Stanley—never wear a necktie on this kind of job, okay?”

“Why? Too grand? I thought the contrast was kind of cute, you all construction biker look, and me the preppy. Makes us look like a real couple, don’t you think?”

“I saw a guy get choked one time with his Windsor knot,” Tom said. “I could choke you myself, before you even knew what was happening.”

“Oh.” Stanley thought a minute and undid the necktie. “Okay, no ties. I don’t want any Windsor choking me. Unless it was Harry, and not with his necktie. He’s kind of cute, don’t you think? You have to sort of wonder about the royal scepter, it seems...”

“Uh, Stan...”

“Stanley.”

“That bulge in your jacket there—that isn’t your gun, is it?”

“Eyes like a hawk,” Stanley said.

“You’re supposed to carry it in your holster.” Tom opened his own jacket to show the shoulder holster, with his gun in it. “See.” He demonstrated how quickly it could be drawn.

“Oh, please, have you even noticed my figure? I tried wearing the holster. It ruined the line of my outfit completely. I looked like I had one tittle under my armpit. Don’t worry, I won’t shoot myself.”

Tom looked as if he were about to offer a reply to that, and thought better of it. “Let’s check out this Carla’s place,” he said instead.



Carla’s Web was in one of those transitional neighborhoods, somewhere between high-end and seedy, just showing a definite tilt toward the latter. A long and narrow—and badly lighted—parking lot occupied one side of the club, and what looked to have been a fairly posh eatery on the other side was closed, with a big “for sale” sign on the door. There were some retail shops: a flower store, a Dunkin’ Donuts, an office complex.

“Good thing it’s a department car,” Tom said, parking in the dark lot next to the bar, “I’d hate to leave my own wheels in this place.”

“Let me guess,” Stanley said. “A Jeep?”

Tom gave him a sideways glance. “Pick up truck. A Ram.”

"Sounds appropriate." Stanley nodded.

"What? You think I should be driving a Buick?"

"They ride nicely."

"Old lady's car."

"I drive a Buick."

"Case closed."

"I'm not old."

"You're queer. Same thing."

A huge dyke sat behind a table at the front door, under a sign that said, "We card everyone." She gave them a fishy look as they came in and nodded them through.

"You're not going to ID me?" Stanley asked, looking up at a security camera over her table. "What if I'm under age?"

"More likely under him," she said, indicating Tom.

"Never happen," Tom muttered.

Stanley leaned back to stage whisper, "I'm working on it."

They went through a curtained doorway and found themselves in a big rectangle of a room. A crowded bar ran down one side, and a brightly lit stage dominated the far wall, with a trio of drag queens in World War Two WAAC uniforms lip synching Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy, alternately wagging their fingers and their tails at the raucously approving audience. The room was crowded, mostly couples sitting at tables the size of salad plates. The stags were all at the bar.

A short, plump woman dressed in Little House on the Prairie flounces hurried up, giving Stanley a hard smile and Tom an appreciative once over. "Table, Big Boy?" she simpered.

"We'll take the bar," Stanley said.

She gave him a frosty look and gestured in that direction. "Help yourself. Bring it back when you're done."

Tom led the way, making a path about the scattered tables in the direction of the bar, Stanley trailing half a step behind him, hurrying to keep up. Tom looked around with an odd combination of curiosity and nonchalance, somehow managing to give the impression that he was by himself, that Stanley's presence was nothing more than mere coincidence.

"I don't get it," Tom said, without looking at Stanley, like he was talking to himself. "Half the people in here are couples. Man-woman couples. Or aren't those real women?"

Stanley caught up with him, managed to fall in step. "It's a tourist trap," he said. "You didn't notice that big red bus out front? These folks are from Sioux City, probably, or Oshkosh. Enjoying a sampling of the wicked life in the big city."

"So why aren't we sitting at a table?" Tom asked. "Why the bar? For us, I mean?"

"That's where the gays sit."

Tom stopped so abruptly that Stanley had actually gone a step or two past him and had to look back. "I don't want to sit where the gays sit," Tom said.

Stanley took his arm in what might have been an intimate gesture, but his grip was ferociously tight. "We need to talk to people. We aren't going to do that sitting at a table in a corner. Unless, darling, you were planning on turning this into a romantic interlude just between the two of us. In that case, I see an empty table back in the far corner, and our investigation can wait." He fluttered his eyelashes in Tom's direction.

"The bar will be fine," Tom said.

They had brought copies of the sketches of their suspect. Both the witnesses had been satisfied that it was

a good likeness of the killer.

"They're pretty good, too, better than what one usually gets," Tom had said. Acheson and Clark had both been right, though. "She looks, I don't know, unreal. She doesn't exactly look like a woman, does she?"

"Think dark bar," Stanley said. "This is not daylight makeup."

Stanley showed the sketches to the bartender who took their order, a thin, dispirited imitation of Tina Turner. "We're looking for a friend of ours, from Denver," Stanley explained. "She came here three months ago looking to land a job in a drag show, and she just disappeared. Look familiar?"

"Who can tell?" Tina asked, "All the makeup. Must have put it on with a trowel. Anyway, sweetie, the drag queens in and out of this place, I can't keep track. If you laid 'em all end to end, I wouldn't be surprised. Maybe Lola can help you." She signaled past them.

An enormous apparition appeared in front of them, a towering black man-woman in a skintight crimson sheath, sparkling with so many sequins it made them blink. She sized them up through dark lashes that looked a foot long, her attention quickly settling on Tom.

"They're looking for a friend," the bartender said, handing the photocopies across the bar. "Anyone you know?"

Lola looked hard at the drawings, and back at the pair seated at the bar. "These look like police sketches," she said. "Of someone who hasn't mastered makeup one-oh-one."

"They are police sketches, sort of," Tom said, giving her a sheepish grin. "A friend of ours back in Denver, a policeman friend, did the sketches. Best he could do. Does she look familiar?"

"So what's the deal with you two?" Lola asked Tom's lap.

Stanley took Tom's hand in his. "If you really want to know, we're on our honeymoon. We just thought since we're here, we'd try to find our friend. Missy, she used to call herself."

"Your honeymoon? You two are supposed to be lovers? Like I'm going to believe that?" Lola snorted derisively. "You're cops, right?"

"Us? Don't be ridiculous," Stanley said. "What makes you say that?"

"You look like cops. He does, anyway. He looks straight, too. You look as queer as a three dollar bill."

Tom laughed. "He is," he said.

"Okay," Stanley said, "cops don't kiss, do they. Not a straight cop and one who's as queer as a three dollar bill." He leaned toward Tom and kissed him on the mouth, quickly, before Tom had time to see it coming.

For a second or two, he could feel Tom resisting, preparing to pull away. Stanley brought his hand up, ran it through Tom's dark hair, pulled on one curl hard. Tom got the message.

In more ways than one. When Stanley explored with his tongue, Tom opened his mouth, and his own tongue came out to welcome him. To Stanley's surprise, it was a very nice kiss. And very torrid.

For a moment, anyway. Then Tom bit down on Stanley's tongue, hard. Stanley grunted and gave his hair another serious pull. Tom opened his teeth, and Stanley pulled away.

"Gosh, lover, you get rough sometimes," he said, managing a little laugh.

"I can get rougher," Tom said with a mean grin.

"Okay, okay, I can tell the difference between a real kiss and a fake one," Lola said. "But you guys are weird, I'll say that for you." She handed the photos back. "Never saw her. I don't do circus clowns."

"What about him?" They had brought the shot of Gordon Hartman as well, a young Gordon Harman in a sailor suit. Stanley handed her one of those.

"Who's he, the husband?"

"In a manner of speaking. Does he look familiar?"

She barely glanced at the photo, handed it back so fast it might have been aflame. "Never saw him either."

She walked away. Tom waited until she was out of hearing range. “All right,” he said through clenched teeth, “What the fuck was that about?”

“What, the pictures?”

“The kissing shit.”

“Part of the job,” Stanley said. “You heard her. She was about to blow our cover. Sometimes a cop has to do things he doesn’t want to do. You know that. It comes up in movies all the time.”

They glowered at one another for a moment. Tom was the first to back down. “Okay,” he said, “But only when we have to, and only for the job. And for the record, I did not enjoy it.”

“You didn’t enjoy it?”

“Didn’t I just say that? Let me make it clearer. I hated it. It made me want to puke, if you want to know the truth.”

“Well, if you hated it so much, why was your dick starting to get hard?”

“What were you doing checking out my dick? For sure my dick’s not a part of our cover.”

“Sugar, when King Kong’s in town, you’re likely to spot him climbing up the side of a building. It’s kind of hard not to notice that monkey of yours when he starts to stir.”

“Well I don’t care what he was doing, it doesn’t mean anything. He stirs a lot, sometimes for no reason at all, just because he’s restless, looking for attention, maybe. That’s just how he is. The point is, I didn’t like what you did and don’t you forget that, okay?”

“Uh, while you’re protesting, too loudly, it seems like to me, could I mention something about our case?”

“Such as?”

“Did you notice that she was lying? Lovely Lola, I mean.”

Tom looked after the drag queen. It was dark in the bar, hard to see people when they had gone even a few feet away, but her height made her conspicuous. He watched her weave her way around the tables, pausing now and again to wave or blow someone a kiss.

“About Hartman?”

“About both of them.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Lola made a point of strolling about the club, seeming to wander aimlessly, but ever so gradually, ever so carefully, making her way back to a small booth in the farthest, darkest corner. Most of the tables had little candles on them, giving off just about enough light to allow the patrons to find their drinks and their credit cards, and not enough to let them read the checks very carefully. The candle at this table had been snuffed out, leaving the booth in almost complete blackness.

It was the booth saved for the performers when they weren’t working, either on stage or working the floor, wheedling colored-water drinks out of the tourists and getting a husband and wife excited for different reasons.

There was only one drag queen sitting there now. Tanya wasn’t in fact a performer, though the management was considering her, or so she said. She’d become a regular just in the last couple of weeks, seemed always to be hanging around, and somehow had found her way to the employees’ table. By now, everyone just sort of took her for granted.

Lola slid into the booth next to her, took one of Tanya’s cigarettes from the pack on the table, and lit up.

“You’re welcome,” Tanya said.

Lola exhaled noisily. “Cops,” she said. “Looking for you. They had sketches.”



“Really?” Tanya looked in the direction of the bar. The light from the stage made it brighter there. “The ones you were talking to? The queen and the straight one?”

“They had a picture of that John you took out of here the other night, too. Is there something I should know about?”

Tanya took the cigarette from her hand, took a puff from it, and handed it back. “He had a huge dick. That’s about all I remember. You know how they all kind of blur together after a while.”

Lola peered at her through the gloom. “You aren’t rolling these guys, are you? We don’t want that kind of trouble with the law. You could get the joint shut down, put us all out of work.”

“I give you my word of honor, I didn’t make a dollar off the guy.”

“Charity?” Lola was disbelieving. “You don’t look the type to be giving it away either, dearie.”

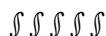
“What type do I look, darling?”

Lola had to think about that. “You know, now that you ask, I don’t know, exactly.”

Tanya laughed. “Yeah, sure, that’s me, woman of mystery. Excuse me, time to powder my nose.” She got up and sashayed to the ladies room.

Lola looked after her. She had this uneasy feeling. Something about Miss Tanya said trouble, if she didn’t exactly know what kind. Maybe she ought to talk to the manager. The last thing you wanted, working a joint like this, was trouble.

Cop trouble especially.



The cops were looking for her.

*Well, goodness, of course they were looking for her. She laughed at herself. She had killed a man. More to come, too. She’d just gotten started.*

*She frowned at the woman in the mirror. Tanya frowned back at her. She’d need to be someone else, though, for a while at least. At least part of the time. She’d work on that later, figure out who she was going to be.*

*She had decided she liked being different people, becoming someone else at will. It was like Halloween, only all the time. It reminded her of when she had been a kid. That was when she’d first started dressing up, becoming someone different. The other kids, it had just been a game, a night’s silliness, but she had always known that it was more to her than that. Way more. And it turned out, she had been right, in ways that she could never have imagined then.*

Tonight, though, was a Tanya night. She felt, looking into the mirror, as if she’d let an animal out of a cage. She smiled at that thought. Yes, Tanya was wild, dangerous—deadly. A jungle cat. A tiger.

And tonight, she was looking for prey.



It had rained some while they were inside, leaving the sidewalk and the parking lot speckled with puddles. They were almost to the car, Stanley chattering about something, Tom not listening. Not to Stanley, anyway. He was listening to the furtive movements behind them. Footsteps, following them. Two guys. No, three. And trying to make no noise. Obviously up to no good.

“So I told her,” Stanley said, and the next minute he was flying. Tom had shoved him, hard, knocking him down. He hit the wet asphalt on his knees, grunted with shock and pain.

“Hey, what the hell...?” he started to say, at the very same moment that someone said, “Fucking faggots.” A lead pipe cut through the air, caught Stanley’s shoulder instead of his head. Stanley let out a yelp of pain.

The guy with the pipe swung again, but Tom swung at him at the same moment, threw him off. The pipe crashed into the glass of the car’s window. The car alarm went off.



Michael Paterson was uncomfortable standing alone at the bar. A drag bar. The first time he'd ever been in one. A pretty young boy in a dress went by, winking at him as he passed.

Paterson's dick twitched in his pants. Guys in dresses turned him on, something fierce. The mere idea of a chick with both tits and a dick gave him an almost instant boner. Just a few days ago, he had never even heard of such a thing, had no idea those people existed.

Until he'd picked up that hooker off the street corner in the Tenderloin, a couple of nights ago: black, sultry. He had taken her to this motel she'd suggested. Pay by the hour, no questions asked. Tawdry room, dirty sheets, rust stained sink in the bathroom. People didn't rent rooms like these for luxury accommodations. The only thing that mattered, really, was the sagging bed and the toilet with the Niagara Falls flush, so mighty it could swallow jism-filled condoms without complaint. Possibly, he had thought, watching his own condom swallowed down, a careless sitter too.

"I'm pre-surgery," she'd told him in the car, and he'd said, "That's cool," without a clue of what she meant—until they had gotten naked, and there it was, double your pleasure, double your fun. Tits, real tits, not the foam rubber he'd been expecting—she was a drag queen, after all. He'd known that all along, he just hadn't known that some of them had real tits, and big round ones that would make any woman proud—and, what was really a surprise to him, and had him standing at attention almost instantly, the queen had a dick as well, a fat glossy ten incher.

Tits *and* cock. Who'd ever have dreamed? What he had dreamed, lots of times, was of a threesome, a guy fucking him in the ass while he worked on a beautiful babe, and now, he discovered, it didn't take two partners, one was plenty—the right one. He'd practically fired off a load just looking at her on the bed.

"Is everything cool?" she'd asked him in a wary voice that said you could never be too careful with Johns.

"Everything is beautiful," he said, dropping his drawers to show her just how beautiful.

He'd taken it up the ass, too, that big ten inch Tootsie Roll, the first time he'd done that since his Boy Scout days, rode it while he squeezed and sucked on those enormous titties and she jerked him off. He'd shot a load like Mount Vesuvius going off, all over her belly and her tits.

Afterward, he had found out from her that this was where she sometimes hung out. So here he was at Carla's Web, sipping a beer, looking around, wondering if he would see her. He hadn't yet, but he saw plenty of interesting looking substitutes. He drank some more of his beer, trying to work up the courage to approach one of them.

As it turned out, he didn't have to. She approached him—a petite brunette, long straight hair hanging down clear to her ass. Pretty, in a cheap, over-made-up way. He liked cheap. The slutty look. He hated "nice" girls. He could never get it up with one of them. It was like thinking about fucking your sister, or your church-lady mother.

He hadn't even seen her approaching. One minute he was alone at the bar, trying to think of a good opening line, and the next, there was this sweet young thing smiling up at him.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Tanya."

"Michael," he managed to sputter, almost choking on a big swallow of beer.

"New in town?"

"No. New here, though," he said. "In the club, I mean."

She nodded. "I thought so. I've never seen you before. Not that I live here, you understand. It's just—well, most of the customers are regulars, you know what I mean. Same old faces."

He glanced around. "That makes sense," he said. "Place like this, you'd sort of have your own crowd."

"You're nervous."

He laughed sheepishly. "Yeah, I am, actually. I'm kind of shy."

"I like that in a man." She gave him a big smile.

"You want anything? A drink, I mean."

"Actually, this is what I want." She reached for him, groped him through his trousers. His dick sprang to instant attention. "Wow," she said, running a tongue over ruby-painted lips, "you're a hot one."

"So are... I mean, that's pretty..." He stammered, his eyes bugging.

"Brazen?" She cocked an eyebrow at him. "I am. Absolutely shameless. Listen, honey, you're a hunk. I've been watching you for the last several minutes, thinking how good you look. Thinking I'd like to suck you till your nose bleeds, to put it crudely. Why beat around the bush, is what I say. Is that too brazen?"

"Yeah. No. I mean, right, why beat... you don't have to stop." She had taken her hand away.

She glanced around the bar. "They don't like stuff like that in here. We could get kicked out if anyone saw us." Her voice filled with regret.

"Well, I was thinking, maybe it was time to leave anyway." He managed to give her a boyish grin, wishing he had the nerve to ask about her tits, if she was pre-surgery. But he couldn't bring himself to ask. They looked real, though, through the filmy blouse she was wearing. And they were big. He thought about sucking on them while she fucked him. He hoped she had a dick. He couldn't make himself ask about that, either. He couldn't stop himself hoping, though.

"I'm ready, if you are," she said.

He put his beer down on the bar, grinned again. "Ready and rarin' to go."

She laughed. "Just the way I like them."



There were three of them. Tom took the one with the lead pipe first, a pumped up skinhead, got the guy's wrist and twisted it hard. Bone cracked, and the pipe fell to the cement. Tom cold cocked him and the skinhead dropped to his knees.

Two of them were whaling on Stanley. Tom got one of them by the collar, jerked him around, hit him hard in the gut, doubling the guy over, caught him under the chin, sent him reeling.

The third one tried a karate kick at Tom's crotch, missed, and decided things weren't going their way. He took off at a run. The other two scrambled to their feet and went after him, the skinhead holding his broken arm.

"Stop," Stanley shouted, struggling to get his gun out of his jacket. It got caught on something. "Stop right goddam there, in the name of..."

"Let 'em go," Tom said. "We can't arrest them. We're undercover, remember? And by the time we could get a black and white here, they'll be halfway across town the rate they're moving."

"I don't care, they're gay bashers, they need to be locked up," Stanley said in a huff, tearing his pocket and finally getting the gun out. He looked angrily at it and shoved it back into his torn pocket. "Go after them, goddamn it. You can't let the bastards get away with shit like that."

Tom made no move to pursue their attackers. By this time, they had disappeared around a corner anyway. "Probably they're going to rethink their activities after this," he said. "One of 'em's not going to be bashing anybody for a while, that's for sure." Tom helped Stanley to his feet, and realized Stanley was trembling like a leaf. "You okay?"

Stanley clamped his left hand over his right shoulder. "I think he broke my arm. Oh, crap, look at my pants, I just got these at Nordstroms," he said in a wail that veered into falsetto. "A hundred dollars, on sale, and look at them." There was a tear in one knee where he'd skidded along the asphalt when Tom knocked him down.

"Sorry. I didn't realize the guy was swinging that pipe till the last minute. I wanted to get you out of the way."

Stanley suddenly forgot all about his pants and gave Tom an adoring look. "You saved my life," he said.

"Ah, those punks," Tom said, embarrassed. He asked, again, "You okay?"

"For crying out loud, no, I'm not okay," Stanley said, his voice shaky. "That guy almost split my head open with a lead pipe and I can't even move my right arm. How okay could I be, for crap's sake? Plus my pants are torn."

"Come on, Stanley, you're a cop."

"Well, I'm a fucking queen, too, as you never tire of pointing out. Thank you for saving my life, but just for the record I was scared silly. I still am."

"Jesus. They're gone, okay? There's nothing to be afraid of. They aren't coming back."

"They might." Stanley's voice was rising now, a note of hysteria creeping into it.

"They won't," Tom said firmly. "Take my word for it. Calm down, Stanley, take it easy."

"I can't take it easy." The voice went up another notch. "How can I take it easy after that?"

"Come on. Just take a deep breath, okay?" Stanley took a deep breath. "That's it. Breathe deep and slow."

"I am breathing deep and slow, Tom." His voice was still tremulous, too high, on the verge of shrieking or something, but he looked marginally calmer.

"Okay, okay, don't get excited." Tom looked around like someone might be standing nearby to give him instructions. This was entirely outside his range of experience. He'd never partnered with a gay cop before, never had a cop get all screamy on him. He was way more scared of Stanley at the moment, of the fit Stanley looked like he was on the verge of having, than he had been of their would be assailants a few minutes earlier. That kind of shit he was used to. "What do you want me to do?"

Stanley moved his right arm cautiously and winced. "It's working, at least. I'm going to have a hard time whacking off, though. I never use my left hand. I don't know, the grip just isn't right, you know what I mean. My friend Chris, he says the same..."

"You want me to take you to the hospital?" Tom interrupted him, ignoring the whacking off part.

"I want you to take me home," Stanley said in a breathless rush, and quickly added, with a nervous little smile, "Like we were on a date."

"We're not on a date, Stanley." Tom sounded exasperated.

"I know that. I didn't say we were. I said *like* we were on a date."

"Well..." Tom hesitated, looked around again, and suppressed a groan. This was really weird. On the other hand, he didn't want Stanley going totally ape-shit on him, in a parking lot outside a drag bar. How would he explain that, to anybody? What if somebody called a black and white, and here he was in the parking lot of a queer bar with a screaming queen on his hands?

"Well, sure, I can take you home," he said, his voice resigned. "That's what I was going to do anyway, before we were so rudely interrupted. Come on, get in the car."

§ § § § §

Outside the bar, Patterson said, "My car's about a block down." He indicated the opposite direction from the bar's parking lot, a Ford Crown Vic just pulling out of it. The lot had looked too dark to him when he drove up a little earlier. The street had looked relatively safer.

"Too far," she said. She tugged him into the shadowy doorway of a closed flower shop. "What's wrong with right here?"

"Here?" Paterson was surprised. "You want to do it in a doorway?"

"I can't wait any longer," Tanya said. "I want you now. Ever since I got hold of what you've got down there. It was all I could do not to get on my knees in the bar." She laughed, a throaty sound that sent little shivers up and down his spine.

"Jesus, there's all kinds of people around," Paterson said, excited and scared all at the same time. As if to

punctuate his remark, a homeless man drifted by, gave them a not very interested glance. "Anybody could see us."

"Let them." A hand reached down, fumbled with Paterson's fly, tugged him out of his trousers. Paterson was instantly hard all over again. Excitement won over scared. He groaned, moved his feet apart to brace himself, pushed his hips automatically forward. She was right, the state he was in, this couldn't wait.

Tanya knelt, sucked on his dick energetically for a moment, fondling his balls at the same time. He groaned again. Jesus, she was good. All of a sudden she took her mouth off it, let go of his balls and stood, leaning in close against him.

"Wow, don't stop now," Paterson said, "I was ready to shoot."

"Me too," Tanya said with another of those throaty little laughs. There was a feverish glitter to her eyes.

Paterson felt something hard pressed against his chest.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

"Does that sort of thing happen a lot?" Tom asked. "To... you know, to guys like you?"

"Often enough. Too much," Stanley said. "Queer haters." He added, in a frosty voice, "You know all about that kind of thing, don't you?"

"Me?"

"Give me a break. You haven't made much of a secret about how you feel."

"Yeah, well, I never hated anybody that way. That's sick, isn't it? I mean, people are people. If you don't like 'em, you don't have to play with them."

"You say the sweetest things," Stanley said dryly.

Tom pulled up at the curb outside Stanley's apartment and waited for Stanley to climb out. Stanley put a hand on the door handle and paused. The light from the streetlamp glinted on some splinters of window glass still clinging to the upholstery. He brushed at them and looked across the front seat at Tom.

"You're not going to walk me to my door?"

"To your door? Are you kidding? Why would I do that?"

"Like a date. Remember?"

"Stanley, this isn't after the prom. We're cops."

"I know, but..." Stanley gave him a little-boy look, his eyes wide. "It just—those gay bashers. That kind of thing upsets me. I keep thinking about them. That guy with the lead pipe." Tom frowned. "What, you've never been scared about anything?"

"Jesus, that was miles from here."

"They might have followed us."

"Stanley, they didn't even have a car, plus I kicked their asses. Big time."

"Okay. But they aren't the only guys like that. How do we know there's not somebody else just as mean hanging around waiting for me to come home?" He gestured out the window. "Look how dark it is at my front steps. You'd feel awful if your partner got attacked twice in one night, wouldn't you? It would look like you weren't even trying."

"Shit." Tom flung his door open and jumped out. "Come on, then, Miss Pussy."

"Sticks and stones," Stanley said. He got out and hurried to catch up, did a little skip. "Will you hold my hand?"

"No." Tom shoved his hands into his pockets.

They reached Stanley's front door. Stanley feigned peering into the bushes on either side. Tom thought he was laying it on a little heavy, and wondered if he was being suckered.

"Safe, now?" Tom asked.

Stanley handed him a ring of keys. "Would you look inside?"

"*Stanley...*" in an impatient voice.

"Please."

Tom grunted, took the keys.

"The one with the pink plastic ring," Stanley said.

"I could have guessed." He unlocked the door, shoved it inward, glanced at Stanley, who gave him a timid kind of smile. Tom sighed again, led the way inside, found the light switch.

"You want me to check under the bed?" he asked.

For a moment he thought Stanley was going to say "yes," but he gave his head a shake. "No. That's okay." He sniffed. It occurred to Tom that, just at the moment, Stanley really did look like a scared ten-year-old. If he was acting, it was a good act.

"Fuck." Tom went past him, went into the small living room, the kitchen, the bathroom, the bedroom, turning lights on everywhere. For effect, he actually flipped back the spread on the bed and bent down to look underneath. "There's no one here, okay?" He came back to where Stanley had remained in the hall, just inside the front door.

"Thank you. Really," Stanley said, giving him a smile both relieved and embarrassed.

They stood facing one another, closer than Tom actually felt comfortable with. "How the hell did you ever get to be a cop, if you're that easily scared? I mean, why."

"My dad," Stanley said. "He was always down on me for being such a sissy. I had to do something macho, to get his respect. Cop sounded interesting. All those guys in their hot uniforms."

"Did it work?"

"The hot uniforms?" Stanley brightened. "Well, there's a couple of guys at the station, I won't tell you their names, but—"

"I meant about your dad."

Stanley shook his head. "Oh, him. No, he still hates me. Now he calls me the sissy cop. When he remembers who I am, anyway. I'm never sure if he really can't remember me or he's just pretending, to shut me out."

"You're not a sissy," Tom surprised himself by saying. "You can be ballsy enough when you have to be. Like, the way you stood up to me when we got assigned. You're just... oh, hell, I don't know..."

"Nervous and boy crazy?"

Tom laughed despite himself. "You're a crazy little mother fucker, that's for sure. How's the shoulder?"

Stanley rotated his arm tentatively, opened and closed his fingers. "It's okay."

"Take your shirt off."

Stanley actually wriggled with delight. "Strip search? Mutual strip search?"

"The shirt, Stanley." Tom did not look amused.

Stanley sighed. "Oh, okay." He peeled the shirt off. It was clumsier than he'd expected. His arm wasn't broken but it really wasn't working normally either. He let the shirt dangle from one hand and stood like a chastened schoolboy. He was kind of embarrassed by his reed thin body. Not that there weren't plenty of guys who liked it well enough, but it wasn't a cop kind of body. Not like Tom's big, hunky hairy one, certainly. He shivered a little.

Tom ran a hand over his shoulder, felt gingerly, pumped his arm up and down, keeping his face carefully neutral. “Nothing broken,” he said, “but it’s going to be sore. You should have somebody look at it.”

“I’ve got a friend who’s a nurse. I’ll give him a call.”

“Well, then...”

“Tom...” Stanley got serious, put his good hand tentatively on Tom’s shoulder. It felt like rock. He resisted the urge to feel his muscles. “Thank you. Really. For saving me back there. I panicked. I’d have been dead before I thought what to do. I’m no hero. I don’t want to get killed.”

“Stanley, it isn’t getting killed that makes a cop a hero, it’s the willingness. Besides, cops don’t survive because they’re tough—”

“You are.”

“Or because they’re particularly smart. They survive because they’re a team, they’ve got backup. That’s why they put two cops together on this sort of thing, to cover one another’s backs.”

And why, it suddenly occurred to him, they had assigned him to this case with Stanley. Because Stanley was smart, smart enough, probably, to solve this case, and he knew all about the gay stuff, especially, in this instance, the drag stuff, which Tom would have known nothing about on his own—but he was a wuss. He needed somebody tough to look after him, to do just what Tom had done tonight, save his ass.

Tom had never really thought about how vulnerable somebody like Stanley was, little and effeminate. Skinny, really, his skin too pale, hairless. Probably guys like those skinheads went after him all the time. Becoming a cop hadn’t changed any of that. He still looked just as helpless as he must always have looked, just as much a come-on for guys with masculinity hang-ups, like those gay bashers.

On his own, he probably would have had his head cracked open tonight. Probably even if he’d been paired up with most of the guys on the squad. He could see one or two of them letting Stanley get his head cracked open. Hell, he could see one or two of them cracking Stanley’s head open themselves. The thought kind of disturbed him.

But, despite his distaste for gay guys, it had felt entirely normal for Tom to take care of things back there in that parking lot, to come to Stanley’s rescue like that. It was a part of his personal cop code.

And, oddly, Stanley’s having been so helpless didn’t arouse Tom’s scorn the way his flippancy had up to this point. It made him feel strangely protective. Like, a big brother, or... or something, he wasn’t sure what. Like Stanley needed him, needed someone big and strong and macho, that he could lean on. To his surprise, being needed appealed to him in some funny way, to his masculinity.

Tom surprised himself even more by grabbing hold of Stanley out of the blue, pulling him close, and kissing him, briefly. Like in the bar, only this time he was the aggressor, which was more normal for him. He was used to taking charge.

“What was that all about?” Stanley asked when the kiss ended—too quickly to his way of thinking.

“I was just making sure I still didn’t like it. After, you know, there in the bar.”

“And the verdict is...? Don’t keep me in suspense.”

“I didn’t,” Tom said in a flat voice. He turned again and went out the front door, walking very quickly toward the car at the curb.

“So why was King Kong on the rampage?” Stanley called after him. “He was practically beating his chest.”

“Fuck you.”

“Tom...”

Tom paused and looked back at him. “What?” he asked in a surly voice.

“I don’t really think you’re ugly.”

“Don’t even go there, Stanley,” Tom said, clambering into the car. “You’re still queer and I still don’t like it.” The car door slammed and in a moment he was gone with a squeal of tires on wet pavement.

Stanley went to the front steps. "I lied," he shouted after him. "You're as ugly as horseshit! You're the ugliest man I ever laid eyes on, you big ape."

An older man walked a Spaniel on a leash past the front yard. He looked after Tom's vanishing taillights, at Stanley on his doorstep, and after the car again.

"I thought he was pretty hot, actually," the stranger said. The Spaniel took a good sniff at the bushes.

"Fine. I'll wrap him in swaddling clothes and leave him on your frigging doorstep," Stanley said. He slammed his door shut. He forgot and used his right hand. It sent spasms of pain up his arm.

He hated straight men. Especially big hairy ones. Most especially big hairy ones who made his balls tingle.

§ § § § §

Chris came straight from work.

"Please tell me the ape didn't do this," he said, bandaging Stanley's shoulder.

"He was trying to molest me. I was fighting for my virtue."

"Honey, you lost that fight years ago." He stuck a last piece of tape on the bandage, worked a sling over Stanley's shoulder and slipped his arm in it. "So, are you going to tell me what happened?"

"Gay bashers. Actually the ape saved me. Saved my life, probably. It was kind of sweet, really."

Chris eyed him critically. "You don't have a 'kind-of-sweet' look on your face. There's something you're not telling me. What else happened?"

"He kissed me."

"Just like that, out of the blue? This straight guy whups on the bad guys and then he kisses you?"

"Uh huh. Well, see, I kissed him first. Earlier. At this bar."

"Stanley, this is another swan dive."

"It's not, I swear it. I hate him, totally, absolutely. It's mutual, too. No chance of this kissing business ever happening again. Take my word for it. It was just a moment of madness. Two moments of madness, actually. One of mine and one of his. To get even." Chris stared at him blankly. "It's just a homicide detective thing. You're a civilian. You wouldn't understand."

"Right," Chris said.

Stanley's phone rang.

§ § § § §

There was a bar Tom sometimes frequented on Townsend, in an otherwise industrial neighborhood. A straight bar. No goddamn queers and no fucking drag queens, he told himself angrily when he walked through the curtained door. He knew what he needed, knew the perfect antidote to this day's craziness. For a moment there, back at Stanley's place, something had come over him. He'd actually found himself drawn to the little fag. Vulnerable? Little boy? Where had that shit come from? Stanley was about as helpless as a diamond back rattler. And about as dangerous, too.

Well, whatever had come over him, the way to cure it was a good piece of ass, and he'd never been here that he couldn't pick one up. This time he set a record, had barely taken a sip of a beer before he caught a buxom blonde giving him the eye.

"You got any plans for the night?" he asked her without preamble. He wasn't in a frame of mind for farting around.

"I didn't, a minute ago," she said. She gave him the look. Women looked at him that way a lot. It occurred to him out of the blue that it was also the way Stanley looked at him sometimes. He pushed that thought stubbornly aside.

"You do now. Let's go," he said. She barely hesitated, slipped down off the bar stool and went toward the



door with him.

“Are we in a rush?” she asked, hurrying to keep up with him. He was walking so fast, she almost had to run.

“You know what it’s like when you need something bad,” he said.

She giggled. The sound reminded him uncomfortably of Stanley. The fucking asshole even giggled like a woman.



It wasn’t exactly a gold star performance, but it worked. By the time they were naked in bed, him atop and inside her, he had completely forgotten Stanley Korski.

He was about to go off, could already feel the familiar tingle in his gonads, when the phone beat him to it, went off first. He thought about ignoring it, but cop instinct took over. Telephone calls in the middle of the night were not usually happy tidings, not for homicide detectives.

“Sorry,” he said, rolling off of her and grabbing the phone. She gave a little mew of displeasure and rolled after him, reaching round him to take hold of his cock.

“There’s been another one,” Stanley’s voice greeted him.

Tom groaned. His dick, until now poker rigid, went instantly limp in the blonde’s hand. “Sorry,” he said.

“Sorry? Why are you apologizing to me?”

“I wasn’t. To you, I mean.”

It took Stanley a minute for that to sink in. “Are you telling me you’ve got someone there? Crap, you just left me at my door an hour ago. After kissing me. You two timer. What do you do, keep them stacked in the cupboard?”

“Something like that. I’ll pick you up.”

“Fine. And leave her in the cupboard.”

## CHAPTER NINE

Stanley was wearing a makeshift sling. “My friend, Chris,” he said when Tom commented on it. “He’s a nurse. I called him. I told him you molested me.”

It was raining again, a steady determined drizzle. This time they showed their IDs right up front. It didn’t matter, the place was already crawling with uniforms, the street outside crowded with black and whites. One of the uniforms directed them to a doorway a few doors down. The victim was lying in a heap in its shadows.

“Shot, in the chest, close range,” the uniform said. “We found a shell.”

“Twenty-two, right?” Tom said.

The cop nodded. “We’ve got a witness, or sort of,” he said. “Homeless guy, says he went by just a minute before.”

They went to talk to him, a wino who hadn’t done a lot of showering lately.

“There was this guy,” he waved a hand in the direction of the body six feet away in the doorway, “and a chick. When I went by, they looked like they were getting something going.” He shivered and looked around hopefully. “Anybody got a cigarette?”

The uniform took out a pack, shook a cigarette loose, and handed it to him. Everyone waited while he got it lit from the uniform’s lighter, inhaled deeply, held it for a long time in his lungs, and finally blew out a great gray cloud of smoke, coughing with wheezy satisfaction. The uniform had returned the pack to his pocket. The wino gave the bulge a yearning glance, which the uniform pretended not to notice.

“You got a good look at the one he was with?” Tom asked.

“Pretty good. Long dark hair, skirt up to here.” He indicated the general area of his bony rump.

“Did you notice anything, uh, peculiar about her?” Stanley asked.

“You mean, like was she a drag queen? Sure. I spotted that right off.” He glanced in the direction of the entrance to Carla’s Web. “You get a lot of them around here. Don’t bother me none. Some of them are pretty good about handing out a dollar or two. They know what it’s like, things being tough.” His eyes went over the three of them, sizing them up as if debating with himself who might be good for a dollar or two.

“So, that was all you saw, the two of them chatting one another up?” Stanley asked.

“Hell, no. Like I said, it looked like they were leading up to some action. You know.” He pumped his hips. All three of them instinctively moved back a step. “So I crossed the street. It’s darker over there, see. The street light’s out.” He pointed. “And I kind of strolled back this way, figured they might be about to put on a show, and sure enough, she was on her knees, gobbling the goop. Looked like he was enjoying himself plenty. Can’t say I blame him. I wouldn’t have minded some of that myself, you know what I mean?” He winked in Tom’s direction.

“Not with this one, you wouldn’t,” Stanley said. “You saw what a climax is like with her. You don’t come, you go.”

The wino looked again in the direction of the dead man and winced. “Yeah, you got a point there,” he said. He thought a minute. “Still, there’s worse ways to go, ain’t there? I mean, you know how long it’s been since anybody sucked the old Johnny?” He gave them a toothy grin.

“So then?” Tom prompted. He wasn’t interested in the guy’s Johnny.

“Well, then she got up. Off her knees. I thought at first maybe he’d cracked his nut, you know, only he looked disappointed. They said something, I couldn’t catch it from across the street, and then, all of a sudden, there’s this bang. A gunshot, you know, only kind of muffled because they were so close together. And he falls down, and she takes off running. That direction.” He pointed toward the parking lot.

“To a car?” Tom asked.

The wino shrugged. “One pulled out a couple seconds later, in a hurry. Could have been her.”

“Did you get a make on it?”

“I didn’t see. Hell, I wasn’t gonna hang around till she spotted me. Pistol packing Mama? I could be laying there same as him. I ducked into a doorway till she disappeared, then I lit out for the club, told ‘em to call the cops, there was a dead man out here.”



“Had to be our girl,” Stanley said.

“Jesus, we must have just missed her,” Tom said. “This couldn’t have happened more than ten, fifteen minutes after we left.”

He paused on their way into the club. The dyke was still at the front table, the Little House on the Prairie standing with her, an uncomfortable looking uniform keeping an eye on them.

“This is the manager,” the uniform said, indicating the ruffles.

“We want the surveillance tapes,” Tom said, glancing at the camera overhead. “For the last week, too. And we want to talk to your hostess, Lola.”

She sent the door dyke for the tapes. “And tell Lola she’s got visitors,” she added.

Lola was waiting for them at a table. The only occupied one by this time. She gave them a wary look as they walked up.

“I knew you two were cops,” she said first thing.

“Yeah, well, if you were so sure of that, why’d you lie to us about the picture, the drag queen.”

“Transgender, to you.”

“Yeah, whatever. You knew her, right?” Tom said.

“Tanya? I wasn’t sure,” Lola said. “It looked like her, kind of. I wanted to talk to her first.”

“And?” Tom prompted him.

“And, she swore it wasn’t her. She said she hadn’t done anything to the John.”

“So you recognized the guy, too?” Stanley said.

Lola gave him a look both resentful and embarrassed. “I wasn’t sure,” she said again. “Do you know how many people you see in this place on an average night? It looked like someone she’d picked up, a few nights ago. But I didn’t pay him that much attention, you know. It was just another transaction. Not to mention, it’s dark in here, unless you’re standing toe to toe with someone, it’s hard to see them real clear. Some of these guys, that’s a blessing, but he wasn’t too bad. Kind of cute, actually.”

“The girls aren’t supposed to be hustling here,” the manager said, giving her a grim frown. “That’s one of the rules.”

“Oh, sure,” Lola said, her voice dripping. “Did you look around when you were in here?” she asked Stanley. “If a guy was stag, one of the entertainers was trying to sit on his lap. That’s how we spent our time between numbers, hustling the customers. So, sure, sometimes people made dates. I mean, do you have any idea what the lousy pay is in this dump? If you can pick up a few bucks on the side, well, what’s the harm?”

“You won’t have to worry about the lousy pay in the future,” the manager said. Lola shot her a furious look.

“Was Tanya on the payroll?” Stanley asked. He wasn’t interested in their private quarrel.

“No. She was just hanging around,” the manager said.

“You let people just hang around? Freelancers?” Stanley asked. “Doesn’t that kind of get in the way of the regulars?”

“I had no clue she was picking customers up,” the manager said.

Lola snorted her disdain. “Right.”

“If she did, it was nothing to do with us. If I’d caught her at it, I’d have kicked her ass out for it. We run a legitimate night club.”

Lola snorted again. “Anyway,” she said, “Tanya told me she hadn’t even charged the guy. She said it was a freebie.”

“Probably was, the way it played out.” Tom said. “The poor sucker was dead before his credit card went through.”

In the end, though, there wasn’t much more that Lola could tell them about Tanya. “She just showed up,” she said. “One night I’d never seen her and the next night here she was. She got friendly with a couple of the girls. She was a good mixer, you know what I mean? I thought she’d probably do okay here. I mean, she could talk to guys. She looked a little cheap, a little over done, but there’s guys that like that, you know?”

“Why do you suppose that is?” Tom wondered aloud.

“Oh, get real.” She lifted an eyebrow at him and smirked in Stanley’s direction. “He is straight, isn’t he?”

“Too,” Stanley said, smiling back.

“He didn’t do that, did he?” She nodded toward the arm in the sling.

Stanley shook his head. “He’s a gentle giant.”

Lola looked at him a minute longer, like she was about to ask him something more, but she thought better of it. She said to Tom, in a tediously patient voice, “The guys who come here know the score. I mean, they know it’s a drag club, right? For them, that’s part of the thrill. It doesn’t matter if a girl doesn’t look exactly like a real woman, because they know from the git-go that she isn’t. Sometimes, it’s better if that’s obvious right up front.”

"Somebody to feel superior to," Stanley said.

Lola nodded. "You said it. Everybody likes to think they're better than somebody else. With these Johns, it made it easier for them if a guy was wearing a dress and makeup, but the bottom line for a lot of them was that, hey, it's still just a queer."

"Which they aren't," Stanley said.

"Exactly. That's their excuse. If it was a guy, in a shirt and trousers, and they picked him up for a blow job, well, that would be homo stuff. Not that they wouldn't let him do it, or enjoy it, these dudes are queer enough for that—but the chances are, they'd want to beat the shit out of him afterward. You hear about queers getting killed, ninety percent of the time, it's after someone got his rocks off, not before. Closet cases have a lot of shit locked up inside them, like dynamite. You can never be sure when it's going to explode. Most of the girls carry protection, you know. A knife, or a gun, some pepper spray, at least. You'd be surprised how often that kind of thing happens."

"But, put a skirt on the queen, and the John is doing it with a woman, sort of. And if she actually looks more like a drag queen than a real woman, well, they get to have it both ways, don't they? They're not queer, and the guy lapping their balls is."

"Did this Tanya ever talk about herself?" Tom asked.

"Not really. We don't exchange a lot of personal information here. It's better that way. You start talking about how you've really got a wife and two kids to support, you lose the illusion. That's what this is all about, for everybody—illusion. Otherwise, what would be the point?"

"A wife and two kids? These guys are straight?" Tom asked.

Everyone looked surprised at him. "I've got a wife at home," Lola said. "And two kids."

"Drag and gay are two different things," Stanley said. "Some straight guys like to dress up. Some gays don't."

"Oh," Tom said. He was thinking yet again that it was a good thing after all that Stanley was working this case with him. There was a lot he didn't know about shit like this.

§ § § §

"So, what do you think?" Tom asked when they were outside again. He was beginning to regard Stanley as a real partner and not as an unfair burden he'd been saddled with.

If Stanley noticed the difference in his attitude, he took no note of it. "I think it's time we visited the Boom Boom Room. I want to talk to Acheson again. And Gaye Dawn. There's something... I don't know what, something I can't put my finger on."

Tom thought of the blonde waiting at home. By now she'd be asleep. If she was still there. He hadn't even gotten his load off. Thinking about her, thinking about finishing what he'd started earlier, his balls kind of ached. At the moment, he'd probably have let Tanya swing on his rod if she was handy.

It was kind of pathetic, what hot nuts could do to a guy.

"Right," he said, with no great enthusiasm.

§ § § §

It was late, though. Gaye Dawn, they were informed, was already in her dressing room, her performances over for the night.

"And she doesn't like to be bothered," the hostess told them.

Tom flashed his badge. "Tell her we'd like to bother her all the same."

She gave him the once over. "You probably will," she said.

"Where's Acheson?" Stanley said.

She nodded her head toward the rear. "He's at the bar."

They found him washing glasses and talking across the bar to a woman. A damned attractive woman, Tom thought: dark hair with a funky white stripe down the middle, bangs spilling over her brow. And big tits, obviously braless. He was partial to big tits. And women who went braless. He was especially partial to the combination.

"You remember Moira," Acheson introduced her. "My wife."

"I don't think," Tom started to say.

"Ex-wife," she said, studying them. "You're the cops. At the apartment building. That's new, though." She indicated the sling. Stanley was beginning to wish he'd left the sling at home.

"You're the sunglasses," he said.

"Ah." Tom nodded. The first time, when they'd met her outside Acheson's apartment, it had been hard to tell much about her—an enormous hat, he remembered, that had shaded her face, loose, kind of floppy clothes, and the sunglasses Stanley had mentioned, that he saw now had hidden a pair of large, smoldering dark eyes, checking him out in frank appraisal, the way a woman looks a man over when she's considering the possibilities. He remembered the voice, though: throaty, seductive. A blow job kind of voice. King Kong took note of it, too.

Stanley observed all this with an odd sense of alarm. He saw a little light turn on in Tom's eyes, like someone inside had struck a match, and he realized Tom was attracted to her. More than just attracted. He looked like he wanted to jump her right there. He was almost leering. Stanley half expected him to do a Groucho Marx roll of his eyes and flick some ashes off an imaginary cigar.

What could cause a man to make such a fool of himself, he wondered in some annoyance? He looked at Moira himself with new interest, trying to see her the way Tom did.

She was beautiful, he supposed, or had the look that could easily enough pass for beautiful, when she meant for it to. The hair, maybe styled just a little young for her, emphasized feline eyes. Her whole face was cat-like, oval, small mouthed—and just as predatory, he thought. She wore a bit too much makeup and managed somehow to make it exotic rather than tacky, and she wore a loose tunic of oyster colored silk that didn't interfere in any way with the jiggle of her breasts.

He thought, really, that, as much as he despised her, Gaye Dawn was prettier. Tom didn't look at Gaye that way, though. Knowing what was underneath the trimmings made a difference, apparently. For Tom, anyway. Stanley decided that he liked Moira even less than Gaye. Which was going some.

Tom was having no such conflict, obviously. He had moved unconsciously closer, claiming space. He stopped chewing on his gum and smiled, one of those rare smiles of his that made Stanley think of the sun breaking through on an overcast day. For once Stanley was not happy to see Old Mister Sun.

"How could I forget you?" Tom said.

"Brain damage?" Stanley suggested, feeling none too pleased with the way this was going, and kind of sorry he didn't have a cast on his arm. He could imagine cracking Tom in the head with it.

Oddly, Moira looked hardly any more pleased by Tom's compliment. "Excuse me," she said, frowning, no longer looking Tom up and down. She got off her bar stool. "I've got an engagement."

"I thought you wanted to talk," Acheson said, holding up a pair of soapy glasses.

"Some other time," she said, and moved away from them, elbowing her way through the still thick crowd.

"Nice walk," Tom said, watching her silk clad rear sway provocatively. At a guess, he'd bet she didn't wear any panties, either. Interesting woman.

"Not once her legs are broken," Stanley muttered. Neither of them seemed to hear him, they were both still watching Moira disappear into the crowd.

"So what can I do for you guys?" Acheson asked, bringing his attention back to them.

Stanley thought about how Peter had described him: Jake the Fake. He had looked at his ex-wife as if he were still in love with her. Or in lust. Not so different from the way Tom had stared after her swinging butt. The difference was, Acheson looked at Gaye Dawn the same way too, a lot. A man conflicted in his desires, obviously.

*Conflicted enough to kill someone?*

"We thought maybe you might have remembered something," Stanley said. Tom was still staring after Moira. Stanley poked him with his elbow, none too gently, to get his attention.

"Such as?" Acheson asked.

"I don't know. I was hoping you could tell me. Something about the murderer, or about Hartman. Maybe something came up while you were in bed later."

"Something did come up in bed later," Acheson said with a lewd sort of chuckle. It came across forced and artificial, like a man shadow boxing. "But you probably don't want to hear about that."

"You didn't know Hartman, right?" Tom said. "Except to watch him perform?"

"Right," Acheson said, his expression wary. He concentrated on washing the bar glasses, dipping two of them into soapy water, into more-or-less clean rinse water, onto a rack. Two more, soapy water, rinse...

"Never visited him at his apartment?" Stanley said. "Say, to borrow some cream? For your coffee, I mean?"

Acheson sighed and stopped dipping, wiped his hands on a funky towel. "Okay, I knew you'd find out about that sooner or later."

"It's what we do," Stanley said. "We're detectives. Well, he's the detective, I'm just the little Missus." Tom scowled at him but Stanley pretended he didn't see. He figured he owed him for Moira. "So, you want to tell us about you and Hartman?"

"There isn't much to tell. Honest. It wasn't like we had a hot romance going."

"But you had something going? How would you describe it?"

"I sucked his dick. One time."

"That's romantic enough for me," Stanley said. "Just one time?"

"I saw him come in late one night. For once, he was alone. Gaye was working, and I was at home, and it occurred to me, Hartman might be horny. I mean, he got it pretty regular, so I knew he had a really strong sex drive, and there was that Super Chief, you know. So, I caught him before he got inside, asked him straight out if he wanted it taken care of. He wasn't all that enthusiastic—I saw him look at my door and I thought probably he'd have preferred Gaye, but he said okay. You know what it's like when you're wanting something and there's nobody else around, even the mailman starts looking good. So we went inside and we did it. That's all it was, though, no kisses, no sweet nothings. We didn't even go into the bedroom. We stayed in the front hall, just inside the door. He whipped it out and stood there while I got on my knees and got him off. We didn't even hardly talk. He said, thanks, I think, when it was over, and that was it, not even good night. That's all there was, honest. I didn't say anything before when you guys were there because I knew Gaye would have a fit."

"We heard you were there more than once," Tom said.

Acheson reddened a little and cleared his throat. "It's kind of embarrassing. I went over another time when I knew he was home by himself, offered a repeat, but he turned me down, said I wasn't his type. Said why didn't I send my girlfriend over some time. The prick."

"I think that's an appropriate word," Stanley said.

"Okay, what about him?" Tom said. "What about Gaylord. Maybe he can tell us something."

Acheson's eyes widened and his expression turned angry. "You think Gaye was fooling around with Hartman?"

“Jesus, don’t act so huffy,” Stanley said. “You never heard of sauce for the goose?”

“Gaye swears to me there hasn’t been anyone else since we got together.”

“What do you swear to her?” Stanley asked.

He studied Acheson hard. Peter had said Acheson was attractive. He couldn’t see it, though. He was probably, when he was in his teens, what people might have called “pretty,” but he was too far past his teens now. His hair was just starting to thin. He’d used one of those thickeners on it, which just made it look artificial. At a glance, you could have mistaken it for a hairpiece. A wide slash of a mouth had grown too thin, like he’d frowned too much, and deep set dark eyes were surely harder, more cynical, now than they had been when he was young. He looked like a man disappointed with the world. Or angry at it.

Or was it only the timing that was off, Stanley wondered? His eyes flicked briefly in Tom’s direction. His good looks were so robust, so powerful, they tended to eclipse other men. Maybe, Stanley thought, if I had met Acheson before Tom... he looked at Acheson again. But, no, not really, he didn’t think so.

“Gaye’s in her dressing room,” Acheson said in a sullen voice. “She doesn’t like being disturbed there.”

“So we’ve heard,” Stanley said, “but she lets you in, right? Why don’t you take us back there?”

Acheson looked at him for a moment, uncertain. He gave them a shrug and walked down the bar to talk to another man there. They chatted for a moment and both of them looked at Stanley and Tom. The other man nodded, and Acheson came back to them and motioned toward the end of the bar.

“Let’s go,” he said.

He led them to a doorway curtained with cheap plastic beads that glittered in the shifting light. Beyond it, a corridor led past closed doors and one open on a communal dressing room where a dozen or more men in various stages of undress chatted and giggled. Someone whistled as they went by.

Gaye Dawn’s dressing room was at the end of the hall, with a red sequined star on it. Acheson rapped on it with his knuckles

“Gaye, it’s me,” he called.

There was no answer. He pushed the door open. “Gaye?” he said again.

The dressing room was empty. Acheson looked around. Either he was genuinely puzzled, Stanley was thinking, or he was a damned good actor.

“Where’d she go?” Tom asked.

“I don’t know,” Acheson said. “She usually waits here for me, and we go home together.” He took another look around. “Strange,” he said.

“What’s that?” Tom asked.

Acheson gestured to some clothes hanging on a rod in an alcove: jeans, a pale yellow polo shirt, a khaki windbreaker. “She didn’t take time to change. She never goes out in costume. Out of the club, I mean.”

Tom had turned to look at a poster on the inside of the door. “Is this him?” he asked.

Acheson glanced at it. “Yes,” he said, and added, “Her. When she’s dressed, she really does become a woman.”

“Not completely,” Tom said. “But she looks good, that’s for sure.”

Stanley came to stand next to Tom, studying the poster with him. He had seen Gaye Dawn perform, months ago, remembered that she was very effective as a woman. The photographer had caught her turning quickly, her long dark hair forming a cloud about a very pretty face, her eyes opened wide as if in surprise to find the camera there.

“Nice,” Tom said. He could see how a man might get turned on to her. You would never know, from this picture anyway, that this wasn’t a real woman. That surprised him. He’d sort of just assumed they all looked like bad imitations, like Lola, who wouldn’t have fooled him at all. This whole drag thing was a mystery to him.

She looked like a very pretty woman, in fact, petite, with long dark hair that, when it wasn't flying around her face, must reach clear down to her butt. Their murderess had long hair like that, from the descriptions they had gotten.

"I guess she was here all night?" Stanley said, making a question of it.

"Yes. Well..." Acheson hesitated. "She was here in her dressing room. She doesn't do the first show, and tonight she skipped the second, said she had a stomach bug. The boss said he didn't care if she was shitting on stage, she'd do the last show or else. So she did. She wasn't herself, though. I could see that."

"Like she had something on her mind?" Stanley asked.

"Like she wasn't herself."

"Nobody shares the dressing room?" Tom asked.

Acheson chuckled. "With Gaye? You don't know her. You saw when we got here, I had to knock. Even I don't come in without permission. Gaye is a great performer, but she can be a bitch. If they tried to put someone else in here with her, it would probably result in murder." Immediately after he'd said it, he looked like he regretted his choice of words.

Stanley took a look at the dressing table. There was a photo on it, turned face down. He picked it up and turned it over. It was one of the police sketches of Hartman's murderess. He looked at it, and back at the poster of Gaye. It was hard to say if they were particularly alike—except for that long dark hair.

The dressing room door opened so suddenly it nearly hit Tom, who was still standing just inside it, looking at Gaye Dawn's poster.

"Oh, excuse me." A pretty young queen in a kind of tatty robe paused in the open doorway, wide eyes taking them in and looking behind her as if for an avenue of escape. "I didn't know there was anyone here."

"Then what brought you in?" Acheson asked, eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Are you in the habit of barging into Gaye's dressing room when she's not here?"

"In the habit, no. Sometimes." She clutched her robe closed over her chest, as if afraid they might see too much.

"And you are?" Stanley asked.

She fixed a smile on him, seeming relieved to have a simpler question asked, one she couldn't get into trouble answering. "Lucky," she said. "Lucky Lulu," and, when that produced no results, added, with a noticeable dimming of the smile, "First show." She looked at Stanley's sling. "What's that all about? Grope the wrong sailor?"

"So, what brought you by?" Tom asked.

This seemed to be another difficult question. She looked around at each of them again, and past Stanley, at the makeup table. "I can't find my mascara," she said. "I thought maybe I'd borrow Gaye's."

"Gaye hates for anyone to touch her makeup," Acheson said in an acid tone. "Everybody knows that."

"Well, duh, I thought she wasn't here. I thought maybe I could borrow it and bring it back before she knew." She looked again, almost wistfully, at the dressing table, at the drawer, and seemed to think better of her errand. "I guess I'd better not, huh?"

"Better not," Acheson agreed.

The smile returned in megawatts, especially when she flashed it in Tom's direction. "Well, then," she said, hesitated a moment longer and raised a hand in a limp wave. "Ta ta." She closed the door after herself. They all three stared at the door for a moment, as if expecting her to reappear.

"The door doesn't lock?" Tom asked. He was kind of uncomfortably aware that if he'd met Miss Lucky somewhere else, in a dark bar, he might never have suspected she was a dragster. He could even imagine himself coming on to her. What a jolt that would have been. He sort of flashed on what a surprise his killer must have been for Gordon Hartman, when he realized the truth. *Hey, you're not a real woman... Christ, I'd have*



*shit my pants.*

Acheson gave his head a shake. "None of them do. Management likes to give the impression they can pop in anytime. It discourages a lot of hanky panky."

"But not all of it?" Stanley said.

Acheson had the good grace to look embarrassed. "We've never... not here. Well, one time, a quickie. Gaye said it made her too nervous, not knowing when we might get company."

They went out into the hall. There were two other dressing rooms with doors closed. Just beyond Gaye's was an exit to the outside. It opened into an alley.

"An easy way to get out unnoticed," Stanley said.

"Or in," Tom added.

"Unnoticed?" Acheson said. "Listen, Gaye doesn't do anything unnoticed if she can help it."

"Just as a matter of curiosity," Stanley said, "Does she appear under any other names?"

"Gaye?" Acheson shrugged. "She's been working on another act, she calls herself Bella Donna, but she hasn't put it on the stage yet." Tom and Stanley exchanged glances.

"Ever hear her refer to herself as Tanya?" Stanley asked.

Acheson thought a moment and shook his head. "No, not that I recall. But we haven't known one another a long time, either. Just a few months. She was performing long before I came on the scene."

"Uh, that night you saw Acheson shot?" Tom said, "You're sure you didn't recognize the shooter?"

Acheson looked wary again. "I already told you. It was nobody I knew."

"Could it have been Gaye Dawn?"

Acheson's eyes went wide in an unconvincing show of innocent surprise. "Gaye? No way, she was with me, in the apartment. I told you all this. Where did you get that crazy idea? Why would Gaye want to shoot Hartman?"

Tom left that question unanswered. "So, generally," he said, "she's alone here in her dressing room, right?"

"No one bothers her," Acheson said. "It's a house rule."

"Except," Stanley pointed out, "anybody could. Bother her, I mean. That door with no lock," he gestured toward it.

"They could," Acheson conceded. "Only, you don't know Gaye."

"Not well enough," Tom said, which earned him frowns from both the others.

"Look," Acheson said, "You don't know... well, I said that already, didn't I? What I was thinking was, see, Gaye had a rough childhood. Or, Gaylord, maybe I should say." He looked at Stanley. "You know what it's like. He was little, effeminate, a real sissy. He grew up in the wrong part of L. A. He must have had the shit beat out of him once a week when he was a teen. It makes you, well, it gives you this veneer, it makes you tough. You have to be, to survive."

"I understand," Stanley said. "Drag queens are the toughest. Everybody knows that."

Tom looked surprised by the remark, but he didn't challenge it. It was just one more of those things he didn't know.

When they were getting ready to leave, Tom said to Acheson, in a no-nonsense voice, "Tell Gaye Dawn that we definitely want to talk to her. We can pull her in, if we have to, but she'll miss a performance. Or, we can do it here, maybe tomorrow night, between shows."

"I'm sure she'd prefer here," Acheson said. "I'll arrange it."

## CHAPTER TEN

"That long hair," Tom said when they were in the car. "It matches the description of our perp. And, once he's dressed up, he's all alone in the dressing room, with an exit door just outside. He could come and go and no one would be the wiser."

"A lot of drag queens go for the long hair," Stanley said. "It's a popular look. The Johns like it. It doesn't necessarily mean anything. As far as our case goes, I mean."

"Maybe not," Tom said, "but if our lady strikes again tonight, I'm betting my money on Gaye Dawn. Plus, Acheson said he was tough. You have to be tough to kill somebody, especially in cold blood."

Stanley nodded, not really listening. "I was thinking," he said. "Did you notice Acheson's still got a case on his wife? Ex-wife."

"Can't say I blame him. Did you get a look at those tits?" He grinned in Stanley's direction. The grin vanished. "So, what about his boyfriend, the dick chick? I thought he had a hard on for Gaylord?"

"He does. Some guys, you know, are very conflicted. Especially when they first come out. What I was thinking is, we've only got Acheson's word for what happened to Hartman. He's the only one who saw the drag queen shoot Hartman."

"What about the other witness, Clark? He saw her too."

"Running out of the building, with a gun in her hand. And there was a difference, wasn't there, in the way they remembered the sequence of events? Acheson says he came out of the apartment right away, and Clark says it wasn't until the drag queen had gone out the other end of the building. I thought at the time that was irrelevant, but maybe not."

Tom thought about that for a moment. "If it were the two of them," he said, trying the idea on as he put it into words, "that would make a kind of sense. They kill this Hartman, they hear this guy coming in..."

"Their living room window overlooks the street in front. I checked when we were there. Maybe they saw him get out of his car, approach the building. He's a neighbor, they'd know him, know he was coming home."

"So they stage it for his benefit? An unknown drag queen, running off with a gun. You'd just assume she'd shot the guy." He frowned. "I wonder if this Clark has ever been to The Boom Boom Room."

"Meanwhile, Acheson's safely back inside his apartment, ready to be our star witness. And all she's got to do is run around the building, come in one of the other entrances."

"Only," Tom said, "what motive would Acheson and Gaye Dawn have for killing the poor bastard? Sounded to me like Acheson was a big fan of that baseball bat."

"Well, we don't know what motive anybody had for killing him, do we? Maybe she was jealous? Or, maybe there was just some big send up. A fight. Hartman came on to Gaye, say, or she found out about Acheson's midnight rendezvous, and the three of them go at it. And Hartman got shot sort of accidentally. It might have happened a few minutes earlier, even. Say, she's flashing the gun, just to be dramatic, we know she has a temper, and they get into a wrestling match, in the apartment, and boom, Hartman's dead. So there they are, with a body on the floor, trying to figure out what to do, and they see this Clark coming in, and they decide to put on a show. You know, that would explain the way his body seemed to be arranged on the steps, Hartman's, I mean, not like he'd been shot and fallen. If he wasn't shot there, if they just carried him out there from inside the apartment. What do you think?"

"I think maybe we need to take another look at Acheson's apartment."

A tinny Can-Can sounded from Stanley's cell phone. He answered it, listened for a minute, and flipped it shut. "Poop," he said. "My dad's had a heart incident. I've got to go to Petaluma."

On an impulse, Tom said, "Want me to take you?"

Stanley looked surprised at him. "It's an hour's drive," he said. He glanced at his watch. "Well, this time of

night, forty-five minutes.”

“I’m not sleepy. And, hey, it would take us twenty just to get back to your place, for your car. Besides, driving can’t be all that easy wearing that.” He glanced at Stanley’s sling. “Unless you’d rather go alone?”

“No. I just... okay, sure, I appreciate it. I’d be glad for the company, actually.”

§ § § §

“He’s awake,” they told Stanley at the desk. “Though he’s been kind of drifting. The meds, you know.”

“It’s all right to see him?”

She looked at a chart. “Yes. But only for a minute or two.” She gave Tom a doubtful look. “And only one at a time.”

“I’m just the designated driver,” Tom said. “Is there someplace I can wait?” He followed her glance at the overheated waiting room, crowded despite the late hour. People standing and sitting, all of them looking like they were in stupors. A couple of vending machines offered soft drinks and coffee. Probably, he thought, equally lukewarm.

His distaste must have shown on his face. “There’s the garden,” the nurse said. “It’s a little cool, this time of night, but...”

“Perfect,” Tom said. “You go ahead,” he told Stanley, “don’t worry about me. I’ve got some thinking I want to do anyway.”

Stanley watched him disappear through the double glass doors that led to the now-dark garden. He had wondered on the drive up, mostly without conversation, what whim had prompted Tom to volunteer to drive him here, but he hadn’t asked. Whatever it had been, he was grateful. Tom’s stolidity, his sometimes taciturn masculinity, had been welcome, had kept him from flying all to pieces, which he would almost certainly have done driving here by himself.

Looking at the broad shoulders as they faded into the darkness outside, he had an odd thought; for all his sexism and his limited vision, Tom Danzel would be an easy man to fall in love with.

Which, he told himself, turning away, would be a monumental mistake for a gay man to make. Bad enough, mostly likely, for a woman, but definitely a disaster for a queer. He’d be easy to fall in love with. He wasn’t loveable.

*And that is something that I am never going to experience with the man,* Stanley told himself firmly, starting for the elevator. He got out on his father’s floor, bumped his arm, which reminded him of the sling, and paused, looking at it. Maybe it would get him some sympathy from the old man.

He snorted and yanked the sling off and tossed it into a trash receptacle. He flexed his arm. It was okay, if he was careful.

§ § § §

His father was conscious. Stanley realized with a sense of guilt that he had rather been hoping he wouldn’t be. He was propped up in bed, connected to an elaborate array of ominous looking tubes and cables. What appeared to be an entire wall of electronic equipment gave the room an eerie green glow.

He blinked when Stanley came into the room, seeming to have some difficulty at first recognizing him. Stanley could see exactly when the truth dawned on him—followed a split second later by the predictable disappointment. He looked away without a word.

“Hey, Dad, how are you doing?” Stanley forced a grin and came to stand by the bed. His father closed his eyes.

“I’m going to sleep,” he said in a petulant voice.

“Good idea,” Stanley said. “Why don’t you rest? I’ll just stay here for a bit to see that you’re okay.”

“I’m fine. I don’t need you watching over me.” The eyes remained closed. “You go on home. Or

wherever.”

“Uh, Dad, it’s like, three o’clock in the morning. I just drove up here from San Francisco. I guess I can hang around for a few minutes.” Stanley pulled a chair over by the bed and sat in it.

The eyes opened then. They were yellowed and blood shot, and stared angrily at Stanley. “I never asked you to come,” his father said. “I’d way rather see your sister. You know that.”

“Yes, I do know that,” Stanley snapped. “I also know that the reason you don’t see her is because she doesn’t want to see you. That’s why she doesn’t come, you stubborn old fart.”

His father’s lips tightened. He glared at Stanley in anger, but behind the anger, hurt cowered. He looked away again, staring at the blank whiteness of the wall.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” Stanley said. He put a hand on his father’s shoulder. “I shouldn’t have...”

“Get the hell out of here.” He shrugged Stanley’s hand off.

Stanley sat for a moment longer, feeling frustrated and ashamed and wishing he knew how to make things better between them, wishing he could take back what he’d said in anger, but he couldn’t. Words only went one way.

“Go on, I want to sleep.”

Stanley sighed and got up, brushing an imaginary fleck of dust off his trousers. “I’ll see you next week,” he said.

“Don’t bother.”

Stanley started to reply, and held his words. Maybe by next week his father would have forgotten this whole conversation. It was maddening, the things he remembered, and the things he didn’t.

Probably he’d remember, Stanley thought, walking away. People always remembered the crud.



His father hadn’t always hated him. Surely his memories of his childhood were of a reasonably happy family, father, mother, two beloved children. Everything changed when the mother died, in a car crash. His father had been driving, after probably one too many joints. Theirs had been an era of joints, and quite often, one too many of them.

Peter Korski had survived the accident. Martha hadn’t. She’d been thrown from the car—her seat belt unfastened—crushed between the car and an ill-placed tree, an instant death. Better, at least, Stanley thought, then what had happened to his father—because, surely, Peter Korski had begun dying then as well, a process still not complete, agonizingly drawn out. Sometimes, Stanley thought he clung to life the way he did so he could suffer longer.

He blamed himself, of course and, it seemed, in some odd way, he blamed his children, maybe for not being there, for not dying with her. Stanley had never understood it. Who could understand grief, grief laced with guilt? Whatever you did, whatever anyone did, it was almost certainly part of the fault, wasn’t it? The whole world, and everything in it, in his father’s eyes, had conspired to this awful fate that had befallen the woman they all loved.

Stanley knew Irene, his sister, suffered more from it, maybe just because she was a woman—necessarily, now, the woman of the house, a role she hadn’t wanted, had no choice but to fill, and couldn’t help being the usurper in doing so. A girl might want to be her mother, might even on some level dream of taking her mother’s place. How could you not feel guilty when it happened like this? Did she ever, Stanley had wondered more than once, feel as if she had wished her mother’s death on her?

Stanley, male like his father, had somehow been, like him, the loser, the living victim—until the day, that fateful day, when he’d told his father the truth about himself.

It had been one of those conversations that had started out innocently enough. A teenaged Stanley had wanted to use the car. His father never drove it now except of sheer necessity. Probably, he blamed cars too,

although this was a different one. He didn't seem to mind, though, Stanley's driving it.

"Big date?" he'd asked, with a wink and a man-to-man kind of grin.

"Sort of," Stanley had said. Man-to-man had always made him uncomfortable, even when he'd been a little boy. Even then, he knew the difference. By now, he was practicing it.

"Who is she? Anyone I know?"

"It's a he, actually," Stanley said, thinking, with a mix of relief and terror, that he had been given the opening he had long been looking for, to broach the subject that he knew sooner or later had to be broached.

"He? Big date? I hope you're not turning queer on me, son." A laugh that said, *I don't seriously think so, but it's entered my thoughts a time or two, so put my mind at ease anyway, why don't you?*

Followed by a long, long silence, so long that Stanley needn't have bothered answering the question. The silence had done that for him.

"Actually, Dad..."

Up until then, from the time Mom had died, it had felt to Stanley like he and Irene were competing for Dad's attention. Later, looking back on that period in their lives, Stanley had the impression that they had been so caught up in their interpersonal turmoil, they had all but forgotten to grieve for the woman who died. They mourned, but it was more like they mourned for themselves and not for her.

After that, though, after Stanley had come out, Irene emerged as the clear winner in their unspoken competition for the most sympathy. His dad barely spoke to him again, hardly looked at him and then never with anything that might have been called affection.

But Irene discovered boys about that time, maybe just a little earlier than one might have expected, a quick succession of them. She was forever rushing to meet one or the other of them, flying out the door as if she were in a big hurry to be away. They hardly saw her. Stanley thought his Dad blamed him for that, too, as if he were the one driving her away.

The blame the senior Korski heaped upon his son wasn't altogether personal, though. He hated Stanley for being queer. That part of it was intensely personal. The rest of it, all that blame he ladled out, that was like the mashed potatoes to accompany the overcooked turkey when they tried to pretend it was Thanksgiving. Everybody got a spoonful, wanted or not.

It wasn't only Stanley, either. He blamed everybody. For everything. That was when he started retreating inside himself. Stanley saw it happening, he wanted to do something about it. But his father no longer let Stanley get close. "Inside himself" was someplace in particular that Peter Korski wouldn't let his son go. And if Irene noticed, any of this, she was too busy dashing out to be with those boys, to do anything.

So, Irene won, but they all three lost, too. Victims of victims.

§ § § §

"You lost the sling," Tom said when he saw him.

"It must have fallen off," Stanley said. Tom nodded, as if that made perfect sense. They didn't speak again until they were in the car. The Petaluma streets were empty. It took no more than a minute or two to reach the freeway. There was nearly always traffic on the I-5—at this time of night, mostly the big rigs.

"How'd it go?" Tom asked, fitting onto the interstate in the space between a couple of semis.

"Fine," Stanley said curtly.

They drove the rest of the way in silence, the headlights piercing the night. Even the semis thinned out, till they had long stretches of the highway to themselves. The rain had stopped, the clouds lifting.

Tom found an oldies station on the radio. Janis, The Doors. Even Credence: Proud Mary. Stanley listened the way you do with old songs that you know so well you forget whether it's you or Dan Fogarty performing them.

After a while, Stanley felt some of the anger and the pain begin to drain out of him. Oddly, the silence

between him and Tom wasn't awkward the way it had been in the beginning. He found it comforting; there was nothing angry or petulant about it. It was patient, understanding, one of those amicable silences that lets everyone settle into his own personal comfort zone before it asks anything of you.

They were curving down the hill that led to the Golden Gate when Stanley said, "Thanks for taking me. I'd have been a mess by myself."

For an answer, Tom took the cut-off that led to the parking area at the end of the bridge. Posted signs warned that the area was closed after dark but Tom parked along the drive and put the SFPD sign in the window in case any highway patrol came along.

"Come on," he said to a surprised Stanley. "This is where I come when things are bugging me."

They walked out onto the bridge and paused by the railing. Tom took a joint out of his pocket, lit it, puffed and handed it to Stanley. Stanley hesitated for a moment. He rarely smoked. It tended to make him silly.

Tom was watching him, though—weighing him, it looked like. Stanley took the joint, sucked in a big lungful of smoke, let it out slowly. Tom grunted. Stanley was glad after all that he had joined in. It was like they were bonding. The way cops did in the movies and books.

It was the hour between night and dawn. Even now, the lights of the city were still bright, sparkling on the ripples of the bay. Far below, black against black, a ship slid slowly under the bridge. The sky above was washed clean, one huge cloud looking so full a pin might burst it, and a faint ghost of a moon still hovering overhead, pale, like silver that has been polished until it is worn thin.

"A little silver slipper of a moon," Stanley said.

"What?"

"Oh, just a line from a play."

Tom looked searchingly at him. "You really like all that stuff, don't you?"

"Stuff?"

"Plays, poetry—I'll bet you like to hang out at art galleries."

"As a matter of fact, I do." Stanley's smile was a little embarrassed. "Too fruity for you, I guess."

They passed the joint back and forth. Tom considered Stanley's remark for a moment. "No," he said finally, actually looking up at the moon. "I don't know any of that shit. I'm just a dumb cop. It's kind of nice, to tell you the truth, knowing someone who does. I guess I could learn stuff from you."

"You're not dumb," Stanley said. Tom only grunted again.

The sun was almost up now, hurrying before the night changed its mind, the gray sky enameled with streaks of bronze and amber, the famous skyline silhouetted against them. The ocean was dark gray and green, like the verdigris one sees on old brass, and the headlands in the distance were smoke purple, flecked here and there with a dusty gold, as if a painter had just daubed at them with his brush. There were those little flecks of gold everywhere, really—gold gray, gold green, gold purple. A pair of early rising gulls called to one another, celebrating the day to come, or maybe jeering their lay-a-bed cousins.

Stanley had seen all this many times, but never before at this time, at this late night, early morning hour, and not from the bridge. It was a spectacular sight.

"It's beautiful," he said.

"I never get tired of it." Tom flicked the roach over the railing, a wink of red as it disappeared, and did the one-handed thing with a stick of gum. "The bridge, the hills, all of it. I come here when I need to quiet my mind down. I guess it's my kind of poetry."

Headlights brushed over them. A lone car, its windows down, went by headed for Marin, leaving little flecks of 'Pretty Woman' in its wake.

Stanley glanced at Tom then, and he had a sudden, almost frightened realization of Tom's beauty. Oh,

he'd known all along that he was good looking, sexy, hot—he just had not until now thought of the word “beauty” in connection with him.

But he was, though, as beautiful as any museum statue or great painting. Not just handsome, which all at once Stanley found too inadequate a word for that dark nest of curls that was his hair, for those brown eyes that glinted sometimes with gold and could turn as dark as thunderclouds in an instant; for the full-lipped mouth—how he had loved kissing that, more than he would have dared admit—and the high cheekbones as if carved of marble. He felt his knees grow weak, and was unaware that he was staring until Tom glanced back at him, his expression puzzled.

“What?” he said, chewing.

Stanley felt something inside himself stir. He wanted to fling his arms about Tom, but he knew that he did not dare. He was afraid to speak, even, to shatter the spell. He took a tiny step closer, not quite close enough to touch, but close enough that he was sure he could feel the warmth of Tom's body. It made his breath quicken, and he had to cough into his hand to disguise his arousal. He opened his mouth, fully meaning to say, “I love you.”

What came out instead was, “I saw a flying saucer once. When I was twelve.” He immediately felt like an idiot. *Flying saucers? Here, now, in this totally romantic moment?* “I guess that sounds weird, huh?”

Tom had to think about that. “Were you stoned?”

“Kind of. Yeah.”

“Well, then.” That seemed to settle the issue.

“I was just thinking,” Stanley stammered, trying to think of something to redeem himself, and coming up blank. Shit. When it didn't matter, he could chatter a mile a minute. He couldn't think of a damned thing to say—not, certainly, any of what he had been thinking. “It's getting cold, isn't it?”

Tom turned up the collar of his sport coat and stuffed his hands into its pockets. “Yeah. We'd better go.”

They walked in silence. Stanley couldn't decide if he felt more like laughing or crying. He had to restrain himself to keep from skipping like a schoolgirl. He'd never felt anything like this before, some kind of ecstasy new to his experience, part pot, maybe, part physical desire, and something more than either of those.

But he felt like a moron, too. Who stood on the Golden Gate Bridge in the early morning light with the man he loved—never mind that it seemed to have happened all at once, who could direct the course of love?—stood on the Golden Gate Bridge in the early morning light and talked about flying saucers? Probably, he should have skipped right over the railing while he was there, tossed himself away like that roach, done one of his infamous swan dives.

Only, he didn't—couldn't—feel as unhappy as he thought he ought to be. As he probably would be later when he did the replay.

Not until they were in the car did he say, his voice carefully neutral, “Thanks. For sharing that with me.”

Tom, fiddling with the ignition, looked sideways at him, and for a few seconds Stanley thought he was going to say something. Or, for the briefest moment, he looked as if he might lean across the seat, like he meant to take Stanley in his arms. But he only nodded his head and started the car.

“What now?” Tom asked when they were across the bridge, merging with the already thickening morning traffic.

“Now, bed,” Stanley said, and all of a sudden he yawned. To his surprise, Tom grinned and yawned too, and scratched at his crotch.

“Yeah, good idea,” he said. “Tonight, the Boom Boom Room again? I still want to talk to Gaye Dawn.”

“I'm starting to get jealous of her,” Stanley said.

“Don't be.”

*Now what did he mean by that,* Stanley wondered?

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was raining again. They never mention that in the travel brochures, Stanley was thinking. Sometimes, in the winter season, it rained for days on end. And when it wasn't raining, everything was sooted with fog, so that when the sun finally did make a brave appearance, you felt almost drunk on its glow.

The Boom Boom Room was packed, the miniature tables crowded close together, men standing three and four deep at the bar, watching the performer on the stage. The hostess told them initially that there were no tables. Tom showed her his badge and she found them one, crammed into a tiny alcove at the rear. A single candle flickered on the table. Stanley ordered a coke, Tom a bourbon and water.

"I thought we weren't supposed to drink on duty," Stanley said.

Tom gave him a dismissive look. "That's under normal circumstances. Sitting in a drag bar is not normal."

Their drinks came just as the lights dimmed and a gorgeous woman with a baritone voice announced "The star of The Boom Boom Room, Miss Gaye Dawn."

The house lights dimmed, a blue spot hit the stage, Gaye Dawn standing in it. Tom hadn't seen her come onstage, although he had been watching for her. She seemed just to materialize. She was small—she looked smaller than he remembered her as a guy—wearing a dark blue dress that reached almost to the floor, high at the neck and slit on the sides, so that she flashed a lot of bare leg as she moved. Very nice leg, he had to concede. The whole package looked pretty good, really. If he hadn't known it was a guy...

She was good, too, he guessed. He wasn't a show tunes kind of guy, but he had to admit, she not only looked utterly convincing, she sounded it too. The performer who'd been on stage when they came in had lip-synched a bit too obviously to a Donna Summer recording. Gaye Dawn, however, sang in her own voice, a kind of whisky baritone that nevertheless managed to sound genuinely womanish.

"The song sounds familiar. Plus, she reminds me of someone," he whispered to Stanley. "Her voice, I mean, the way she sings."

"It's Lili Marlene," Stanley said.

"Never heard of her."

Stanley did one of those longsuffering sighs that always pissed the hell out of Tom. "The song is Lili Marlene, dope. It was one of Dietrich's signature songs. You have heard of Dietrich, one hopes."

"Oh, sure." Tom had once worked a case with a Noah Dietrich. He felt pretty sure that wasn't who Stanley meant, but he wasn't inclined to say so.

He focused instead on the performance onstage. She had segued into something more upbeat, completely unfamiliar to him, about boys in back rooms. He wondered if that was a, what did they call them, an innuendo. Boys, back rooms? Probably it was, the way the audience was eating it up. Back door stuff, for sure. He smiled to himself, proud that he had worked it out without any of Stanley's snide cracks.

Gaye Dawn danced too—more a sashaying back and forth across the stage, a lot of shimmying of hips and bottom. A very convincing bottom, he couldn't help but notice. Did drag queens wear padding there? He decided maybe he didn't want to know. It looked real, anyway.

She did three numbers, and a loudly enthusiastic audience convinced her to do a fourth before she curtsied deeply, blew her admiring fans a series of kisses, and left the stage. This time, the spotlight went out, making it clear the performance was over.

Acheson came to their table soon after she went off. "She'll be here in a little while," he said. "Half an hour, maybe forty minutes."

"How long does it take to change out of a dress?" Tom asked. He hadn't planned on sitting there for the evening. He didn't like some of the stares they were getting from the other patrons.

Acheson gave him a scornful look. "It isn't getting out of the dress that takes time, it's taking off Gaye



Dawn,” he said. “I suppose if you’re in a really big hurry, she’d let you come back and watch her undress. Maybe you could help her with her bra. She sometimes has trouble with the clasp.”

“We’ll wait,” Tom said. “But tell him—”

“Her. And I don’t tell Gaye anything at this stage,” Acheson interrupted him. “No one bothers her after a show, not for a half hour or more. Sometimes it takes a full hour for her to come down. It’s called artistic temperament.”

“We’ll wait,” Stanley repeated. “Don’t get impatient, sugar.” He gave Tom’s arm a pat.

§ § § § §

*It felt funny, looking into the mirror and seeing, not Tanya’s long dark hair, but this shorter, reddish blonde do. Tanya was gone—not permanently, not dead, exactly, just gone for the present. The cops were looking for Tanya, whose hair hung all the way down her back and whose makeup was just a touch overdone. So, Tanya had taken a vacation of sorts. She’d come back when she was needed. When it was time for the real thing.*

*The woman, this different woman in the mirror, smiled at her encouragingly. She smiled back. She hadn’t started out to become different people, only to be Tanya, to play a specific part, but she had found that she liked the power of transformation. She was like someone in one of those fantasy novels, who could change herself at will. There was a Schwarznegger movie with someone like that, she couldn’t remember the name of it, but she had liked the idea. She found herself thinking about who she might be in the future.*

*In the future. She liked that thought, too. She’d never thought of a future in this context. When she had thought of the future, in the past, it had been an entirely different future. That one was gone now, though, it had been stolen from her. She would have to make a different one for herself. One that included all kinds of women, and all of them her.*

*Something else she had discovered that she enjoyed, and this discovery had surprised her even more than the other one: she liked the killing part of it. At first, the first couple of times, she had only done what she deemed necessary to her plan. But the last time, she had found herself savoring the experience afterward—had actually begun to look forward to the next time. To tonight.*

*Only, she hadn’t yet decided who she was tonight, this red-blond with the more subdued makeup, who looked far more like a real woman. Not exactly, but closer to it than Tanya had. Someone who could pass, under the right circumstances. In the right light.*

*She needed a name. She couldn’t totally become this woman until she knew the woman’s name. Leslie? Doris? No, too patrician. She didn’t want to look cheap—Tanya, after all, had looked cheap—but she didn’t want to be too elegant either.*

*Belle? Yes, Belle. It had a nice Southern ring to it. The madam with the heart of gold. She’d be Belle. Belle Simmons.*

*And Belle Simmons was angry. She had liked Tanya and Tanya had nearly been caught.*

*It was the cops, those two looking for her. They had made her nervous, in too big a hurry. She’d been careless.*

*It was their fault.*

*She took her cell phone from her little handbag and punched in a number.*

§ § § § §

Stanley’s cell phone rang, the tinny Can-Can again. He answered it, said “Hello, hello,” a couple of times, frowned, and closed it. “I can’t hear myself think in here,” he said. “I’ll have to go outside. It might be the nursing home.”

“I’d better come with you,” Tom said. “Just in case the wrong guys are hanging around.”

Stanley flashed him a grateful smile. “Thanks,” he said, “but I’ll be okay. There’s a doorman on duty and I won’t go more than a couple feet outside the door, I promise. If I have to leave, I’ll come back for you. Meantime, you sit tight and wait for Gaye Dawn to show up. Or Gaylord, as the case may be. You never know with these guys who they’re going to be next.”

“Five minutes,” Tom said, checking his watch. “If you’re not back, I’m going to come looking for you.”

“Hmm. Maybe I’ll linger just to see,” Stanley said. He winked and got up from the table, elbowing his way through the crowd.

Tom watched him disappear, shook his head disapprovingly at the twitch of his rear. Damn, the guy really was a three dollar bill. No wonder punks tried to kick his ass.

It was a cute ass, though, he suddenly realized. At a glance, it could pass for a woman’s, Tom gave him that. Say, if a guy liked guys...

Or, the thought popped into his head, maybe Stanley ought to be doing the drag thing. He was way better looking than Gaylord What’s-His-Name. Tom tried to imagine him in a dress and a wig. Yeah, sure, he’d be a doll baby, with those big round eyes of his. Maybe he’d ask Stanley if he’d ever done that. Probably he had. All the gay guys did, didn’t they? Maybe Stanley would do it some time just for him. A private performance. He smiled unconsciously at that thought.

And remembered kissing him. That had been a totally strange experience, like nothing he’d ever imagined. Different from kissing a woman. He couldn’t exactly define it. Not better, necessarily—but, to his complete surprise, not worse, either. Just different.

He thought again about Stanley in drag. What would he look like in a dress? What would it be like to kiss him if he was all made up, perfumed, looking like a woman? He’d be hot, I bet, Tom thought. Kissing him like that would probably be just like kissing a woman.

And immediately scolded himself for thinking that way. Guys weren’t hot. Not to guys like him. Jesus, what had gotten into him? Maybe it was catching, working with Stanley. He frowned and half emptied his glass.

He looked again. Stanley was out of sight. *Maybe I should go with him anyway.* What if there was someone hanging around outside, like the last time. He took another peek at his watch. A minute. He’d give him the five, like he’d said.

He took a more decorous sip of his drink and watched a petite redhead in a skintight gold dress and too much makeup sashay in his direction, giving him the once over as she came. Incongruously, because the room was so dark already, she was wearing dark glasses, little ones that perched on her nose. He wondered how she could see anything through them.

She smiled in his direction. He started to smile back at her, and flashed on the fact that she was a drag queen. Shit, some of these guys were truly unbelievable. You couldn’t be sure till you got your dick in them. No wonder that Hartman guy had been so surprised the night he got offed.

He glanced at his watch again. Three to go. Three and half, actually. He stared at his watch, at the second hand, wondering if it was running slow. It seemed like Stanley had been gone longer.

The redhead went by his table, the dress shimmering like it was made of spun gold. Just as she passed, she stumbled, bumping the table hard with one hip. She grabbed at it for balance and managed to knock Tom’s drink into his lap.

“Oh, I am so sorry,” she said, clapping her hands to her face. “It’s these damned stilettos, I can’t get used to them. They’re new. I don’t know how women walk in them. Are you okay? Can I...?”

Tom was busy trying to blot his lap with a paper napkin. “It’s okay,” he said, “Don’t worry about it.”

“I could help with that, you know.” The redhead looked at his wet crotch and gave him a coquettish smile.

Tom reddened and tugged at the fabric of his trousers. Wet, it was clinging to his dick a little too conspicuously. For sure he needed to switch to jockeys, while he was on this case anyway. “No, that’s okay, honest, I’m fine.”

“Well, at least let me buy you another drink. They cost too much in this dump to be wasting them like that.”

“No need,” Tom said, but she was insistent.

"Scotch, right, Chivas? Rocks?"

Tom grunted. "Bourbon. Water."

She was back in no time, a drink in each hand. She set one in front of Tom and slid into the booth with him, in the spot Stanley had vacated, taking a quick sip of her own drink. "Your first time here?"

Tom edged slightly away from her, but the booth was too small for any real distance. Funny, it hadn't seemed so crowded with Stanley, and she was even smaller than he was. "What makes you ask that?"

"I've never seen you before. Not that I'm here all the time, but, well, I think I'd remember you." Another flirty smile.

He managed a faint smile in return. Damn, even with the makeup plastered on, she was a looker. If only..."Thanks. I think I'd remember you, too." He squinted at her through the dim light. "Actually, I have this feeling I do remember you. Have we met?"

Another smile. "Maybe. It's a small world, isn't it? How's the drink? I asked for the good stuff. I'm not much of a bourbon drinker. The bottle said Maker's Mark."

"That's good stuff," Tom said. He took a sip of the drink. "Yep, definitely good stuff."

Her smile widened, like a mother approving of something her child had done. "That's fine then. Here's looking up your address." She lifted her own glass, clinked it against his. They both drank. "I'm Belle."

"Tom." They toasted one another again.

Tom struggled to think of something to say, but she seemed content to sit next to him. Someone else had come on stage but Belle seemed more interested in looking around the crowded room, checking out the crowd. Probably, Tom thought, looking for a John. Or, does she think she's found one, he wondered, and frowned. He took another drink, a big one this time.

As if reading his thoughts, she glanced in his direction. "I hope you don't mind my sitting here," she said. "I hate wandering around this place on my own. It's a dump, isn't it?"

"It seems okay to me," he said, and, because she might think he was into the drag scene, he added, "for what it is."

"It's a toilet. You know how they sweep up most places when they close? They flush this one." She laughed. Despite himself, he laughed with her.

"Anyway, you walk around too long on your own, people start thinking you can't get a date."

"I doubt that's much of a problem for you," he said, thinking belatedly that it had sounded a little flirty. Close on the heels of that thought came another; his words had come out slightly slurred.

"You okay?" Her voice seemed to come from somewhere far off, as if she were in a tunnel.

Tom frowned and shook his head. He suddenly realized he was drunk. Very drunk. But he couldn't think how he'd gotten that way. He lifted the glass in his hand and looked at it. It wasn't quite empty. Hell, he didn't get drunk on one glass of good bourbon. He didn't get drunk on one bottle.

"I don't know, I feel funny," he said.

"You look funny. How many of those have you had, anyway?"

"Just the one. Well, the one that got spilled. And this one." His speech sounded funny, even to his own ears.

"That makes two, doesn't it? Look, maybe you need some air. There's an alley out back. Let's go have a cigarette, why don't we?"

She slid out of the booth, stood up. Tom wanted to say no, he was fine, but he wasn't. The room was definitely tilting now, slipping around. He slid out after her, got to his feet a little unsteadily. She put an arm around his waist to support him. He would have jerked away, but actually, he thought he needed the support just at the moment.

Where was Stanley, anyway? Stanley would see that he was okay. Stanley might be gay as pink ink, but he trusted Stanley. He looked at his watch but he couldn't make out the numbers on the dial.

"Easy," she said, "It's just back this way. Lean on me, why don't you?"

Somehow, she piloted them through the crowded room, smiling politely at people, giving them you-know-how-it-is looks. One or two of them smirked knowingly, you could read their expressions: *another guy who couldn't hold his liquor*. Tom felt pissed, and too light-headed to take anybody on. What was wrong with him?

The stage was to their left and raised a little. A trio of drag queens danced to and fro. When he looked in their direction he saw oversized feet in high-heeled shoes, but the light suddenly hurt his eyes and he looked away. On the wall next to him, their shadows leapt and spun like ghosts. Their song came at him as if from a great distance. The Pointer Sisters. He knew this song—tried to hum it. What came out sounded more like a moan. Some shithead in pajamas laughed at him. Tom swung around to confront him and stumbled a little and the redhead steadied him. Belle, he reminded himself. Her name was Belle. In a shimmering golden haze.

Despite the fact that she was little, five two, five three at the most, he was grateful to have her helping him. He'd have rather had Stanley, though, to lean on. And Stanley would see that he was all right, he was sure of it. He paused once.

"What?" she asked.

"I thought I heard someone call my name." He tried to look over his shoulder. "I heard someone say, Tom."

"Honey, there must be a hundred Toms in this place. Come on, you need air."



There was no message on his phone. Stanley stared at the little screen, punched in Most Recent Calls. There it was, just a couple of minutes ago, but no call back number, just "Missed Call." Whoever had phoned him had blocked their call back number. Which made no sense, did it? Why call someone if you didn't want to talk to them?

On a hunch, he called Home Gardens in Petaluma, to check on his dad. But no, the woman there informed him, after checking, Mister Korski was sleeping. No one there had called.

Stanley shoved the phone back into his pocket, nodded to the doorman, and reentered the club. He was halfway back to the table before he saw it was empty. He looked around the room and spotted Tom, walking away from him, heading toward the rear of the bar. Even at the distance, in the bad light, he couldn't mistake those shoulders.

Where the hell was he going?

Stanley tried to follow him and lost him in the crush of bodies. He jumped up and down a couple of times to see better, thought he caught another glimpse of Tom moving through the crowd about twenty feet ahead of him. Who was he with, and why hadn't he waited at the table? Was that a woman? A woman in a gold lamé dress? Jesus, was the guy that desperate to get laid?

Something nagged at him. A woman, here? No, the knowledge flashed like lightning across his consciousness, more likely it was a drag queen. No real woman in this club would be wearing a gold lamé dress. That was the kind of thing entertainers wore. Drag queen entertainers, especially. Drag queens loved gold lamé.

A drag queen? And that call—nothing. A missed call message, but no call back number. That worried him, too. He had a sense of something amiss, nothing more than a hunch, really, but it buzzed around him like an angry wasp.

"Tom," he shouted again, but his voice faded into the roar of the crowd and the broad shoulders had disappeared. Where he thought he'd seen him there were only broken shadows, dancing. The Pointer sisters, singing *Don't Walk Away*. The shimmering dress was gone too. Together? The way people were shoved in here, it was impossible to say for sure.

He elbowed his way through the packed room, ignoring a couple of oaths and some dirty looks.



The room was too dark, too crowded. Tom looked back a couple of times, but he couldn't see Stanley. Probably, he was still out front, on his cell phone. Maybe there was something seriously wrong with his father. Or maybe there'd been some trouble out there. Stanley on his own was a magnet for trouble. He needed someone to look after him, that was for sure. *He needs me to look after him.*

"Maybe we should go out front," he said.

"Doll, you're too wasted. The doorman would never let you back in. Come on, this way you can get some air, and you'll be fine, and nobody will know anything about it but me. It doesn't look good, a cop getting wasted. Especially not in a drag bar."

"I guess you're right," he said, letting her move him along again. If Stanley saw him this drunk he'd just ride his ass. Anyway, he didn't want Stanley to see him like this, not to see him helpless. He wanted Stanley to think he was tough, always in control. A Clint Eastwood kind of guy, or Bruce Willis. He liked how Stanley looked up at him that way. Maybe it was dumb, but it made him feel good. Made him feel—he wasn't sure what—bigger, maybe, stronger? Tougher?

*More of a man* popped into his head, but he pushed that thought aside. For sure, that wasn't it. He didn't need a queer friend to make him feel like a man. There'd always been plenty of women for that. Well, fuck, really, he didn't need anybody to make him feel like a man. He *was* a man.

They went through a curtained doorway, past a door marked Girlfriends and another, Boyfriends. There was a door at the end of the little hallway, with a red light burning over it.

"Alarm?" he asked in a mumble, nodding toward a sign that said No Exit.

"I come out here all the time," she said. "Everybody does, since the no smoking thing. They had to turn the damned alarm off, kept emptying the place out."

They were in the alley, then. Dark, damp with fog, the rain nothing more now than a mist. He gulped in the cool night air gratefully, felt the spinning of his head slow down somewhat. They walked a few feet. "Can we get back in?" he asked, glancing back at the door that had closed behind them. Stanley would be worried...

"It doesn't lock," she said.

"Jesus, I don't know what happened to me," he said, leaning heavily against a brick wall, his words still slurred. "I felt like I was halfway to the moon."

She grinned up at him. "I've never had quite that effect on a man," she said. "Not that fast, at least."

He managed to grin back at her. "Hey, thanks," he said, "I really appreciate your helping me. I think I was about to pass out back there."

"You looked green around the gills, that's for sure. I need a cigarette." She fumbled in her purse, leaning against him, so close that his nostrils were filled with the scent of her perfume. Not the cheap stuff, like you'd think. This smelled expensive. His wife had used the expensive stuff.

Stanley did, too. That had never occurred to him before—Stanley wore a woman's perfume, maybe it was even the same perfume. *What a little fruitcake*, he thought, grinning despite himself. He wore good stuff, though. Had to give him credit for that. He had some class, anyway. Little Stanley was a piece of work, wasn't he, a real...

Something registered then in his consciousness, the grin fading. "Did I tell you I was a cop?" he asked.

She smiled. "No need to, handsome."

He was suddenly aware of how close she was, of how red her mouth was—so desirable. And the perfume. Like Stanley's. Despite himself, he felt his arms coming up around her, pulling her close. She tilted her face up to him, scarlet lips parted, inviting.

He leaned down to kiss her, felt something hard and metallic between them.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Stanley made it to the rear of the room finally. He looked back once at the shifting mass of people in the dim bar. It would be easy to miss someone in that crush. Maybe he should check around in the bar some more. And a part of him was scared. They were on the trail of a cold-blooded murderer. With a gun.

He thought of what Tom had told him—it wasn't getting killed, it was the willingness that made you a hero.

"Crap, I'm no hero," he told himself. But Tom was his partner, he couldn't just not look after him. And Tom had rescued him, hadn't he, when those gay bashers had jumped them? He didn't want Tom to think he was completely without balls. Tom might be a Neanderthal, but he was *his* Neanderthal. He wanted Tom to like him. To respect him, at least.

His courage on tiptoe, he went through a curtained doorway into a narrow, dimly lit hall. One of the doors was marked Boyfriends. He flung it open. "Tom?" he said. A short, flabby looking guy at one of the urinals looked around at him.

"You sure you don't want Dick?" he said, leering.

Stanley let the door swing shut, went back to the one marked Girlfriends and shoved that door gingerly ajar. Several garishly made up faces turned in his direction.

"Is there someone named Tom in here?" he asked.

"Try Mary," someone said and they all laughed.

Stanley looked back toward the bar, and the opposite direction. A red light shined over an exit door, with a warning sign: "Emergency exit only, alarm sounds when opened."

Not that way, then? *Maybe I missed him in the bar...*

§ § § § §

Hard, metallic. A gun, for sure.

"What the hell," Tom started to say, when the door they'd come through flew open.

"Tom?" a voice called.

"Stanley?" Tom was startled, confused, his head still spinning.

"It *was* you," Stanley said, stepping into the alley. "I thought..."

There was a clatter of high heels on concrete. The redhead was gone, running fast down the alley. Tom stared after her stupidly, watched the metallic gold dress disappear around a corner.

"I hope I didn't interrupt anything," Stanley said, arching an eyebrow.

"I think you did," Tom said. "Lucky for me. She had a gun. I think she was planning to shoot me."

§ § § § §

Stanley ran after her, trying to get his gun out of his pocket as he ran. He was trying with his right hand, though, and that one still didn't function too well. He looked down at his pocket, tripped, and fell on his back arm with a yowl of pain. By the time he scrambled to his feet, the gun finally free, the redhead was gone.

Stanley followed her to the street, but there was no sign of her, and too many places she could have ducked into within seconds. Plus, Tom had looked like he was in serious danger of passing out. He went back to where Tom was now sitting on the pavement, and got him to his feet, and to the car.

§ § § § §

"Do you honestly think that was our perp?" Tom asked when they were driving down Polk Street.

"Duh. Don't you even remember the sketches? Dead ringer."

"She had red hair. Short red hair."

"Jesus, do you really think all those fake women in that club were wearing their own hair? You've never heard of wigs?"

"Listen, what do I know about that shit? You're the fag. I'm just a homicide cop."

"A homicide cop who got himself fucked up, on ropies most likely, and almost got killed before the fag came along. How did she get the stuff in your drink, anyway?"

"She spilled my first one, and brought me another. Thank God, I didn't drink it all. I'm still woozy from it. Think, if I'd polished it off." Stanley pulled to the curb, turned the lights off, and the motor. "Where are we?"

"My place." When Tom gave him a dubious look, Stanley said, "Look, you're in no condition to be left on your own. You can still hardly walk. Come on, you can sleep it off here."

"I don't know..."

"Give it a rest. Come on."

They got Tom out of the car, and up the steps to the front door. It was evident that he was in no condition to take care of himself. He leaned heavily against Stanley, one arm draped around Stanley's shoulders. He was, in fact, more messed up than Stanley would have expected.

*So, what do I know about stuff like that,* he asked himself. Two martinis and he was on top of the bar—three, he was on top of the bartender. The important thing was, Tom needed someone to take care of him. It was a job Stanley didn't altogether dislike, either.

Inside, Stanley left Tom by the front door while he went around turning on lights. He disappeared into the bathroom, emerged a moment later. "Come on, lover, in here."

"Where's this?"

"See that big, flat thing over there with the blankets on it? That's a bed. Which makes this the bedroom. See how it all fits together. It's like one of those Agatha Christie mysteries."

"Just one bedroom?" Tom asked, but he let himself be steered through the open doorway.

"You're a big guy, but you're not that big," Stanley said. "I think there's room enough in here for both of us, if we move around carefully. Take your clothes off."

"Oh, man, you pick now to put the moves on me? I couldn't fight off a butterfly. I'm as weak as a kitten."

"Sweetie, you don't look like a kitten, you look like something the cat coughed up. Listen, do you hear anything?"

"What?"

"Like, water running? Like, say, someone was drawing a bath? Come on, you'll feel a lot better, I promise you. A nice hot bath and then Stanley's going to give you a good massage, and you'll feel like new. Off with them now, time to bare all."

He actually got Tom's clothes off of him, but not before Tom had insisted on a bath towel to wrap around himself before the boxers slipped to the floor at his feet. He stepped out of them, holding the corners of the towel tightly clenched in his fist.

"Now what?" he asked.

"If you're going to soak in a bath, the best place would be the bathroom," Stanley said with a put-upon sigh. "In here, come on, and stop acting like a frightened virgin, why don't you?"

"I am a virgin. As far as you're concerned." He squinted at the bathtub, the old fashioned claw-foot kind, while Stanley leaned down to turn off the water. "What's that shit?"

“Bubbles. It’s a bubble bath.”

“Jesus H. Christ, I can’t take a bubble bath. What’ll people think? If anybody found out I was taking bubble baths...”

“Well, why don’t you climb into the tub and I’ll go fight off the paparazzi, okay?”

They got him in the tub, Stanley carefully avoiding looking where he wasn’t supposed to when the towel finally fell by the wayside—well, okay, a couple of quick peeks, but he was pretty sure Tom hadn’t caught him at it.

Tom sank down among the bubbles, leaned back, sighed. Stanley was right, it was great. He felt himself drifting and closed his eyes. When he opened them, Stanley was handing him a steaming cup. Tom gave it a suspicious look.

“What’s in this?”

“Spanish fly.”

“If you fucking think...”

“It’s Celestial Seasons Sleepy Time tea, for Christ’s sake. It’ll help you to relax. You’ve just been drugged and almost killed. I think the best prescription at this point is a good night’s sleep. This is part of the plan.”

“Hmph,” Tom said, but he took the cup and inhaled the aroma before taking a cautious sip “You’ll pardon me wondering what else you’ve got planned. You being the way you are.”

“Listen, I turn my back on you for five minutes and you get yourself picked up by a guy. And, may I mention, when I came out of that club back there, you were getting ready to kiss him,” Stanley said in an aggrieved voice. “I don’t know why you’re being so pissy with me.”

“He looked like a girl,” Tom said stubbornly.

“Well, I could too, I suppose, if I put my mind to it, but I don’t have time to put on a goddamn dress just at the moment. You’ll have to take me the way I am.”

“I hope when you say ‘take me’ it’s only a figure of speech.”

“Wash,” Stanley said, throwing a washcloth at him. “And make sure your crotch is clean. There’s nothing I dislike more than smelly balls in my face.”

“They aren’t going to be in your face. I don’t even like your face.”

“Fine, then. If you don’t like my face, fuck it. See if I care.”

Tom glowered at him, and waited until Stanley had left the bathroom before he began to scrub himself. He did take pains, however, with his crotch.

Not out of consideration for Stanley’s suggestion. It was purely a matter of hygiene. It was important for a guy to keep himself clean down there. Otherwise, you got jock itch.

§ § § §

Not until the water had grown cool did he finally climb out of the tub, watching the door carefully, expecting Stanley to pop back in at the opportune moment, but he didn’t. Stanley had hung a huge bath sheet over the towel bar—pink.

*You might know*, Tom thought with a grimace. He wrapped it about himself, feeling oddly let down—not disappointed exactly, but surprised. You’d have thought Stanley would be making an effort, at least.

*Maybe he really does think I’m ugly*, he thought. He paused to look at himself in the mirror and decided that wasn’t it. Couldn’t be.

He went back to the bedroom. Stanley was standing at the window, staring out. He turned when he heard Tom come in. Tom held tighter to the bath sheet.

“Feel better?” Stanley asked.



“Lots. I’m still pretty woozy, though. That must have been some powerful shit she slipped me.”

Stanley gave him a funny look. “Must have been,” he said.

There was a long, awkward silence. “So, now what?” Tom asked.

“So, now, you go beddie bye,” Stanley said.

Tom looked at the one bed, the covers turned invitingly down. “Uh, where will you sleep?” he asked.

“Oh, I just hang myself upside down in the closet, like an old bat. Go on, bed.” He pointed.

Tom sat down gingerly on the side of the bed, gave it a testing bounce, looked at Stanley, swung his feet up onto the covers, leaned against the headboard.

“Turn out the lights,” he said.

“Stretch out,” Stanley said. “Face down.”

“Face down?” Stanley nodded. “What’ve you got on your mind?”

“I’m going to give you a massage, okay? I told you about it earlier. Go on now, turn over.”

Tom grunted, but he turned obediently onto his stomach, carefully adjusting the towel so that it covered his backside.

Stanley clambered onto the bed, straddling him. He started with Tom’s neck, kneading the muscles there, and then the shoulders. Tom grunted appreciatively a couple of times.

“Feels good,” he murmured into the pillow. “You know what you’re doing.”

“You’re not the first guy I’ve worked on,” Stanley said.

“I’ll bet not.”

“Shut up,” Stanley said, and jabbed hard at his ribs. Tom gave a surprised woof, and went silent.

Stanley’s right arm had begun to hurt but he gritted his teeth and worked his way down the broad back, took his time getting to Tom’s waist, rubbing firmly, using his fingers and his whole hands, ignoring the pain in the right one. He was on a mission. He wasn’t going to let a little pain deter him.

Finally, he took hold of the towel and tugged it out of his way. For a moment, Tom resisted; then, like he’d made up his mind about something, he lifted himself slightly off the mattress, and the towel was tossed aside. Stanley began working the muscles of Tom’s butt.

After a moment, Tom raised his head and looked back over his shoulder. “Hey, what are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m taking your temperature.”

“It feels like a...”

“Christ, I’m rimming you, okay? Relax, why don’t you? You’re supposed to go to sleep.”

“Not with a tongue up my asshole.”

“Good point.” Reluctantly, Stanley stopped tonguing and went back to massaging. He made note of the fact, however, that King Kong had been on the alert. You couldn’t hide that friendly giant from somebody rimming your butt. Not when the big ape was showing his muscles. People complained all the time about guys thinking with their dicks. Personally, he thought things would be a lot better all around if Tom let his decide things for him. Apparently Kong knew what was what.

Somewhere between the thigh rub and his hamstring muscles, Tom really did fall asleep. Stanley stood up, looked at the physical pulchritude on display. Had to be the prettiest butt he’d ever seen. He thought about going back to the rimming and decided that was almost certain to wake up the sleeping giant. Both of them.

With a sigh, he pulled the sheet up over Tom, got the pillow from the other side of the bed, and turned out the light. He curled up in the big overstuffed chair in the corner.



Which was where he was when he woke up, feeling stiff all over, and opened an eye, to find Tom half sitting up in bed, watching him.

“You’ve been there the whole night, there in that chair?” Tom asked, looking doubtful.

“Except when I had my way with you. Oh, and I clipped off one of your balls for my jewel box.”

Tom laughed weakly, but Stanley saw that, under the cover, his hands went automatically to his crotch, checking.

“You feeling better?” Stanley asked aloud.

Tom paused a moment to take inventory. “Yes,” he said finally. “I am, actually. Only, I have to piss.”

“I think I’d rather you do that in the bathroom, at least on our first date. You need help?”

Tom shot him a wry glance. “I can manage,” he said.

He did. It took him a couple of minutes to get to a sitting position, and swing his feet to the floor. He covered his crotch with a corner of the blanket and gave Stanley a meaningful look.

“Oh, sure,” Stanley said. He got up and walked into the kitchen. He heard bare feet pad across the hall, into the bathroom. The seat came up with a thump, following by a noisy, long pee, and a flush.

§ § § §

Tom took longer than he needed, standing at the toilet, shaking the drops off his dick. Peeing, he’d thought about what Stanley had done the night before—rimming him, he called it. He’d never had that done before. It had felt, not nice, exactly, kind of weird, actually. Too weird to know if he’d really liked it or not.

When he thought about it, though, it felt better remembering it than it had when Stanley was doing it. His buttohole kind of tingled at the memory, and his dick, long since shaken dry by this time, kind of raised its head, like it had been asleep and was starting to wake up.

Someone, a woman he’d been with a long time ago, had told him, “Letting things happen is a good way to bone up on living.” At the time, she’d been boning up on his boner—trying to convince him, while she was sucking it, that it was okay for him to let fly with a load. He hadn’t—not with anybody. It felt good, having the knob polished, but to shoot his load he needed to get down to business.

Her point, though, was one he’d remembered more than once. If you let something just happen, it wasn’t your responsibility. You didn’t do it.

He flushed the toilet again, just for good measure. In case Stanley was listening. And gave his dick another good shake. He thought of what Stanley had called it—King Kong—and grinned.

The beast was definitely awake now.

§ § § §

Stanley gave Tom time to get back into bed before he returned to the bedroom—and he tried not to notice the enormous tent in the middle of the bed. It was impossible to ignore, though.

“I guess you are feeling better,” he said.

Tom followed his gaze. “Looks like it,” he said, sounding surprisingly shy for a man who was used to being in charge.

“Probably somebody should do something about that.” Stanley nodded toward the towering display.

“Maybe it’ll go down on its own.”

“Or, maybe not,” Stanley said.

“Yeah. Or, maybe not.”

“Does it usually? Go down on its own?”

“Not usually, no,” Tom said, looking everywhere around the room but at Stanley.

"Thing is," Stanley said, "there's nobody here but the two of us. If someone was going to do something about it, I mean."

"I think I'm too weak to jack off," Tom said, his eyes still averted. He coughed experimentally. "I'm pretty sure I am."

"Well, then..."

Surprisingly, though, Stanley found himself struggling with his horniness. There, obviously on offer, was the object of the desire that had kept him awake most of the night in his chair. He had only to go to the bed, to help himself to it, and...

And then what? That was the big question. What would the aftermath be? He'd had experience—what gay man hadn't—with men like this, essentially straight, but gay-tinged enough, and more to the point, horny enough at the moment, to give in to the urge. It was often an enjoyable experience—while it was happening. Afterward, though, could be an entirely different matter.

There was almost always, in these men, not just that little touch of homosexual—call it curiosity, perhaps, more than desire—but anger as well, at discovering this possibility in themselves, an anger that often got transferred from suckee to sucker.

Even if Tom did not get really angry afterward, he might feel resentment, and how was that going to influence their working relationship in the future? They were partnered in a homicide investigation. How could this not get in the way?

For that matter, Stanley wondered what resentment he himself might feel. Through no effort of his own, he was being placed in the role of seducer. It was he who must, from this point on, be the aggressive one, take charge of the situation. Whatever happened next, it would forever be "his fault." He did it.

It was like that surprise birthday party friends had thrown for him some years ago. There he had been, pretending first ignorance and then delight, hiding his embarrassment, actually squealing with pleasure as each beribboned package was presented to him by friends smugly thrilled at their cleverness, while he felt an utter fool all the while.

Now, here was Tom offering him this present. It was already unwrapped, too, under the sheet. So why did he suddenly feel so reluctant? He was reasonably sure that he was about as old as Tom was, or close enough, but the situation had skewed their ages. He felt like a bawdy old queen, about to seduce a not-altogether-bright young boy. The truth was, in the present situation, he felt far less desire for Tom's cock than he had felt before it was made available for his taking.

On the other hand, he hadn't altogether lost his desire, either. Not so much, he decided, that he was willing to pass up what would almost certainly be his only opportunity.

*Oh, hell.* He sighed. *Here comes bawdy old queen.* He managed what he hoped was an eager expression, like at the birthday party, came to the bed to sit on the edge, and reached a hand under the covers, tentatively, in case Tom changed his mind at this late juncture and decided to object. It had been known to happen. In that case, you weren't just the seducer, but the perpetrator of an unsuccessful molestation, forever branded as a naughty queen trying to get into an innocent hetero's pants. Probably every queen in the world had been led down that garden path a time or two, to their undying embarrassment—and resentment.

"A nurse has to think of her patient's welfare," he said, watching Tom's face with a careful eye.

Tom's eyes were closed. He said nothing, only took in a deep breath. Stanley slid the sheet back. An enormous erection bobbed into view—a thick shaft, a battering ram head, swollen until it was red-purple with blood.

"Jesus, I never handled anything that big," Stanley said without thinking, awestruck.

"I can't do anything about that," Tom said, a little peevishly but not altogether displeased, either. "It's the only one I've got. You don't have to, you know..." He reached for the sheet. Stanley slapped his hand away.

"Sacrifice, sacrifice," he said, and leaned over to take it in his mouth, glad to discover it tasted as good as it look. "One thing, though—when you pass my heart, be gentle." He heard Tom draw in his breath sharply.

"The thing is," Tom said, "I won't come."

"Just to spoil my fun? Or you think you're still too weak?"

"No, it's just, I can't."

"You're impotent, or what?"

"Not that. No, I mean, I can come all right, fucking."

"I'm a top," Stanley said. "I don't take it that way." He looked up, still holding Tom's dick in his hand. "Well, I guess if you insisted. Seeing it's you, I mean. Partners, and all that stuff."

"That wasn't what I was angling for. I never fucked a guy. I mean fucking a woman. I can come every time. All I'm saying is, I just can't come with a blow job. I never have been able to, even with a woman."

"Okay, so you can't come having your dick sucked. So what?"

"What do you mean, so what?"

"I mean, it feels good anyway, doesn't it, having your dick sucked? Why don't you just let yourself enjoy what's happening, and forget about what may or may not come later—so to speak."

"Yeah, but sooner or later you're going to want me to shoot off in your mouth, and I'm just telling you..."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, why don't you lie back and shut up and let me do this? I'm the cocksucker, if you'll recall." He took a firmer hold of Tom's dick, put his mouth on it, took it all the way down his throat, and began to suck heartily.

Tom sniffed. "Okay. But I'm just telling you, it won't come."

Without breaking his rhythm, Stanley reached up with his free hand and shoved hard at Tom's chest. Tom fell back against the pillow, but he raised his head almost immediately to watch.

*Jesus*, he wondered, amazed, *where did the guy put it all, nine and a half inches and it just vanished down his throat, to the hilt.*

Well, sure, of course he could suck dick. He was queer, wasn't he? That's what they did. Probably born sucking cock. He just hadn't known they could do it like this. He'd had plenty of women chow down on the old banger, some of them he'd thought knew what they were doing well enough, but he had to admit, it had never felt like this. He remembered a woman telling him once that no man could eat pussy the way another woman could. It made a kind of sense, he guessed. So, maybe a guy knew how to suck dick in a way a woman couldn't. Even so, though, a part of him wanted to object to this, wanted to continue to insist this was the wrong thing to be doing, having a guy down there working on him. Especially his partner in a homicide investigation.

How could he object, though? His dick was so hard it was trembling, and his balls felt like they weighed a ton each...

He came, so suddenly it caught him by surprise. One second he had closed his eyes, doing what Stanley had suggested, just giving himself up to the incredible sensations that Stanley's mouth was creating—and the next second, the damn thing was going off like a cannon, like a fire hose, this geyser of hot come blasting out of it, into that sucking, hungry mouth.

Stanley took it all, drank ever drop out of it until it had finally, it seemed an hour later, finished shooting, and still he squeezed on the shaft and ran his tongue over the head and licked the peehole until Tom pulled back from him, not out of distaste but because he couldn't stand the sensations Stanley was creating, so intensely pleasurable that they became painful.

Stanley looked up at him. He had a satisfied, unmistakably smug smile on his face.

"Don't say it," Tom said.

For an answer, Stanley burped loudly.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Afterward, Stanley went into the kitchen and Tom took a long shower, stretching, occasionally feeling his dick as if it were something he had just discovered, like this was the first time he'd ever used it.

He felt both good and bad. Bad about fooling around that way. Jesus, what had come over him? It wasn't like Stanley had raped him or anything. Hell, he'd wanted it, had made up his mind when he was in the john, taking a piss, that he was horny, that he was in the mood for some head and he was going to let it happen.

Besides, Stanley had taken care of him, hadn't he, the night before, when he'd been so helpless? And he hadn't tried to take advantage. If you looked at it that way, he owed him. And what was it going to cost him beyond getting his dick sucked?

He felt good about the blow job, though. Much as he might want to, he couldn't pretend about that. So, how could he hate queers and like having one suck his dick? It didn't make any sense. Hell, there was only so much to a blow job, wasn't there? To any kind of sex, if you were honest. I've got a pole, you've got a hole, that's what it all came down to. So, somebody put it in their mouth and sucked on it. Just two lips, not much difference between lips, and there was the tongue and, well, that was it. It was just another kind of foreplay. He'd always done it as much for the woman's pleasure as for his own. It generally got them turned on. One of the benefits of having a big one. Chicks got excited.

So what had made it different with Stanley? Because, it had definitely been a number in itself, and not just a warm up. A random thought slipped furtively into his mind: what if it was Stanley that made it different? What if it was having Stanley doing it?

He thought about that for a minute. They were partners. Even with a partner you disliked, you developed a kind of rapport, and he didn't really dislike Stanley, not half as much as he put on. Really, when you got down to it, he'd kind of gotten to like Stanley, more than he cared to let Stanley know—it would only give him ideas if he knew. More ideas, anyway. Queer ideas.

But, when he thought about it, he kind of liked, too, that he had made Stanley happy, done him a favor, so to speak. And, Stanley had saved his ass, hadn't he, with the killer drag queen—even if he couldn't get his gun out in time to do any good with it—again. What a pansy.

But if it was having Stanley suck him that made it special, that would mean he had a thing for Stanley, wouldn't it? That would be queer. Getting your dick sucked wasn't.

Nah, he decided, turning off the shower and reaching for a towel, he was sure that wasn't it. Really, it was just one of those things that happened. Like an accident. Yeah, that was it, it had been an accident. Like that chick had said a while back. It had just happened. In a way, it sort of didn't count.

He could hear Stanley banging pots and dishes around in the kitchen. Tom wrapped the big towel around his middle and followed the noises, pausing in the doorway, not sure how to handle things now that he was in the same room with Stanley, without a hard dick between them. The situation was always a little awkward. He'd had plenty of those "after it was over" bits with women, but he'd never been in one with a guy before. This was definitely different. With a woman, you just told her how great it had been, the best night of your life, blah, blah, blah. He was not about to tell Stanley how great it had been, and for sure, not that it had been the best night of his life.

"I don't think..." he said, and hesitated.

Stanley turned from the stove and put a hand on his hips. "I already figured that out," he said. He poured a cup of steaming coffee from the pot on the counter and handed it to him. "Want cream in that?" he asked.

Tom had expected him to be all chipper, smiling and singing, pleased with himself over what he had gotten. He wasn't though. He actually looked kind of surly, like it had been Tom who took advantage of him instead of the other way around.

"Not yours," Tom said with a laugh, meaning to lighten things up a bit. He took a sip. "This'll do fine."

Stanley didn't laugh, though. He made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a snort. "Bacon and eggs on

their way,” he said.

“I’m a coffee and doughnuts guy.” Tom looked around like he thought he might find the doughnuts waiting for his notice. Like, whatever he wished for...

“Bacon and eggs.” Stanley said, turning the sizzling bacon in the skillet. He still sounded sore about something.

“Are you pissed?” Tom asked.

“No,” Stanley said without looking, not sounding like he meant it. “Are you?”

Tom had to think about that for a minute. He ought to be, he guessed. He wanted to be, actually. But he wasn’t. Hell, the bacon smelled good. There was something to be said for having someone fussing over you. When was the last time a woman had pampered him? With them, it was always wham, bam, thank you ma’am. He wasn’t a hang-around-afterward kind of guy.

“No,” he said.

“That took you long enough.”

“Yes,” Tom said. “Now that you mention it, I am. Sore, I mean.”

“That was quite a flip-flop.”

“I had to think about it,” Tom said. “Look, Stan...”

“Stanley.”

“Stanley sounds fruity.”

“I am fruity, in case you hadn’t noticed. I sucked your dick. You’re a cop, right? Sucking dick is generally considered evidence of fruity.”

“Look, Stan, about that...” he stammered, his face turning red. “Look, it was okay, what you did.”

“Okay? Most guys think I do it pretty nicely. I have even heard fantastic.”

“And I kind of asked for it, but, well, let’s just forget it happened, okay? I mean, it isn’t going to happen again. It was, well, I was weak. I was still a little drugged out, I guess.”

“I guess,” Stanley agreed. Stanley’s voice was definitely frosty now.

“So, then...”

“Look,” Stanley said, brandishing a spatula like he wanted to bang Tom on the head with it, “Let’s just leave it like that, okay? Let’s say I raped you—”

“You didn’t, though. Hell, I was the one with a big boner showing... that was an accident, like, I didn’t do it deliberately, or anything, I just...”

Stanley ignored the interruption. “—But the bottom line is still, you’re straight and you don’t do that sort of thing and you’re embarrassed now, and it’s going to get in the way of our working together—”

“I’m not embarrassed.”

Stanley fixed a steely gaze on him.

“Well, some, okay, but not a lot.”

“And you’re right, it’s better all around if we both of us just forget it happened, and agree that it isn’t going to happen again. We have a murder to solve. And for reasons of my own, I really want to solve it. Let’s just stick to that in the future, okay?”

Tom glowered back at him. Of course, everything Stanley said was exactly right. Only, shouldn’t he have been the one to say it? If they were going to agree that it was a mistake and shouldn’t happen again, he would like to have pointed it out, not the other way around. He was the one who was in charge here—wasn’t he?

“Okay,” he said in a grumpy voice.

“Okay,” Stanley agreed, equally grumpy.

There was a long silence. When it began to seem to Tom that Stanley was waiting for him, Tom said, to change the subject, "So, about our murder..."

"I hope you're going to say you've got it solved." Stanley sounded relieved at this new direction, that they had somehow gotten past an awkward moment.

"Actually, I was kind of hoping you'd figured something out. I mean, you're the one who's, uh, well, what I meant was, about our drag queen. Had any ideas?"

It took Stanley a while to answer. He busied himself with the bacon and eggs, heaped them on a plate. The toaster oven pinged and he reached a piece of toast from it, added that to the plate, set it on the table.

"Eat," he said.

"What about you?"

"I ate already. Big breakfast. Very big."

Tom gave him a suspicious glance but Stanley's face was blank. Tom grunted and began to eat. The eggs were just the way he liked them, over easy, the bacon shatteringly crisp. He took a big bite of toast.

Stanley poured himself a mug of coffee, picked it up in his right hand and winced—still not back to normal, and massaging someone's butt the night before hadn't helped it any—and switched it to his left. "You know, what I can't figure," he said, sitting down opposite Tom, determined to bring the focus—his focus—back to their case, "is motive. I mean, people kill once, because they're drunk, or they're angry. Or they kill for some kind of profit—money, or sex. That's how it always is in the books."

"Serial killers," Tom said around a big mouthful of food. "They're different."

Stanley watched him eating for a moment. He liked a man with a hearty appetite. Despite his best intentions, he somewhat disconcertingly found himself wondering if Tom's tank was empty yet. He wasn't wearing anything but a towel. There was plenty of room under the table. *If I got on my knees...* He looked up and saw the suspicious look Tom gave him.

"You've got a funny look on your face," Tom said. "What are you thinking?"

Stanley sighed. No, they both knew it had been a mistake, a big mistake, and one that mustn't happen again, or it would really fuck things up on their investigation, and that was important to him. He really needed to solve this case. Otherwise, it was back to pounding the pavements or riding around and around all night in a squad car wishing somebody would murder someone just to relieve the boredom, eventually thinking about who he could murder to get the ball rolling.

"I was thinking about," Stanley said aloud, and paused. "I was thinking about what you said."

"Serial killers?"

"Right. Only, even so, there's a pattern, isn't there, with serial killers, a kind of a motive behind it? Anger, maybe, or frustration."

"The guy hates men. You said there's lots of fag bashers out there. Maybe he got bashed one time too often."

"But, that kind of thing, you'd think he'd go after the kind of guys who had bashed him. Like those skinheads. Punks, you know, that type."

"Skel. The bottom of the barrel," he added when Stanley looked puzzled. "The punks, the bums, the shitbags. Good point, though. The guys our Tanya is killing, they don't fit that stereotype. Hell, from all we can tell, they're the kind of guys who like doing it with guys, with guys in drag, at least."

"Which tells us...?"

"I don't know," Tom said. "Something. I just can't figure out what yet."

"Okay, then, so we keep checking out the drag bars. We know Tanya's hanging around in them. Maybe she'll have another go at you. Which, if you think about it, is another good question. Why did she want to kill you?"

“Because we’re getting close?”

“If we are, I sure don’t know it,” Stanley said. “Or, maybe she didn’t even know who you were.”

“No, she knew I was a cop.” Tom thought for a moment. “Maybe she just wanted to kill a guy. You know, the serial killer thing. That’s part of the profile. The time frame starts speeding up, the time between killings gets shorter. They get more and more into it.”

“So, you were just there, is that what you’re saying?”

“I don’t know.”

Stanley did one of his long suffering sighs. “Well, last night was as close as we got. Much as I’d hate to lose you, I think we give her another chance at you.”

“I’m not sure I’m real keen on being bait for some fag.”

“Sugar, you already were bait. There were lots of fish in that pond last night just aching to go for your worm.”

To his surprise, Tom laughed. “So it’s a worm now, is it? You didn’t think so a little while ago.”

“Forget it,” Stanley said. “We weren’t going to talk about that, right?”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Tom nodded, looked for a moment almost regretful. “Okay, we’ll do the rounds again, see if we can catch her eye again.”

Stanley thought for a moment. “Listen, that queen last night, the redhead, Belle—could she have been Gaye Dawn?”

Tom thought hard for a minute. “I don’t know. Maybe. I’m not used to this drag queen thing, it confuses me. She could have been, though. I thought, when she first sat down, she looked familiar, like maybe I had met her before, but not dressed up like a woman, you know what I mean?”

“One thing’s for sure,” he added after a moment, “I’m getting more and more interested in our Gaye Dawn.” The look Stanley gave him was pure evil. It was Tom’s turn to look innocent.

“Professionally, I mean.”



Stanley had dinner at The Cove with Chris.

“So,” Chris asked, taking a hearty bite out of his cheeseburger, “How’s the homicide thing going?”

“Great.” Stanley picked up his burger, contemplated it, and put it back on the plate. He picked up a French fry instead and nibbled decorously at one end. Christ stared at him, paused in his chewing.

“You’re not hungry?” he asked.

“Not awfully.”

“Oh, dear.” Chris put his own burger back on his plate. “When you lose your appetite, it can only mean one of two things. You’re not pregnant, are you?”

Stanley managed a laugh. “No. Not that.”

“But, all things being physiologically equal, you could be?”

“If I were female, you mean. Yes, I guess so. No, wait, that takes actual intercourse, doesn’t it? So, no, I couldn’t be pregnant.”

“But there was some form of sexual interaction?”

Stanley studied his French fry, took another nibble. “Uh-huh. Yes.”

“Meaning, we’re talking about a blow job?”

“Sort of.”

“Honey, you can’t sort of suck a dick. It was a dick, right?” Stanley nodded. “And you had it in your



mouth?” Another nod. “And stuff came out of it, creamy stuff, man stuff.”

“Come,” Stanley said and sighed. “A humongous load of it.”

“Speaking as a nurse, that is what is what is known in medical terms as a blow job.” Chris pushed his plate aside, took a sip of his iced tea, unsweetened, with lemon. “Was this cock attached to anyone I know—it was attached, I take it, not something free standing.”

“Yes. I mean, yes, it was attached, and no, not to anyone you know.”

Chris looked at him long and hard for a moment. “Oh, shit,” he said, his eyes going wide, “Don’t tell me, not the straight cop? The hot one? The Neanderthal?” Stanley smiled grimly and nodded.

“Mother of pearl. I thought you told me he hated fags?”

“He did. Does.”

“Oh, boy. Score one for our team.” Chris paused, torn between looking commiserative and being excited. Excitement won. “So, tell all. How was it? You said he was hung big. And totally hot.”

“He is, something out of a porn fantasy. Only, it was just something that happened. It’s never going to happen again.”

Chris clucked his tongue. “Oh, dear, this is worse than I thought. Don’t tell me—you haven’t got a case on this big ape, as you so affectionately call him?”

Stanley looked altogether miserable. He tried to swallow another bite of the French fry, but it refused to go down. “In the worst way,” he said. He glanced at the clock on the wall. “Crap. And he’s going to be picking me up in forty minutes. We’re hitting the clubs again. I need to catch a cab.”

“I can run you home,” Chris said, waving at Solange for their check. “Is anything going to happen, do you suppose? How do you think Mister Macho would feel about a three way? I’ve always wanted to do a cop—you don’t count, I mean the real thing. I sort of thought, in uniform, but I’ll settle for a gun in a shoulder holster and a big...” He saw Stanley’s expression, and bit off whatever he had been going to say.

“Actually, there’s always cabs at the corner,” he said. “I planned on doing some shopping before I went home.”



Tom and Stanley stopped by the station on their way to The Boom Boom Room. Tom had gotten so used to Stanley’s manner, he hardly even thought of it any more. He had forgotten how the others regarded him till he was alone in the homicide room with the other detectives.

“How’s it going with little Stanley,” one of them asked with only the slightest hint of sarcasm.

“Stanley’s okay to work with,” Tom said, more defensively than he’d intended. He looked around, realized they were all watching him, waiting for his response—all of them not quite smirking. “He’s really sharp, actually. He’s gonna make a kick ass detective in time.”

The future kick ass detective picked that moment to come into the room—practically skipping, Tom thought, his heart sinking. He couldn’t have looked gayer if he’d worked at it.

“Hello, boys,” he greeted them, flashing his queeniest smile around the room. “How’s it hanging?” Which, really, was an expression several of the guys used regularly, but it sounded very different, coming from him.

No one answered. Everyone looked away, some of them with a quick glance first in Tom’s direction. Someone muffled a snicker.

“Let’s go,” Tom said gruffly.

The silence lay like a cloud of smoke between them. They were in the car, on their way to The Boom Boom Room, when Stanley asked, “Are you mad again?”

“No,” Tom answered him curtly.

He was, but he didn’t want to discuss it—in large part because he wasn’t even sure who he was mad at.

He glanced sideways at Stanley. As if on cue, Stanley looked at him and smiled, a hesitant, hopeful kind of smile.

That ignited something inside Tom, some odd little spark that started in his brain and flared in his chest, and spilled down through his guts to his balls, and made them tingle ominously. Even King Kong, roused momentarily from sleep, seemed to wonder what was going on.

"Everything okay?" Stanley asked.

All of a sudden, Tom wasn't angry. He was more like confused. He smiled back, a little shamefacedly.

"Everything's cool," he said.

*Well, fuck the boys back at the station,* he thought. What did they know anyway, the stupid pricks? Probably some of them went out bashing fags on their nights off. One or two of them, he wouldn't be surprised if they sucked cock.

Only, not as good as Stanley, probably.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Gaye Dawn, they were told, was in her dressing room. She couldn't be disturbed.

"Fuck that," Tom said, in no frame of mind to put up with any shit. They went to her dressing room, Tom in the lead and Acheson following at their heels and making clucking-hen noises.

Tom knocked at the starred door, the kind of bang-bang-bang knocking you couldn't ignore. Silence within. Several heads poked out of the large communal dressing room next door, eyes wide.

Tom gave them one ferocious scowl and they all disappeared. He had just raised his fist to knock again when the door flew inward and an angry Gaylord stood framed in the opening.

"I'm busy," he said in an icy voice. "Come back later."

He might have closed the door, but Tom's broad shoulders got in the way. "This is later," he said. Gaylord blinked and backed out of his way. "And you don't look especially busy to me. We heard you were getting dressed."

"What I do isn't just about putting on a dress and makeup. I have to get myself in the right frame of mind," Gaylord said. He looked angrily in Acheson's direction. "This is going to throw me off completely."

"I tried to stop them," Acheson said, his voice just verging on whiny.

"We've been trying to talk to you for a couple of days," Tom said. "I was beginning to get the impression you didn't like us."

"I came looking for you last night, but you'd already gone." Despite his obvious annoyance, Gaylord smiled and gave Tom a flirtatious look. "Oh, and I like you well enough, sugar." Stanley coughed.

Gaylord looked at him and back at Tom. "Do I get the feeling you're just a teensy bit hostile?" he asked.

"Someone tried to shoot me last night," Tom said.

"To death," Stanley added, smiling sweetly.

Gaylord laughed. "Honey, if I had anything like that in mind, it wouldn't be shooting, it would be fucking you to death," he told Tom. "Oh, there might be some shooting before we were finished."

Tom ignored that, strode to a table where an array of wigs stood on foam heads. "No red hair?" he asked.

"I had one, but I tossed it," Gaylord said. "Not my color."

Stanley had gone to the rack of dresses in the alcove. "Or gold lamè dresses?"

"Please, I'm a drag queen. The law requires at least one lamè dress." He saw the glance Stanley gave the rack. "I don't keep everything here, you know."

"Do you have a gun?" Tom asked.

There was just the slightest of hesitations before he said, "No."

Stanley, watching Acheson in the mirror, saw his eyes drop to one of the drawers in the dressing table, and slide quickly away.

Stanley reached past Gaylord and opened the drawer. Lip gloss, eye shadow, eyebrow pencils, tweezers...

"It got stolen," Gaylord said. "A while ago."

"What caliber was it?" Tom asked.

"I don't even know what that means," Gaylord said. "It was a small gun, that's all I know. A John gave it to me a long time back. You run into a lot of nut cases in this life. Some bastard tried to rough me up one night. So, this guy I was seeing, it was before Jake," he added quickly before Jake could protest, "he said I should have one just in case the asshole came back. I don't know anything about guns. They scare me, to tell you the truth. He showed me how to use it, he said I had to be close to somebody if I was going to shoot them with it, real close." He poked a finger at Stanley's chest and said, "Bang. Like that. I put it in the drawer then and pretty much forgot about it."

"But you knew it was stolen?" Stanley said.

"Yes. But I don't even know when. I was looking for something a week or two ago and I realized all of a sudden it wasn't there. I asked Jake if he'd taken it."

"I hadn't," Acheson said.

"Are there lots of people in and out of here?" Tom asked.

"Not usually. But the door isn't locked."

"Lucky came by the other night," Acheson said. He was speaking to Gaye, but Stanley thought the remark was really intended for them, a reminder. "She said she was looking for mascara."

"That bitch. Let her buy her own." Gaye's eyes sparked angrily. She turned back to Tom. "Well, there you have it. Anyone could come in if they wanted. I didn't think much of it, either, the gun being missing. Like I said, things can get rough for drag queens. I just figured another one of the girls had some trouble and borrowed it. To be honest, I figured it would come home in time."

"And you didn't report it missing? You get sore about another queen borrowing makeup and it doesn't bother you that a gun disappears from your dressing table?"

"I pay for my mascara. Besides, that's a personal kind of thing. The gun, well." He shrugged. "The guy who gave it to me, he told me it wasn't registered. I didn't want to get him into any trouble."

"This John, what was his name?" Tom asked.

She gave him a sly smile. "John," she said. "I don't think I ever caught his last name. We're not always real formal around here."

"The first time we talked to you," Stanley said, "You said you had never watched any of Hartman's performances, but you mentioned all the girlfriends in and out. If you hadn't peeked, how did you know about them?"

Gaylord laughed. "You've got to be kidding. He was the talk of the town. Besides, Jake here never missed a show. I got the blow by blow—so to speak. It did get him all worked up." He blew Acheson a kiss. "I guess I should have stopped by to thank Hartman."

"But you didn't?" Stanley asked. "Stop by, I mean?"

"No. I already told you. I never actually met the man."

"We were here two nights ago," Stanley said. "You weren't. In your dressing room, I mean. But your street clothes were. Do you usually go out in costume?"

"Probably I went outside for a cigarette. We're not supposed to smoke in here. That's against the law."

"You weren't in the alley, either."

Gaye gave him a look just short of a smile. "Maybe I walked around the corner. That's not against the law, is it?"

"But why would you?"

"Or maybe I was with a John. In a car. Did you check all the parked cars?"

"Gaye..." Acheson's voice was a bleat.

"Relax, darling, I'm just kidding." He looked from Stanley to Tom. "I've got a show to get ready for. Are we done here?"

Tom looked at the rack of dresses again. "The rest of your costumes are at home?" he asked. Gaylord nodded. "Suppose we wanted to see them?"

"Suppose you got a search warrant," Gaylord said.

"We might," Tom said. He knew they didn't have enough to get a search warrant, but he wasn't going to admit that. He looked at Stanley. "Finished?"

"For now," Stanley said. He had the feeling there was something more he ought to ask, but he didn't know what it was.

"Stick around for the show," Gaylord said as they were going out. "Drinks on me."



They stayed for her performance. If their appearance in her dressing room had thrown Gaye Dawn off her stride, it didn't show. If anything, Stanley thought she was better than the last time. Like something had inspired her. He had a nagging suspicion he knew the source of her inspiration. He gave Tom a frosty glance.

"What?" Tom said, puzzled.

"Like you didn't know."

"I don't." Tom looked more puzzled than ever, but Stanley ignored him.

"I have a special guest in the audience tonight," Gaye said after her first number. "This song is for Tom." She blew a kiss in the general direction of their table. Several people looked. Tom turned red and frowned at the lookers and they quickly looked away. Gaye began to sing, "You Made Me Love You."

Embarrassed though he was, Tom had to admit she was good. He found himself thinking of the whole special world of drag, a world he had hardly been aware of in the past, almost a separate city within the city. Actually, within the city within the city. He was glad, really, that Stanley was on this case with him. He'd have been completely lost without him.

He looked around at the audience. They were all watching Gaye intently, obviously savoring her performance. It struck him again that most of these people were straight. Oddly, he felt more distaste for them than he did for the performers or for gays in general. What brought these onlookers here but a kind of snobbishness, a desire to look down their noses and smirk, less obviously, but no less surely than the cops at the station smirked at Stanley?

He thought of what Stanley had said before, "Someone to feel superior too." If you thought about it, though, that was sicker than guys just being what they were. If you were gay, probably you couldn't help yourself, but the people paying to see the performers could. It was only their own sense of superiority, wasn't it, that made the show so appealing to them? *Let's go watch the freaks at play.* It gave him a new perspective that he would never have imagined before—and a new sympathy for people like Gaye Dawn—and Stanley.

He glanced sideways at Stanley. He was rapt, tapping his fingers on the table top in time to the music. In the light from the stage, his eyes glittered brightly. He took a sip of his Coke and unconsciously ran his tongue over his lips. Underneath the table, King Kong took note of that tongue and its movement. Tom put a hand down to pat him, as if consoling him. He stole another glance at Stanley. Really, even without the makeup and shit, he was way prettier than Gaye Dawn. His mouth, for instance. You couldn't look at it and

not think...

He drained his glass in one long draught and with his other hand, signaled for the waitress.

§§§§§

The number ended, another began. It seemed to Stanley that Tom was drinking an awful lot. He was asking for doubles, and chugging them down about as fast as the waitress could bring them. Like he was deliberately trying to get plastered—and succeeding.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Stanley asked him at one point.

“Great,” Tom said, giving him a drunken leer. “And getting better by the glass.” He downed another double, neat, and winked at Stanley. “You like me kind of helpless and weak, don’t you, Stan my baby?”

“Not that weak,” Stanley said. “And it’s Stanley.”

To his great surprise, Tom reached across and pinched his cheek. “You know, you are cute,” he said. “Have you ever done drag?”

“A time or two. Why?”

“Just wondered.” Tom gave him a boozy smile. “Maybe I should try kissing you again, to see if I feel any different about it.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” Stanley said in a chilly voice. He had an uncomfortable feeling about where this was going. He hated guys who had to get drunk before they could do anything. Anyway, they both knew that had been a mistake. It wasn’t going to happen again.

The grin slipped off Tom’s face and he looked away, signaling the waitress for another drink. “Yeah, you’re right,” he said, sounding appropriately chastened. “Maybe I shouldn’t.”

“You probably shouldn’t have any more to drink, either.”

But he did. By the time Gaye’s show had ended, again to thunderous applause, Tom was drunk. Very drunk.

“You know, Stan,” Tom said, and quickly corrected himself, “Stanley, I think maybe you had better drive us home.”

When they were in the car, though, Stanley behind the wheel, he wasn’t sure what was supposed to happen next. What Tom wanted to happen next—or, for that matter, what he himself wanted. He thought about what had happened before between them. It had been good—too good, and too bad, too.

He started up the engine, put the car in gear. “Uh, where am I taking us? Your place, right? I’m guessing you don’t want to go to my place again.” Meaning, I don’t think that’s a good idea.

“My place is fine,” Tom said, and hiccupped.

“Your place it is,” Stanley said. He wasn’t altogether sure if that idea was any better, though.

Tom was sober enough, at least, to give him directions. It turned out to be not so far away, on the edge of the Mission.

“Looks like a rough neighborhood,” Stanley said, parking where Tom told him to, in an alley. Someone had painted a huge mural on one wall of the building, Latino workers in a field. It looked, in the dark, surprisingly good.

“Nobody bothers me.” Tom reached for the door handle.

“So, good night, I guess,” Stanley said.

Tom blinked at him. “Hell, forget it, you’re coming in. We’ll have a nightcap. I’ve got some good bourbon.”

“I don’t think...” Stanley started to say.

“Or some colas, if you’re going to be a pussy. Come on. I don’t bite.”

Stanley got out with some misgivings. Tom weaved a little as he went up the wooden stairs that clung to the outside of the building. Behind him, Stanley was ready to put his hand on Tom's butt—just to break his fall if he slipped—but they got to the door with no incidents.

"It's not much," Tom said. "Bachelor pad, you know what I mean."

Stanley stood inside the door and surveyed the apartment—one big room, really, with a sofa bed, opened flat, sheets and blankets in disarray. There was some kind of kitchenette in one corner, a sink piled high with dirty dishes. An open door gave a glimpse of a bathroom, a big green towel on the floor. There was one window on the far wall, curtainless. Stanley walked to it and looked out. It opened onto an alley with a blank brick wall opposite.

"Home sweet home," Tom said. "I'll bet you think I'm some kind of slob, don't you? I'm not much of a housekeeper."

"You need someone to do it for you," Stanley said without thinking, and was sorry the minute the words left his mouth. "Probably you should have a wife, I mean," he stammered. "Some guys do better with a woman to look after them."

"Nah, I went that route," Tom said. "Didn't work." Stanley turned from the window. Tom took a step toward him. "Don't need a wife. Just someone to, you know, take care of things for me." He grinned, a lopsided, drunken kind of grin. "How'd you feel about that?" he asked in a lower voice, hoarse, almost a whisper. Like he was having trouble getting the words out.

"Being your housemaid? Gee, Tom, that sounds like a real thrill. My heart is beating faster just thinking about it."

Another step. "I wasn't thinking about the house cleaning stuff," voice lower still. "Besides, well, there might be some bonuses with it. If you were a good little maid. Did all your duties."

Tom started to lean toward him, pulled back slightly, and then hesitated, looking totally confused, like he was not sure what he'd gotten himself into. After a long, strange pause, both of them just staring at one another in uncertainty, neither of them sure what to say, Tom turned away and went to the mini stereo atop the dresser. He shuffled through some CDs, inserted one. A woman's voice, smooth, honeyed, filled the room.

"Who's this?" Stanley asked, not so much caring as wanting to break the tension.

"Maxine Sullivan."

Tom came back to where Stanley stood, watching him with a puzzled expression. He took Stanley's hand in his, put his other hand on Stanley's waist and—this surprised Stanley even more than everything else that had happened between them—began to dance, turning Stanley slowly about the room. He smiled at Stanley's astonishment, looking comfortable and confident for the first time since they had arrived at the apartment.

"I'll bet you'd never have guessed I was a dancer," he said.

"No, honestly, I wouldn't." Stanley felt clumsy. His feet didn't seem to want to move the right way, but Tom might not even have noticed. He pulled Stanley closer. Seemingly of its own accord, Stanley's head rested on his shoulder. Tom lips were at Stanley's ear. He hummed along with the singer.

Stanley could see why couples had liked to dance this way in the past, slow dancing. It was certainly far more romantic than dancing separately.

Only, romantic for what?

Stanley felt as if he had been dropped down in the middle of some foreign country, where he didn't know the rules, the taboos. With other guys, he knew when to make the moves, when not, he could generally tell pretty easily. But, with Tom, it was like a game he'd never played before. Obviously, Tom was horny. And, just as obviously, he had gotten drunk deliberately because, for some guys, this kind of thing was easier to handle when you were drunk.

Or, the idea of it was easier to deal with, anyway, and sometimes, even drunk, they didn't really want to go

beyond the idea stage. Besides, this dancing together stuff felt more like some kind of courtship thing, not a lead in to a blow job.

Oh, fuck it, Stanley thought grimly, suddenly tired of the games. He lifted his face, went for Tom's mouth, touched it lightly with his own lips, just brushing it, and when Tom didn't pull away, kissed him for real.

The usually very aggressive Tom didn't protest, didn't object or pull away. He just stopped dancing, went totally passive, like he'd surrendered. He let Stanley kiss him, long, hard, let himself be guided backward to the sofa bed, staggering slightly and falling heavily onto it. He lay back, eyes closed, saying nothing, lifted his hips enough to help Stanley slide his jeans down, again for his boxers—and that was it.

It lasted not even a minute. Stanley had just taken it in his hand, marveling once again at the size, the beauty of it, and Tom gave a series of violent convulsions, his dick jumping frantically in Stanley's hand, and this great eruption of come exploded out of it, shooting so high into the air it seemed it surely must drench the ceiling. It splashed in great puddles across his heaving belly, Stanley's hand, the bed sheets.

It had barely finished shooting before Tom pushed his hand away as if he were angry and wordlessly began to rearrange his clothes. Stanley moved to help him, but again Tom shoved his hand aside.

"It's okay," Stanley said. "It was going to happen. That first time just about guaranteed it would happen again. Hell, it's been happening since the first day. No point in kidding ourselves."

"I'll drive you home," Tom said, standing, tucking his shirt into his pants, not looking at him. Almost, but not quite surly.

"No, that's okay, I'll get a cab," Stanley said with a sigh.

"I can drive you."

"Aren't you drunk?"

Tom did look at him then, long and hard. "Yeah, you're right, I am," he said. "Real drunk."

"I rather thought so."

"Look, you take the car, okay," Tom said. "You can pick me up tomorrow for a change." He stumbled across the room, fell face down onto the bed, passing out.

Stanley stood for a moment, staring at him, thinking about going to the bed and climbing in with him, taking Tom's pants off again, taking everything off, his own clothes as well. And this time, Tom had shot his load so suddenly, there not only hadn't been time to really look him over, there hadn't even been any opportunity to savor the experience. So much for Mister I-Can't-Come.

Tom shifted one leg in his sleep, moaned faintly. In his mind's eye, Stanley saw him, stretched out as he was now, but totally, splendidly naked. He imagined himself just sitting on the floor next to him, feasting his eyes.

Or, maybe he'd run his hands over him, massage him like that other time. He remembered the bones of his spine and the muscles, like bands of iron, that stretched across his back. The hard roundness of his buns and the deep valley...

Right now, though, Tom was angry with himself. *Probably with me, too.* Stanley swallowed hard and decided against doing anything more. Bad enough he and his cop partner were fooling around together and couldn't seem to help themselves. The last thing they needed was a physical altercation, a drunken Tom taking a punch at him. Which was the sort of thing that could happen in situations like this.

Anyway, what he wanted was not just the opportunity to suck Tom's dick yet again, or even to kiss him, though that was closer to the mark than the other stuff. Just to hold him—or, to have Tom hold *him*—that would have been nice. Like a couple. Like two guys who were, if not in love, sharing something at least, something tender and sweet.

"Well, good night, then," he said. "Unless," he couldn't resist adding hopefully, "like, you wanted me to stay."

For an answer, Tom began to snore.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tom was in the shower when Stanley let himself in the next morning. Stanley emptied the grocery bags, found a skillet that didn't look too poisonous and washed a couple of plates. Breakfast was cooking by the time the shower stopped running.

The bathroom door flew open and a naked Tom, still dripping wet, burst out of the room. "What the hell...?" he demanded, and stopped.

"Good morning, sunshine," Stanley said, smiling brightly over his shoulder. After all his fantasies of how Tom looked naked, he couldn't bring himself to ogle, took no more than the briefest of glances before he looked away. "Oh, if you're wondering how I got in, the apartment key was on the ring with the car keys."

"This is getting to be a habit, isn't it?" Tom said, and added, looking a bit embarrassed, "breakfast, I mean."

"In my experience, men have two states of mind. If he's not showing a boner, fix him breakfast." Involuntarily, both of them looked at Tom's crotch. His morning erection was still half in evidence.

"You're all wet," Stanley said, turning quickly back to the stove.

Tom seemed to notice that for the first time. "Yeah. I should get a towel." After a moment, he added, "Plus I ought to cover myself up, I guess."

"I've already seen it," Stanley said without looking. "If you're thinking about preserving your modesty you're a little late."

"Yeah, well..." Tom blushed again and went to the closet, rattled some hangers and finally found a wrinkled bathrobe, dark and light blue stripes, in a pile on the floor. While he was bending down, Stanley stole a quick peek at his backside—*now there's a serious breakfast*—and looked away before Tom glanced suspiciously in his direction.

Tom slipped into the bathrobe, tied it at the waist. "Don't want to scare the neighbors. Listen, about last night..."

"You were drunk," Stanley said. "We both were."

"You were drinking sodas all night."

"There's different ways of getting drunk. Here." Stanley shoved a plate at him.

"You do bacon and eggs a lot."

"It's about the extent of my culinary skills. The sort of thing you learn when you make a habit of taking guys home at night. Eat."

Tom sat and began to eat, and paused to look up at Stanley. "You're not eating. Oh—you had breakfast already, is that what you're going to say?"

"Late supper. And it got spilled. I stopped for a doughnut on the way."

"Huh," Tom said. He thought for a moment, chewing silently. "I don't get it, all this waiting on me. It's just a dick, Stanley, it isn't..."

"Eat," Stanley said again, more forcefully. He pulled out a chair and sat opposite Tom. "Can you eat and think at the same time?"

"Is that a joke or something?"

"Sorry. I meant, let's talk about our case. We're getting nowhere, it seems to me."

Tom thought for a moment about pursuing the subject of last night's activities, and thought better of it, not sure what he'd want to say anyway. "I don't know," he said, picking up on Stanley's cue, "We've established that it's a serial killer. A drag queen. Picks guys up at random."



He paused, ate a piece of bacon in two bites. “Only, that Hartman thing, it doesn’t exactly seem like a random, does it? I mean, he was kind of a regular at that club. This Tanya, she must have seen him there before the night she picked him up. And he was the first. That’s where it all starts.”

“So, why him? I mean, what do we know about Hartman except that he had an enormous wienie, bigger than yours, even, and God knows yours is a beaut, and...” He paused, his eyes going wide. “Damn. What am I saying?”

Tom paused, his fork halfway from plate to mouth. “What,” he said. “You don’t think I’ve got a beaut? I thought you liked it—”

“No. I mean, yes, that isn’t what I was thinking about. Where’s that tape?”

“—the way you’re all the time after it and... What, you mean the surveillance tape, from the bar? It’s at the station.”

“No, the other one. When we were interviewing our first witness, Acheson. I taped everything. Hold on. I think I’ve got it in the car.” He went out and was back in a few minutes with an audio tape. “Have you got a player?”

“There’s one in the closet, there, on the shelf.”

Stanley went to the closet, rooted around among some boxer shorts covered in little red hearts. *Cute*—he resisted the temptation to check if they were clean, aware that Tom was watching him; probably, he wouldn’t take kindly to having his underwear sniffed, men could be so touchy—and came back with a mini tape player. He set it on the table between them.

Tom cleaned up the last of his eggs with the toast, popped it all in his mouth. “So?” he said.

“So, that’s really the only thing we know about Hartman that seems to have any relevance to the case, isn’t it? He picked Tanya up at Carla’s Web, and you couldn’t walk in there and not know it was a drag club. Anyway, it wasn’t the first time he’d even been there. Same with Patterson, I mean, it might have been his first time, but, hell, even that homeless guy knew Tanya was a drag queen.”

He pushed the play button on the recorder. Tom shoved his plate aside, leaned back in his chair to listen. Stanley’s voice came out of it, unreal sounding, asking questions. Acheson answering, Gaye Dawn making an occasional muffled remark in the background.

“There,” Stanley said, hitting pause. He gave Tom a triumphant look. “What’s the oldest rule in crime detection?”

“Don’t eat where you shit?”

Stanley made a grimace. “That is so fucking butch, honestly, I think I just came in my drawers.”

“Well, what then?”

“*Cherchez la femme*.”

Tom gave him a disgusted look. “Oh, man, fuck, I let you suck my cock two lousy times—”

“Once. Last night doesn’t count, I barely got my hand on it.”

“—and now you’re going all artsy fartsy on me with the foreign language crap. What is that, fucking Italian?”

“French. It means, find the woman.”

“Find the woman. Shit, that’s what we’ve been trying to do, isn’t it?”

“Is it?”

“Isn’t it?”

Stanley looked around the kitchen. “You really must do something about the echo in here. No wonder my *Un Bel Di* sounded off pitch last night.”

“Stanley, cut the gay shit. I’m straight, remember.” He looked a trifle abashed. “I mean, last night—that

didn't mean anything. We were both drunk."

Stanley let that pass. For the moment, he had more important things on his mind. "What I'm saying is, we haven't been trying to find the woman, we've been trying to find the drag queen."

"So? That's what the woman is, in this case."

"Think, Tom. Acheson, standing at his window, waiting for the show to begin, he says he heard Hartman say..." He tilted an eyebrow up.

"He heard him say, 'Hey, you're not a real woman.'"

"Wrong." Stanley played the tape again. Acheson's voice, sounding tinny. "I heard him say, 'Hey, you're not a real woman.'"

"You're not a real woman," Stanley's voice on the tape repeated.

"Right. Well, what he said was, 'You're not a real...' and that's when she shot him. There was this noise, anyway, I didn't realize at first it was a gunshot. It was kind of muffled, you know."

Stanley paused the tape again. "Hartman didn't say, 'you're not a real woman.' She shot him before he finished the sentence. We were just finishing the sentence for him, Acheson and me both, because that was what we expected him to say. But he never finished the sentence, never said a real what."

Tom shook his head. "I don't get it. What are you trying to say? Of course he said 'you're not a real woman.' That's what he was going to say, anyway, before the drag queen shot him. What else could he have been saying?"

"I'm trying to say, there are men who can't handle getting it on with another man, but it's okay with a drag queen—remember, it's what Lola said—they can do it with a drag queen because she looks like a woman, she smells like a woman, she dresses like a woman. Think about it, you got turned on yourself the other night, even knowing it was a guy in drag."

"I didn't exactly get turned on. Anyway, I was doped up."

"Give it a rest. You could have pole vaulted up and down that alley, the way you were poking out when I came through the door."

"Well, fuck, he looked real, didn't he? I mean, some of them look so much like a woman, you can't really tell. I mean, if I thought it really was a woman, like, if I didn't know it was a guy, or, say it was somebody special, say it was, well, maybe somebody I kind of liked, or..." He paused, looked abashed.

"Someone you liked? Like, who, may I ask?" Stanley's eyebrows went up. "I hope you were not going to say Gaye Dawn."

"Don't be dumb, of course I wasn't. I don't even like Gaye Dawn, I was thinking of, well, in general, was what I meant. Why? What's this got to do with anything? What's it got to do with our case?"

"But that's not the way it happened with Hartman, is it? Look, this guy likes drag queens, he hangs out in drag clubs, what's the chances he didn't know this was a drag queen he'd picked up?"

"So, then, why was he so surprised when he found out?"

"That wasn't what surprised him. Think about it, just suppose you were into drag queens, they turned you on, the whole chicks with dicks thing. And, say, you'd picked this one up, she was drop dead beautiful, at least late at night after a bunch of drinks, and you didn't care if underneath that makeup and the skirt and all it might be a guy. Say, you were one of those men who looked for that especially. Say you were Hartman. We already know that's what he liked. And say that's what turned you on, that's what you thought you'd picked up, a chick with a dick. And suppose you took a feel..."

"See, that's where I'd lose it, if I reached down to grope a chick and got a handful of dick instead of pussy..."

"But what if it was the other way around? Say, you expected to get a handful of dick, and you felt her, and you found a pussy instead. You'd be surprised as hell, wouldn't you?"

"Tickled pink, actually..." Tom struggled to make sense of what Stanley was trying to tell him.

"You might even be so surprised, you'd blurt out, "Hey, you're not a real drag queen."

Tom's mouth fell open. He stared at Stanley, thinking through everything he'd said. "What makes you think that's what he was about to say?"

Stanley shrugged. "It's just as likely as the other, isn't it? We just made the assumption that he thought he had picked up a real woman, and when he copped a feel, and found a dick in his hand, he started to object. But everybody, the witnesses, they all said she looked like a drag queen. Not a real woman. And Hartman, of all guys, ought to have known the difference."

"But why... why would a real woman pretend to be a drag queen? That makes no sense."

Stanley crossed his arms over his chest. "Yes. It does. It has to. We just have to figure out what kind of sense it makes."

"Huh," Tom said. He sat for a while, thinking over what Stanley had said. It sounded convincing.

"I don't know," he said finally, giving his head a resigned shake. "This is too weird for me. I'll have to think about all that."

"We both will. Best put it out of your mind for a while, see if anything rises to the surface." Stanley began gathering up dishes, carrying them to the sink. "Have you actually been eating off these?" he asked, holding a food-encrusted dish up to the light.

"Nah, I mostly eat out, or carry in stuff. I eat it out of the cartons. This has been a special treat. I like the way you do bacon and eggs. Thanks."

Stanley, busy washing dishes, said brusquely, "Don't mention it. It's not exactly Julia Child."

"Whoever she is. Thanks for everything, actually." Tom came to stand just behind him. Stanley could smell his after shave—Old Spice, he'd been wondering for a while what it was, but smelling it so close up, like this, and just freshly splashed on, he recognized it.

His dad used to wear Old Spice. It took Stanley back, in some funny way. He felt like a little boy to Tom's—what? Not his Daddy, surely, but something big, strong, to be leaned on. He almost did lean back, physically. He felt like somehow all of a sudden he was sharing a special space with Tom, some kind of subliminal bonding. Was that a good thing? He wasn't at all sure. It could conceivably be the worst thing that had ever happened to him in his entire life.

"Stanley, I want you to know, I appreciate this," Tom said, his voice husky.

It seemed to Stanley as if he could actually feel Tom's breath on the back of his neck, but he knew that had to be his imagination. He thought he heard it, too, loud, fast, rasping—and realized that was his own breath.

"Cooking breakfast? Washing the dishes?"

"Yes," Tom said, and, "No, I mean all of it. The sex..." he stammered over that, "I never had anybody, you know, make a big deal about, well, taking care of me, the way you do. I mean, with me, with women, I've always been the one trying to please them. I mean, not like I didn't enjoy getting a load off, but it was never like that was what it was about for them. And, fuck, you've been real cool, about everything, is what I'm trying to say. All of it, the cooking and stuff, the way you do. It's kind of nice. I'd forgotten what it's like, having somebody, like, devoted to you. You know what I'm saying?"

Stanley had to think about that for a minute. "Not exactly, no," he said. "And I wouldn't actually say I'm devoted to you."

Tom ignored that. "I know I've been pretty tough on you," he said. "I can be a real prick sometimes." He put his hands on Stanley's waist. The plate in Stanley's hand came dangerously close to dropping on the floor. He put it gently back down into the dishwasher. *Mustn't waste the family china.*

"Tom, maybe," Stanley started to say, but his voice came out a squeak. He cleared his throat, tried to think what to say.

“Listen, about last night,” Tom said.

Stanley turned from the sink. Only, Tom was standing so close, even closer than he had realized, and with Tom’s hands on his waist, the result was that, in a way, he was in Tom’s arms. For a long moment, they stood there like that, practically touching. Then Tom pulled him closer and kissed him, hard at first, angrily, his teeth bruising Stanley’s lips, and then, more gently.

Stanley felt, or thought he felt, something stir between them. King Kong, waking up? For what? They’d done that show already, hadn’t they? However quickly. Last night...

“When I said see if something rises...”

“It’s always like that in the morning.” Tom’s expression was not quite apologetic. “Doesn’t matter how many times I get off the night before.”

“Maybe I should point out once again, we were drunk last night. We’re not drunk now. It’s the middle of the morning.”

“Like you said, there’s different ways to get drunk.”

Stanley considered that for a few seconds. “What you’re trying to say is, you woke up horny.” He paused for a moment. “And you’d like somebody to do something about it.”

Tom’s laugh was kind of embarrassed, and kind of excited too. “Yeah. I guess that’s what I’m trying to say.”

Tom’s robe had fallen open. Stanley put a hand up and ran his fingers through the thick hair on his chest. He slid his hand down tentatively, over a rock hard stomach, down through another patch of thick, wiry hair.

Yup, just as he’d suspected, the damn thing was half hard already, and rapidly filling out the rest of the way. *Oh, fuck it*, he thought. He took a firm hold of it and led Tom with it toward the still messy sofa bed.

“This is probably not a good idea,” he said.

“Yeah, probably not,” The bathrobe sank to the floor in a little blue cloud. Tom dropped to his back on the sofa, carrying Stanley down atop him, kissed him again, long and searchingly this time.

Stanley thought, fleetingly, that this was some kind of breakthrough for them. This time, Tom wasn’t coming off a drug trip, or drunk. So, a different game, but Stanley still didn’t know the rules.

Their lips parted. Tom pushed down gently on Stanley’s shoulders. Stanley got the hint, slipped downward until Tom’s erection, standing at full attention now, was in his face. He took hold of it, ran a tongue up the length of the shaft, around the head, raised his head to look at it.

“Suck it,” Tom said in a hoarse voice.

“Jesus, can’t I just take a minute to admire it?”

“Not if you don’t want to waste another load.”

“Oh.” He didn’t. He popped it into his mouth.

Tom closed his eyes and leaned back—and just as quickly, his eyes flew open again, his expression surprised.

“The woman,” he said.

Stanley lifted his head. “Of all the gross, no class things—I’m down here sucking your dick—and doing a damned good job of it, too, I might say—and you have the nerve to tell me you’re thinking of some woman?”

“Moirra,” Tom said.

“You’re thinking of Moira Acheson? That bitch? Now that just tears it, if you think—”

“The redhead, in the bar, the one that tried to kill me. It wasn’t Gaye Dawn. It was Moira Acheson.”

Stanley went silent, his jaw hanging open. He sat back on his haunches between Tom’s widespread legs, staring up at Tom.

“You’re sure? You said you couldn’t really see her eyes.”

“She looked over the rims of those sunglasses a couple of times. Had to, the damn bar was so dark she could hardly see anything through them. Plus, it was her voice. I’m positive. She’s got a blow job voice, you know what I mean?”

“Like mine?” Stanley said, fishing shamelessly for a compliment. If they were going to do these scenes, it would be nice to have at least a little romance. He was starting to feel like a two-bit hooker on a half-off sale.

“No, yours is different.” Not missing a beat.

Stanley frowned. “What way, different?”

“Oh, fuck, I don’t know. Her voice it made me think of getting my dick sucked. Your voice, I think of, well, like what you did that first time, you know, rimming me.”

“Oh, great, thanks. She’s got a cock voice and I’ve got a asshole voice, is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

“I’m trying to tell you, that drag queen was Moira Acheson. She’s our Deadly Nightshade.”

“Miss Titty Titty Bang Bang?” Stanley thought for a minute, absentmindedly stroking Tom’s cock. “But that means... what? And where does Acheson fit into the picture? Is he part of it, do you think?”

“No, I don’t think he’s a part of it at all. I think it’s what we talked about before, serial killings. I think he’s just a coincidence. You know, she picks Hartman up, realizes when he takes her home that he’s Acheson’s neighbor.”

“Maybe that’s why she killed him there, on the steps. Maybe she knew Acheson would be watching. It was like, to freak him out. Or maybe give him a warning.”

“Maybe she’s going to kill him,” Tom said. “Maybe she’s had that in mind all along. Maybe all the rest of it was just a, you know, like a decoy, to throw us off the track.”

“And it did,” Stanley said. “I mean, think about it, if she’d just gone ahead and shot him, she’d be the prime suspect. He jilted her, didn’t he?”

“For a fag,” Tom said.

“Well, yes,” Stanley agreed in a slightly cooler voice, “I suppose that would add to her annoyance.” He started to scramble from the sofa bed. “Gosh, we’ve got to warn Acheson and, well, I guess the first thing is to find her and...”

“Uh, Stanley...”

Stanley, his feet already on the floor, looked at him. “What?”

Tom lifted his eyebrows and looked down the length of his body, at his dick, still pointing rigidly at the ceiling.

“Oh,” Stanley said.

“A couple of minutes isn’t going to make any big difference. Unless you’re more worried about Acheson,” Tom said.

Stanley rolled back onto the couch. “Who?”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tom’s ID of Moira was enough for a warrant to search her apartment—no need, they agreed tacitly, to mention that he’d been drugged at the time.

“What exactly are we hoping to find?” Stanley asked. They were at the station. Tom was assembling a team to do the search.

“The gun would be helpful. And a long black wig.”

"And a gold lamè dress," Stanley added.

"That too. And not 'we.'"

"And maybe... what do you mean, not we?"

"That arm of yours," Tom said.

"My arm is fine."

"You're right handed, right?" Stanley nodded.

Tom had been sorting through weaponry. He picked up what looked to Stanley like a small cannon. "Here, catch," he said, and tossed it.

Stanley did, right handed, and winced. It slipped through his fingers and fell to the floor. He stooped to pick it up. "I can hold it just fine," he said. "Who's going to be throwing it at me?"

"You can't even draw a gun without catching it on your bra-strap."

"Now that's just..."

"Stanley, you've done a good job on this case—really, I mean it. I couldn't have figured it out without you, not so fast, anyway. But, the fact is, you're not really a cop. You've never done this kind of action before. And when you're busting into somebody's apartment, to nail them, anybody who can't help is in the way."

"Listen..."

"No, save your arguments. It's nothing personal. You'd just hamper us. I'm team captain. It's my decision. I'm saying you don't go. Period."

"So what am I supposed to do while you're busily wrapping up *our* case? Which I practically solved, I might mention. Sit in the car and play with myself?"

"We both thought maybe Acheson's at risk. You go pick him up. Bring him down to the station, for safekeeping. Anyway, we might need him once we start questioning her. And I'm the one who recognized Moira, remember?"

"While you were getting all excited thinking she was a guy in drag."

Tom gave him a frosty look. "Acheson. He should be at the bar by now. Go."

Stanley thought about arguing the point. But Tom had spoken. Something in him acquiesced on a gut level. When your man said...

"Acheson," he said. "At the bar. Got it."

§ § § § §

Only, Acheson wasn't at the bar.

"It is his shift," the manager explained. "He was here. He got a call from his wife, some kind of emergency, said he had to rush back to his apartment."

*Oh, crap*, Stanley thought. He got his cell phone out and dialed Tom's number. Probably they would just about be arriving at Moira's apartment now.

He got a "the party you are trying to call is currently not available. To leave a message..."

Tom was right. He'd never taken part in this kind of take down. Would Tom have his phone turned off? Hmm. He thought about that and decided he most likely did. You wouldn't want it ringing just before you kicked the door in, or whatever they did. He left a quick message, telling Tom where he was going.

"Jake said he'd be back in a while," the manager said.

"I wouldn't count on it." Stanley ran for his car.

§ § § § §

Moira hated that little faggot, Gaylord. She hated Jake even more. She hated all men.

Which wasn't exactly true, either. There were things that she actually loved about them, things that made them special to her. She loved the way they got excited, their dicks swelling, their breath turning all ragged when they thought they were in line for some pussy. She loved how easy they were to manipulate. All it took was one whiff, and a woman could do whatever she wanted with a man.

*If* she wanted. She had never been sure with Daddy if she really wanted it or not—or, was she just trying to please him, to get his approval.

That, certainly, she had done—at least at first, for a couple of years, actually. Sometimes, he'd be already stiff as a poker by the time he slipped into her bed. At first, the first few times, she had been asleep, he'd awakened her climbing into the bed. Later, at the supper table, or while he was watching television, she'd catch him looking at her. She had learned to recognize the glint in his eyes, could tell when he was planning a nighttime visit, and she would lie awake waiting for him, growing more impatient as the minutes ticked by.

It wasn't the fucking, though. Even then she had known that. It was the way he *wanted* to fuck her, needed to fuck her. That turned her on. In time, she'd even gotten into the habit of getting herself ready for him, thinking about what it would be like, being needed that way, wanted so desperately.

Since she'd been a little girl, she had wanted to be wanted, and had never felt like she was. She was the adopted child—meaning, she hadn't been wanted by her own, her real parents. And then, after her adoptive parents had presumably given up, along had come Brenda, their own baby girl. And Moira had slipped into some sort of childhood Netherland. There, dutifully taken care of—but always feeling like she was in the way, never like she was really a part of anything. Not, surely, a part of the family, a wanted part. Until Daddy had discovered something after all that he did want from her.

Sometimes, he was still soft when he got there. She liked that the best, loved to take him in her hand, feel him quickly grow and stiffen, loved the sense of power that gave her over him. He was on top, he was Daddy, he was the one having his way, but she always felt as if she were the one who was in control. She wondered what he would do if she rolled away from him, if she failed to take his cock in her hand, if she refused to open her legs when he pawed at them with his big, rough hands. But she never refused.

Their sessions were necessarily quick. There wasn't a lot of time for foreplay, even if he had been so inclined, and in time, too, she came to understand that he wasn't. He wanted to get in, go at it hard and fast, and get off—and get out, before anyone discovered them. It had been a long time before she had even had an orgasm, and that was only after she had started working on herself before he got there.

She liked the way he held her, though, fondling her the whole time, her tits, her ass, running his hands up and down her back. Kissing her, whispering sweet things in her ear: "You little darling. You are so beautiful. God, I love you. You don't know how happy you're making me." Or, just before he came, "Who's your man, sugar, who's your Daddy. I'm your beau, ain't I?" Dozens, maybe hundreds of different snatches of love-talk, always ardently whispered into her ear or against her throat while he nipped at it.

That had been the sweetest, what she had really loved about what they did. The rest of it—well, the first few times, the first several times, it had been downright painful, she had wanted to cry out, but she never did.

After she had gotten used to it, though, and it didn't hurt so much, it had still been just okay, until she had learned to get herself close to orgasm before he got there. Even the orgasms hadn't been all that great. In time, she had learned that she could do better by herself or, still later, with a vibrator.

Which told her she didn't need a man to get her off. She never had. She'd needed something. He had said so. "I'm doing this cause I could see you needed it," he said one time, "if it wasn't me it would be someone else, probably the wrong someone else. I'm doing this for you, sweetheart."

But whatever she had needed, it wasn't that. Once she had tried it with the vibrator, had found one in her best friend's mother's nightstand and stolen it, she discovered immediately that the vibrator did a better job of getting her off.

But a vibrator couldn't sweet talk you, couldn't stroke your back and fondle your buttocks while it thrust in and out. Couldn't start out soft and then stand up stiff from nothing more than the power of your magic over it, couldn't pant just from the idea of humping you.

So, as imperfect as they had been, she had loved his nighttime visits—until everything changed. Until she discovered she was pregnant.

“Jesus Almighty,” he swore through clenched teeth when she told him. “How could this happen? How could you do this to me?”

They hadn’t fucked at all that night. Afterward, she thought it might have been wiser to wait until he’d finished—only, most times, as soon as he’d shot his load and slipped out of her, he slipped out of bed, too.

“Don’t want your Momma to come checking on us,” he’d say. He’d adjust himself in his boxers, most nights give her bottom a quick slap, or maybe pinch one of her nipples, and like that, he’d be out the door, never even looking back.

So, she’d had to tell him first, as soon as he climbed into bed. He’d taken hold of her, she could tell he was in a hurry, he was already hard as rock, tried to push her on her back and climb on without hardly a pause—and she’d told him, her voice shivering, “I think I’m pregnant.”

He had frozen crouched over her, stayed like that for the longest time and, finally, with a great, weary sigh, he rolled off of her, onto the bed beside her, not even touching her now—like she was contaminated or something. She could see, in the moonlight through the window, that his mighty erection had shriveled, it lay limp across the front of his boxers. He reached down absentmindedly and tucked it away. She was sorry to see it go. She wanted to take hold of it, make it grow, the way it did in her hand. She didn’t, though. There was nothing inviting now in his manner.

“Maybe you’re not,” he said at last, and she said, “I’m pretty sure.”

The next day, he brought home a sack full of pregnancy tests from the pharmacy, slipped the bag to her when Momma was in the kitchen, told her to wait till everyone was in bed before she tried them out.

She used a half dozen different kits. The results were all the same.

“Shit fire,” he swore when she told him. They were in bed. He’d slipped into the room same as usual, slipped into her bed, but nothing else was the same. He lay beside her again, still not touching her, and when she summoned up her courage and tried to reach inside his boxers to take hold of him, he shoved her hand away.

“We don’t have time for that shit,” he muttered. “I got to think. You’ve got us in a real spot here, you stupid little bitch.”

“There’s clinics,” she said. “I could go for an abortion.”

“You’re too young,” he said in an angry whisper.

“You could go with me?”

“And tell them what? That I’ve been porking you steady. I don’t want to be associated with it in any way, your being knocked up, not in anybody’s mind, least they start thinking the wrong things. People have dirty minds.” He paused, and swore under his breath. “Fuck. There’s things a woman can do, you know, douches, stuff like that.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Well, you ought to have, you want a guy slipping it to you regular, the way you like it and all, you’re supposed to think about shit like that, it ain’t up to the man.”

She couldn’t think what she was supposed to say to that. How could she have known anything like that? He was the first one, which he surely knew. The only one.

He’d thought of that, too. “Who else you been fucking?” he asked her. “Maybe it ain’t mine.”

“Nobody,” she said, hurt, wanting to cry, and knowing if she did he’d slip away.

“Maybe so, maybe not.”

“Nobody,” she said, her voice intense. “You’re the only one, I swear to God.”

He was silent, apparently believing her. “Christ,” he said after a while. “If your Momma found out. If



anybody found out. You got any idea what they'd do to me? I'd be in prison for sure. Probably dead in the first year. Those guys in there, they resent stuff like this. They're all jealous, most likely."

Eventually, he found someone, a woman he knew. "She does this all the time," he told her when she said she was scared. "Knows more about it than the doctors do, you want to know the truth."

She'd done as he wanted. Momma had unwittingly cooperated. Her sister, Aunt Jenny, was getting married. They'd planned to go together, the three of them and Moira's younger sister, Brenda, the whole family. Moira had played sick, started a day ahead of time, not enough time to take her to the doctor's, the way she had figured it out, and time enough for her to lay it on thick.

"You go," he said to Momma, "You take Brenda and just go on, and I'll stay here with her, see that she's okay. I'm not that crazy about your sister anyway, and I sure don't like that shitass she's marrying."

The Buick had barely pulled out of the driveway, Momma and Brenda on their way to Charleston, before he was urging Moira to get dressed fast, "She's waiting for us," he said repeatedly. "Said not to be late."

It had actually been far simpler than she had imagined and feared. They were home in less than three hours, and she spent the rest of the day in bed. Nothing much was said. He brought her some soup, sat on the side of the bed while she ate it. She thought maybe he was thinking about doing it. She was sore, but she'd suffer through that, if he wanted to.

When she reached for him, though, tried to grope him through his jeans, he'd shoved her hand away again.

"No more of that shit," he said. "One good scare is enough."

That was how it had ended for them. A year and half love affair, over just like that. She tried. Sometimes she almost thought she had convinced him. She'd catch him when they were in the house alone, she'd see him looking at her with that unmistakable gleam in his eyes, the way he had looked at her in the beginning, before that first night, when he was still just thinking about it.

She would come close to him, press herself against him, and sometimes his arms would come around her. Once or twice, he kissed her, and she could feel it rising up in his pants, pressing against her belly.

Whenever she tried to take it out of his pants, though, he would shove her away before she even got the fly undone.

"I could suck it," she said once, and he said, "We both know what that would lead to, don't we? It ain't sucking you want, you wouldn't be happy then till you had it in you, and next thing you know, I'd be sweating bullets again. Thanks, but no thanks. I'll do without."

It was months before she realized he wasn't doing without. He was slipping down to Brenda's bedroom now instead of hers. She heard stealthy footsteps in the hall one night, and, curious, poked her head out in time to see a shadow disappear into Brenda's room. One time, she found Brenda staring at her in a funny way, and wondered if Brenda knew. Moira had blushed and looked away. And another time, she found a used condom in the wastebasket by Brenda's dressing table. At least now he was being careful. Looking out for Brenda. Which he hadn't done for her.

After that, she hated Brenda. She was angry with her father, and hurt, but that was nothing compared to the way she loathed her sister. She'd have given anything to hold him in her hand again, feel him growing stiff—at the same time, she thought she'd like to cut it off, so he couldn't stick it anywhere else.

Especially so he couldn't stick it in Brenda.

Eventually, she'd seen to it that he wasn't sticking it to anybody, unless they did it in Hell. She'd seriously thought about sending Brenda to join him, and had decided to run away from home instead. But she still thought sometimes about going back for a visit.



Tanya parked on the side street, 17<sup>th</sup>, let herself in the gate there, strolled down to the atrium. She was actually humming as she passed the fountain, pausing to run a finger through the splashing water. She was

happy. She was about to do what she had been planning for a long time.

She had to knock twice before the door opened. She dearly hoped she'd interrupted them fucking.

"Hello, Gayborg," she said when he opened the door. She had the gun in her hand. "Is your sweetie here yet?"

§ § § §

No sign of Moira at her apartment. No wig, either. No gun.

Tom watched as his men combed the apartment. Had they gotten it wrong? He closed his eyes, trying to remember the bar, the redhead in the gold dress. His head had been spinning from the drugs—but not at first, not when she'd approached the table, knocked over the drink, sat down beside him.

No, he was sure of it. It had been Moira. So, where was the evidence he was looking for?

On cue, one of the uniforms said, "There's a gold dress in here." He took it out of the closet. The dress shimmered on its hanger.

Tom smiled. "That's it," he said. And the rest of it... maybe she was wearing the wig. And if she was wearing the wig, she probably had the gun with her too. Which must mean she was working, stalking another victim. But where...?

He became aware that his cell phone was vibrating in his back pocket. He took it out, checked the messages, found the one from Stanley.

*Oh, shit*, he thought. Stanley, going after Moira on his own? If it came right down to it, Moira could probably kick Stanley's cute little ass. "You guys strip this place," he said. "Look for anything that might give us DNA. Tissues, lipsticks, used glasses. Tampons."

"Ah, man," the uniform searching the bathroom said.

"Bag it," Tom said, and ran outside.

§ § § §

Stanley knocked hard on the apartment door. It occurred to him suddenly that, in the movies, the cops all had their guns in hand when they did this. He reached for his gun, to take it out of his pocket, when the door opened and Gaye stood there, white as a ghost. She was in full drag, as if she were getting ready to do a show. Stanley thought it was odd to see her all dolled up like this, at this time of day.

"Is Acheson...?" Stanley started to ask, and saw the woman standing off to the side. Or, not a woman, but what looked like a drag queen, with long black hair and overdone makeup.

"Moira," he said in a hoarse whisper.

She smiled. Unlike Stanley's, her gun was already out. She pointed it at him.

"It's Tanya," she said. "Oh, this is working out even better than I dreamed. Do come in. We're having a party."

§ § § §

Gaye and Tanya might have been twins. Or, they were dressed alike, the same skimpy red dress, the same long black wig—only, Gaye exuded a certain glamour, if it was a bit exaggerated for daytime. Tanya looked as if she had made herself up to be a caricature of Gaye. Close enough you could see the resemblance, but, at a second look, not really alike, not really convincing.

Acheson was taped to a kitchen chair, leaning against the far wall. His hands were behind the chair, duct tape holding his feet together, covering his mouth. Only his eyes, wide with fear, showed.

"Over there," Moira gestured with the gun.

Stanley moved to stand with Gaye in front of the sofa. Stanley's gun was on the floor, where she'd ordered him to toss it. Even if Stanley had been the heroic type, and way more athletic than he was, there was

no possibility of his getting to her before she shot him. Anyway, if it ended up the two of them fighting over the gun, he wasn't altogether certain he'd win. She looked hard and mean, and determined, and he'd never been much of a fighter.

"So, uh, what's the theme of our little party?" he asked, swallowing and trying to make his voice sound normal. It didn't work.

She laughed. "We're going to play a game."

"What kind of game?"

"It's called, last one standing. Of course, he loses by default," she shot a quick glance at her former husband, trussed like a Christmas turkey in his chair, "since he can't stand up."

"So, how do we play?" Stanley managed a watery smile. He was thinking, Tom must have gotten his message by now. Tom knew where he was. Only, would Tom rush here? He might be busy with all kinds of raiding party things. Never having been in on one of those (and it occurred to him that if the big lummoX had let him go on this one, he wouldn't be in this fix now) he didn't know quite what the drill was. For sure, Tom would come, but would he come in time? Because it didn't look like there was going to be a lot of it to spare.

"Well, since he's just holding up the action," she said, flicking a hand in Acheson's direction again, "the first thing is, we get rid of him. Twinkletoes is going to shoot him."

"I won't," Gaye said. "You can't make me."

She gave him a look of devastating scorn.

"She doesn't mean literally," Stanley said. "She means, she's going to shoot him. And make it look later as if you did it."

"Bright boy," Moira said. "I always did figure you for the smart one. By the way, where's the beefy one?"

"He's at..." Stanley started to say, and caught himself. "He's just downstairs, parking the car. He'll be here in another minute."

"And he sent you in first, to clean things up? I don't think so." She laughed again and as quickly grew sober. "Then, after Gaye shoots him, she's going to shoot you. She's the murderer you've been looking for all along, don't you see? She's the one who killed Hartman. She fits the description, doesn't she? She looks just like those sketches. Or enough like, at least."

"It wasn't me," Gaye said. "It was you. Jake told me later, after he'd thought about it. He said it was the funniest thing, but that drag queen looked an awful lot like you."

Stanley suppressed a groan. Gaye Dawn had just signed her death warrant for sure. His too. There was no way they'd talk Moira out of it now.

"So, then, Gayborg kills you, and it'll just be me and her," Moira said. "And I'm going to try bravely to take the gun away from her, and while we're struggling, the gun will go off. And that will leave just me. Last one standing. Get it? I win."

"You can't get away with anything that silly," Stanley said. "It's like an old Joan Crawford movie. The cops will get here and they'll see you dressed in that Tanya getup and they'll know right off what happened."

"Only, I won't be in this get up. I'll be Moira. Jake's ex-wife. Who Gayborg hated. He set all this up to kill me and Jake both, because he realized Jake was still in love with me. But, before he did it, he confessed. All about the others."

"Well, since you brought it up, what about those others?" Stanley asked. "Why did you have to kill them?"

"Because I wanted him dead." She waved the gun in Acheson's direction. "Him and his little faggot friend. But I knew I couldn't just kill the two of them. I'd be number one on the hit parade, wouldn't I? The first one they'd look at. But if I set it up first, made it look like some crazy drag queen was running around killing Johns, well, he'd be just another victim of a serial killer." She looked downright proud of herself.

"But, Jesus, Moira, that's pretty cold, isn't it? I mean, killing all those innocent guys..."

“Innocent?” She sneered. “As far as I’m concerned, those no such thing as an innocent man, they’re all of them animals, they do all their thinking with their dicks. And those guys I killed, well, they were hypocrites to boot, getting it on with drag queens so they could pretend they weren’t queer. They were scum. They deserved to die.”

She was smiling again. “Only, the thing was, I found out I liked it. I mean, at first, they were just a means to an end, just part of the plan. But then, the means became the best part of it. I really got off on killing them. Getting them turned on, all hot and bothered, and then, before they could get their rocks off, bam. It was such a rush. I wish I’d started doing it sooner. When I was kid, even. What a way to grow up, offing a bunch of stupid dickheads...” She stopped, breathing heavily, her eyes glinting with a feverish light. She stared at Stanley as if she were seeing him for the first time.

*And now she’s going to kill me*, he thought. His flesh actually seemed to shrink, to cower against his bones.

“And now I’m going to kill you,” she said. She smiled again, broader than before.

“It won’t work. Tom will be here any minute.”

“Oh, please, spare me...”

“Stanley? Are you here?” From outside. Tom’s voice.

“The cavalry,” Stanley said, giggling despite himself. This was *worse* than a Joan Crawford movie.

§§§§§

“Stanley.” Tom dashed up the stairs shouting, gun in hand. He hit the door of Acheson’s apartment, hard. It exploded inward. He stopped on the threshold, barely registering the sight of Acheson gagged and bound, or Gaye Dawn cringing in the far corner. What he saw, the only thing he had eyes for, was Stanley, in the middle of the room, and Moira-Tanya with a gun at his head.

“Drop your gun,” she said, “Or I’m going to blow your little sweetie’s brains out.”

Tom tossed his gun to the floor.

“Move out of the way,” Moira said. She motioned with the gun. Tom moved to his left, circling clockwise. She took Stanley’s arm and circled as well, to the right, keeping Stanley between her and Tom, until she was by the door. Then she gave him a shove in Tom’s direction and she was out the door, but as she ran she took a wild shot in Stanley’s direction. He gave a kind of yelp and dropped to the floor.

Tom knelt over Stanley. There was blood on the side of his head and on the floor around it. For a minute, he thought Stanley might be dead, and something seemed to die inside his own chest, a painful death.

Stanley opened his eyes, squinted up at him, and somehow managed to smile. “You came for me,” he said, his voice not much more than a whisper. “My hero.”

“Yeah, well, it doesn’t look good on your record, letting your partner get killed. You okay? Because I think our little nightshade is getting away.” The high heels were clattering now down the steps.

“Go get the bitch,” Stanley said. “I’m going to slap her head sideways.”

Tom grinned and jumped up, went after her. He paused at the top of the stairs. She was in the atrium, almost to the fountain. Across the way, Jeremy Clark’s apartment door opened.

“What’s...?” he started to say. He got a glimpse of Tom’s face, and slammed his door.

“Moira,” Tom called. “Give it up.”

She stopped cold, swung around, surprised to hear her own name. He took advantage of her pause, took a cautious step or two down, not wanting to startle her into running again.

“Tanya,” she said. “It’s Tanya. My name is Tanya.”

“Even if you got away,” he said, “we know who you are now. You think you can live on the run? Sooner or later, they’ll track you down.”

“I should have killed you in the damned alley,” she said. She raised the gun, leveling it at him. Tom froze.

“I should have killed you the first time you laid a hand on me.”

Stanley had dragged himself to his feet and out of the apartment, leaning over the atrium wall. He saw her bring the gun up, saw that Tom had gone after her unarmed. Poop, he thought. Both the guns, his and Tom’s, were in the apartment behind him. Not enough time to go get one, and he wasn’t about to let that crazy bitch kill the man he loved.

He scrambled up onto the stucco half-wall, balancing himself on his knees for a moment, cried, “Look, Mom,” and flung himself into space, arms wide, back arched.

It might have been, at last, his perfect swan dive, if he’d had time to finish it, if the water were further away. But there wasn’t time, and no water except for the few gallons splashing in the fountain, just an astonished Moira looking up at him, eyes wide, disbelieving.

He landed on top of her with a thud and a whoosh of breath and a tangle of limbs. The gun clattered somewhere off to the right. He heard something break, hoped for a minute it was her neck, and realized belatedly it was his arm.

*Oh, great, now I’m wounded and crippled,* he thought. *She’ll probably beat the crap out of me and Tom will believe I really am a nuss.*

She didn’t, though. She was out cold. Stanley lay atop her for a moment, trying to get his breath back, suddenly all too aware of how painful his arm was.

Tom reached him, helped him to his feet. “What in the hell was that all about?” he demanded, his voice shaky. “You had both guns up there. Why didn’t you just shoot the bitch?”

“I’m afraid of guns.”

“You okay?”

“I’m fine. Except...”

Stanley started to move his arms, realized the left one wouldn’t work. “I think it’s broken,” he said with an apologetic grin.

“Hold tight. I’ll get the medics.” Tom would have turned away, but Stanley grabbed his sleeve with his good hand.

“You came for me,” Stanley said. “You came after me, to rescue me.”

“Well, Jesus, of course I came after you. You’re my partner, for Christ’s sake, that’s what partners do. Besides, you’re my...” Tom paused and looked at him hard. “You look, I don’t know, funny. You’re as white as a snowman’s ass.”

“No, no, I’m okay, really, I’m fine now, now that you’re here,” Stanley said. “You started to say...?” He glanced down then at his arm and saw a shard of bone sticking out through the skin—and fainted dead away, falling into Tom’s ready arms.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

This time, Stanley’s arm was in a cast, and he was on medical leave. Tom had credited Stanley with solving the case, and the Captain had praised him in the squad room, and the other detectives had echoed the praise in not very enthusiastic tones. But Tom had looked genuinely proud of him, which had been the best part.

Chris had been playing nurse. “You’re okay now?” he asked. “I’ve got to get to work.”

“I’m fine,” Stanley said. He waved the cast. “At least it’s my left hand. It leaves the right one free.”

Chris laughed and let himself out. Stanley took a swig of the beer Chris had left on the side table for him, and tried to think what to do with himself. He’d already looked at *Some Like it Hot* twice and *Mildred Pierce* three times, and he was bored with the soaps. He was not a good convalescent. He felt all at odds and ends. And he missed Tom. He hadn’t seen him in three days.

On cue, the doorbell rang. He thought Chris must have forgotten something, and hurried to open it.

He was surprised to find Tom standing outside. Tom grinned down at him, a smile both mischievous and something else, too, that Stanley couldn't quite identify.

"How are you doing?" Tom asked.

"Well, you know." Stanley raised the arm with the cast on it. "It's kind of a nuisance. Jacking off, especially."

"I'll bet." There was an awkward kind of pause that seemed to Stanley to reverberate with some as yet unidentified possibility.

"Got time for an old playmate?" Tom asked.

"Playmate? As I recall, every time we play you get frosty as hell afterward. I ought to slam the door in your face. If you think you can just barge in here, with those to-die-for lips and Coca Cola eyes, and..."

"Coca Cola eyes?" Tom laughed aloud. "Jesus, if that isn't fag talk, I don't know what it is."

"Fuck you."

"And they're not Coca Cola, they're Pepsi."

"I hate Pepsi."

"Yeah, well, how do you feel about dick?"

Stanley hesitated, looking him up and down. "As in the general or the specific?" he asked.

"As in, I've got a nine inch boner in my pants. Nine and a half, actually."

Which ended the argument. It seemed odd to Stanley; Tom was usually so reticent about getting anything going between them, and here he was, the aggressor this time. Something about the situation was different. Okay, everything was different. He wasn't altogether sure, but he thought he liked it—or would, if he weren't a bit suspicious.

"Come on in," he said.

Things went fast after that. The door hadn't any more than closed behind him than Tom had grabbed him and was kissing him, hard. Stanley held on to him with his good arm and tried to keep the one in the cast out of the way.

Which turned out to be not much of a problem. To his astonishment, Tom reached down and picked him up in his arms, carried him right through to the bed. Stanley almost wet his pants. He'd always dreamed of some big butch guy doing that, but he had never really imagined it would happen—and here was Tom, as big and as butch as anyone could dream of, laying him very gently on the bed, bending over him, stripping his clothes off, piece by piece.

"Wow," Stanley said, "what brought all this on?"

"I want to make you happy," Tom said. "I want this to be an experience you'll remember."

Tom had him down to his bikinis now. "I can handle those," Stanley said, pushing Tom's hand away from the elastic. He waved a hand in Tom's general direction. "Your turn."

Tom stood up, looked shy for a moment. "I never actually put on a strip show for anyone before," he said, unbuttoning his shirt.

"You want music?"

Tom grinned. "I can hum it," he said, and hummed something totally unrecognizable—really, the man couldn't carry a tune in a wooden bucket—while he peeled off shirt, pants, socks—fast, like he was shedding past sins, till he was down to his boxers—the ones with the little hearts on them that Stanley remembered. This time, he was definitely going to sniff them.

"Ready?" Tom asked. He put his thumbs under the elastic and looked at Stanley, watching enthralled from the bed.

Stanley glanced down at his erection, jutting ferociously upward. "What do you think?"

Tom rather pointedly didn't look at that, though. He peeled the shorts down, his own dick jumping out of them, dropped them to the floor and kicked them aside. He got on the bed, straddling Stanley, and looked at the arm in the cast.

"Can you manage, with that?" he asked.

"Watch me." Stanley took hold of him by his dick, tugged to bring Tom up where he could suck him. To his surprise, Tom held back.

"I want you to fuck me," he said, blurted out all of a sudden like, as if he was afraid if he said it slowly he wouldn't get it said.

Stanley shook his head and banged at his ear as if there might be water in it. "Something's wrong with my hearing. I would have sworn you just asked me to fuck you."

"You'll have to take it easy though, okay? I never did that before."

"I figured that," Stanley said.

"And stop licking your fucking chops."

"Maybe I should try licking something else?"

"That sounds like a good idea."

Tom scooted up on the bed until he was straddling Stanley's shoulders, his dick in front of Stanley's face.

"The pillow," Stanley said.

Tom put the pillow behind Stanley's head, and Stanley took the big hard cock in his mouth, put his good hand on Tom's hip and pulled him closer. Tom pushed forward, shoving it slowly down Stanley's throat.

He fucked his mouth like that for a moment, gently, taking his time. After a minute or two, he pulled out and sat back on his haunches.

"So, the butt fucking thing," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"Totally. Well, unless you don't want to. I mean, I kind of had the impression that was something you wanted to do, the way you chowed down on it. Something that would make you especially happy."

"Happy? Jesus, if I'm dead and imagining this, don't wake me up."

Tom smiled. "You are a crazy fucker, you know that?" He paused, glanced down very briefly at Stanley's cock. "Uh, so what do we do here, should I get on my belly, or... this is your show, you tell me."

"This thing..." Stanley lifted the cast off the bed. "I think it's better if I just stay like this and you could maybe, you know, just kind of sit on it." Tom looked a little doubtful. "Plus, it'll be easier for you, this being your first time, you can kind of control everything. You know, how far, and how fast..."

"Oh, sure, I get it," Tom said. He moved back a little further, kind of positioned himself, and lowered himself toward Stanley's dick. And paused again. "Lube?"

"Right," Stanley said, breathing hard. He stretched his hand toward the drawer of the nightstand.

"I'll get it," Tom said. He leaned across and tugged the drawer open, found a jar of lube and dipped his fingers into it, reached behind himself. Stanley could tell from his little grimace that he'd never even had his fingers up there. Totally virgin. He half expected Tom to change his mind at this point, but Tom lowered himself again.

"Uh, Tom, the condoms are in the drawer there, too," he said.

"Oh. Sure." Tom leaned over again, got a condom, opened the package, and looked down at Stanley's dick. "Maybe you'd better do it," he said, putting the condom in Stanley's hand.

Stanley slipped it over his dick, noticing with some trepidation that Tom carefully avoided watching this

part of it. But, he was essentially straight, wasn't he? A dick up your ass, where you couldn't see it, was one thing, admiring the dick before it went there was another. Though he did kind of wish Tom would admire his dick. It wasn't in quite the same league, but it wasn't too shabby, either, as many a guy had attested in the past. *Oh, well, you couldn't always have everything, could you?*

"Ready for take off," he said.

This time, Tom didn't pause, but lowered himself slowly, cautiously, onto the tip of Stanley's cock. For a second or two the muscles in his hole resisted the intrusion. Tom grunted and closed his eyes, twisting his face into a grimace again. Stanley thought for sure this was where he was going to change his mind, but he didn't. He took a deep breath and settled down on it, taking it inside.

It was like nothing Stanley had ever experienced before. Not just because it was so tight, although it was certainly that, he was sure he'd never been in one so tight before. But, this wasn't just any virgin ass he was fucking, this was Tom Danzel's virgin ass, the most beautiful ass in the world, attached to the most beautiful man, the man he loved. He could have shot his load with the first moment of entry, and had to will himself to hold off, savoring each little half inch or so as Tom settled lower on it. He wasn't sure if the excitement that shot through him was more pleasure or terror that Tom would still change his mind, or equal parts both.

Tom's eyes were closed, his face contorted. It was evident he was finding this painful. And not a lot of fun. Stanley's conscience gave him a nudge.

"You want me to stop?" he asked.

"I'm okay," Tom said, and pushed down some more.

Stanley sighed. Well, he'd been polite, but even Miss Manners could only ask so much of a guy. He lifted his hips, began to fuck upward.

Tom froze in position, let Stanley take over. His face showed stoicism now more than pain, like he was resigned to whatever was happening, but Stanley couldn't help noting that his big cock had gone flaccid. Stanley took it in his hand, began to stroke it, felt it respond and begin to swell, and at the same time, Tom's hole relaxed a bit, allowed him easier access.

"Bend down," Stanley told him in a hoarse voice. "The more you bend over, the easier it gets."

Tom bent down obediently, nibbled at Stanley's ear, kissed him. He was beginning to get used to it now, Stanley could tell. Still, he didn't want to make this an endurance test. With any luck, this might just be the first of many heavenly experiences. He fucked faster now, but still cautiously, not going all the way, just moving the head in and out, coming close anyway, feeling his climax building.

"I'm getting close," he said, and Tom kissed him again, hard, and ground his butt around in a circle, like a pro, and took it nearly all the way to the balls, just as Stanley let fire. He groaned and Tom grunted with him, holding him tight, grinding his dick against Stanley's belly, seemingly unaware that Stanley was drumming on one broad shoulder with his cast.

They lay like that for a long moment, until Stanley's latex clad dick had slipped out and flopped across his balls.

"Whew," was all Stanley could say.

"Happy?" Tom asked. Stanley nodded, grinning foolishly. "Good," Tom said. He swung his legs over, got off the bed, went into the bathroom. Stanley heard the water running. He slipped the condom off his dick, dropped it carefully into the wastebasket beside the nightstand.

*Now, what was that all about,* he wondered. Experience told him that, once they'd got going, Tom had enjoyed it somewhat. Not a lot. Okay, not very much, really, but at least he had stopped hating it. But it was hard to imagine that he had done this for his own pleasure.

So, he did it for mine, Stanley told himself. The kind of thing you did for someone you loved?

He shook his head. Dangerous thinking. Guys like Tom Danzel didn't fall in love with guys like Stanley Korski, no matter how many times they took it up the butt, or whatever else they did.



In the bathroom, the toilet flushed. Stanley's dick was hard again, thinking about what they had done. He wondered if Tom's strange mood would extend to a repeat.

Tom came out of the bathroom, gave him a lopsided grin, and sprawled onto the bed beside him. "Feels funny," he said. "All, I don't know, hollow in there. Is that what a woman feels like afterward, do you suppose?"

"I wouldn't know," Stanley said.

"No, I guess not." Tom reached for the bedside lamp and turned it off. They lay side by side, staring up, not speaking for a while.

"You want me to, you know..." Stanley reached for Tom's cock. It was soft again.

"No, that's okay," Tom said. Stanley wondered if he had whacked off in the bathroom, but was afraid to ask.

The headlights of the cars on the street shined through the Japanese plum tree outside the window. The shadows of leaves curtseyed, chased one another across the ceiling like little cartoon characters. A horn honked. In the kitchen, the refrigerator kicked in. Back in Iowa, there would have been gnats and crickets to listen to. Natural noises. Here, even the stars exploding light years away were noiseless.

The atmosphere between them felt oddly formal. They'd had sexual relations four different times now, and it still felt like they were on a blind date that wasn't going particularly well. Stanley wanted desperately to do something, and he hadn't a clue what it was he should—or could—do.

"So, tell me something, Stanley." Tom's voice was so unexpected, Stanley had gotten so used to the silence, that he actually started. "Where do you see this going?"

"See what going? Us, you mean?"

"Hmm. No. I was thinking more like, this whole police thing. Stanley Korski, homicide detective."

*Where's it going?* Stanley thought. *My police career? That's what he's got on his mind, after he just took my dick up his ass?*

"Gosh, I don't know. I guess there'll be another case, and we'll solve it, and then one after that. Where do these things go? Generally, I mean."

"Some guys, a lot of them, they have in mind they'll end up Chief some day. Is that what you've got in mind?"

"Why would I be satisfied with Chief of Police? Why wouldn't I shoot for, say, Governor?"

Tom laughed out loud. "A queen for governor. That's a riot." He laughed again.

"You know," Stanley said in a cool voice, "if they gave Pulitzers for Asshole, you'd be a shoo-in."

Tom was unperturbed. "Flattery will get you nowhere. Besides, why stop at Governor? Why not President?" He laughed again.

"Why not?" Stanley said. "I don't see how a queen could screw things up any more than your average macho-man." After a moment's pause, he propped himself up on one elbow. "Okay, since we're playing twenty questions, let me ask you something, hypothetically. Even, say, amphigorically. Suppose that a guy fell in love with you—"

"What's that mean?"

"What, falling in love?"

"No. That amphi-whatever?"

"It means..." Stanley gave a big sigh. "Skip it." After a moment, he said, "Haven't you ever been in love?"

"No."

"Never? You were married, weren't you?"

"Yes. Teenage couple, that kind of thing. A guy in his teens, hot nuts forever, a girl puts out, it's the

greatest thing in your life. You think that's what love is all about. And you think about getting it every night, no more wrestling around in the car, no more sneaking in when her parents aren't looking. You marry her. That's what it costs you for regular nookie. That, and swearing you love her."

"And you didn't?"

"Hell, how would I know? I guess not." He paused to consider that for a moment. "After a while, though, you start thinking, is that all there is? It starts feeling like something's missing, only you don't know what it is, just... something. And you know this isn't it. You start thinking other people, maybe it's different for them, maybe they know something you don't know. Then, you start looking around. You think, maybe I should have waited for someone better to come along, someone who would make me feel... oh, hell, I don't know that either, what you're supposed to feel. It just always seemed to me that there ought to be a woman somewhere who would make me feel it. That longing to take care of them, to do whatever makes her happy, someone where, just giving her pleasure is your pleasure. The way it is in the songs, and the movies. You know what I mean?"

"I think so."

Tom was silent for a moment more. "I've thought a lot of times what it would be like. I mean, I guess everybody hopes someone will come along one day. You know, someone special, the one that's meant for you."

"I guess we all think about that," Stanley said. These were not the answers he'd been hoping to hear. Or, more like he had asked the questions too early. It took some men a while to get used to the idea.

"What about you?" Tom asked. "Haven't you ever been in love? I don't mean, just, like, the way you're hot for my dick."

"Hot for your dick? Excuse me. I had the impression that I wasn't the only one enjoying these little interludes of ours."

"Well, sure, fuck yes. Sure I've enjoyed it. Most of it, anyway. I don't think I'm cut out for, you know, what we just did. I don't think I'd ever get to where I thought that was fun, but, the rest of it, sure. What I meant was, you know, really in love? With some person. The whole deal."

"Hearts and flowers, you mean?"

"Yeah. That kind of shit? You ever felt like that about a guy?"

"Yes. I thought so, anyway." He was tempted to embellish that, and didn't, not sure Tom would like hearing the rest of it.

"And? What happened? Where is he?"

Stanley sighed. "He was a Merman. You know, half man, half fish. I forgot to keep his tail properly wet, and he just vanished." He paused. "They do, you know. The good ones."

"Yeah," Tom said. He thought about the sex they'd just had. It hadn't been as bad as he'd expected, but he hadn't much liked it either, the way he did when Stanley took care of him. He liked that, though.

He liked Stanley, too—actually, more than he wanted to let on. He thought Stanley was cute. He got a big charge out of the things he did—like, the sassy way he had about him, and cooking breakfast, and the way that, when he got serious, Stanley looked even younger, the way little kids do. Stanley was a good guy.

It felt good lying in bed next to Stanley, too. Actually, just being with Stanley gave him a good feeling. Like nothing he'd ever quite experienced with anybody else before. He liked feeling like Stanley's big bad daddy. Looking after him, protecting him, shit like that. In some ways it was like... but he stopped that thought before it fully formed itself in his mind.

When he was a kid, he had jumped into the river near where he lived, not the Mississippi, but a good-sized one that ran into it, meaning to swim to the other side. It had looked so close at that point, until he was in the water, and fighting the current.

He had made it, but only just, puking water and everything else in him while he hauled himself onto the

opposite shore, and passed out in the mud, where the searchers found him. He'd laid in bed for days, half dead and wishing for the other half. He never tried to swim the river again.

The problem was, it felt too good, actually, when he was with Stanley. But, in his experience, the good feelings faded. Always. It was only the bad ones that hung around to bug you. The water was fine. He could have swum that distance easily. It was the current that was treacherous. It carried you along, and you couldn't know where it might carry you.

"What is it," he asked aloud, warily, like sticking a toe in the water, "that you think you want out of this?"

"That I *think* I want?"

"Say, back at the start. When we first got together. What did you want from me?"

"I wanted to solve this case together. Really. That's all I wanted." Which wasn't quite true, but putting it the other way wouldn't be quite true either, would it?

"Okay. Then, what about after that first time we, you know, we did it..."

"I sucked your cock." This did not seem like a conversation that called for subtleties.

"Right. You sucked my cock. So, what then? Were you thinking that I'd fall in love with you? That we'd, I don't know, get something going? Whatever they call it. Couples, I guess. Was that what you were hoping for?"

"Honestly? After that time, what I was mostly hoping for was that you wouldn't beat the shit out of me, or hate me. And, just maybe we'd do it again."

Tom took a long time to think about that. The silence in the apartment was deafening. "Well, then, there you have it," he said finally. "I'd never beat the shit out of you, fuck, I couldn't do that. And I don't hate you, and we did it again. I guess that's a happy ending, isn't it?"

It was Stanley's turn to think things through. "Ending?" he said, that word finally sinking in. "Is it ending?"

Tom sighed, sounding even to his own ears a lot like Stanley with those long suffering sighs of his.

He knew Stanley was in love with him. And a part of him wished fervently that he loved him back. That he *could* love him back. He'd actually thought about what it would be like if they had—well, he didn't even know what to call it—if they made it like a regular thing between them. He could handle the sex, sure. Not what they'd done tonight, but the other stuff was fine.

But, there was all the rest of it, that other stuff when you got tied up with someone, and he'd just be going through the motions with that, wouldn't he? And what happened when he wanted some real sex? A woman. Maybe not a woman to love, but a piece of ass. That wasn't something he was willing to give up, not for Stanley, not for anybody. Sooner or later, didn't matter how many blow jobs he got, he'd want to get himself some of the real stuff, and he knew as sure as anything that Stanley would never be able to handle that. He might say he would, he probably *would* say it if he was asked, but that wasn't how it would play out when the time came.

He sighed again and swung his legs over the side of the bed without answering Stanley's question.

"You could spend the night," Stanley stretched, nervous about the non-answer, his eyes feasting on the curves of Tom's butt. His no longer virgin butt, but he did not think this was the time to suggest that encore he'd been hoping for.

"No," Tom said. He sat on the edge of the bed to tie his shoes. Stanley reached out and traced one finger along his spine. Tom ignored him, got up, put his shirt on, tucked it in.

"Stanley, this isn't good," he said.

"What we just did? It wasn't good?"

"I don't mean the sex. Well, I do, sort of."

Stanley managed a kind of chuckle. "The night's still young," he said.

“Only, think about it. It isn’t fair, is it? I mean, it’s all one sided. The way it usually goes, you do all the work, and I get all the fun.”

“I wouldn’t say that, exactly. I mean, I just...”

“Don’t say it,” Tom interrupted him. “That’s not going to happen again. That was strictly a one-time thing.”

“Well, then, why did you do it? It was your idea.”

“I wanted to see... I wanted to make you happy, is all. But like I said, it was just for once. I’m not going to do it again. Or, well, anything else. I mean, anything to get you off. I’m never going to give you head, not in a million years. If I was going to try it for anybody... but I couldn’t, not even for you. And don’t tell me that never crossed your mind.”

“I’ve got a dirty mind, what can I say? There’s all kinds of naughty ideas banging around in there. But, so, okay, you can’t give head and you don’t want to do that again. You could always...”

“Give you a hand job? Don’t think I didn’t think of that, too. But I couldn’t. It just... hell, I don’t know. I don’t even like to look at your dick. I don’t even like to remember that you’ve got one, if you want the truth. I sure don’t want to play with it. I’m straight. Ninety percent. Ninety-five, maybe. You knew that. So, what have we got here? Say we were going to get something going between us, which is what you’ve been angling for, I know that. But, hell, get what going? I lay back and you polish the woodwork, and it’s good night, Irene. ‘Cause that’s all we could ever do in the future. What kind of a relationship is that?”

“I’ve never complained, have I?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Maybe I like polishing the woodwork, as you so poetically put it. Maybe...”

“I know you do. I can tell that. But, well, this time, what I let you do, fucking me, you asked me why I did it. It was something special I wanted to do for you. The most special thing I could think of. It was a present. A goodbye present.”

Stanley sat up, reached for the bedside lamp and turned it on. They both blinked in the sudden light. “Goodbye? As in so long it’s been good to know you?”

Tom nodded. “I asked for a change in partners today. We won’t be working together any longer.”

“Why?”

“Our case is solved.”

“There’s plenty of other cases,” Stanley said. “And we work together well as a team. Don’t we?”

Tom shrugged. “Maybe. But there’d always be this other stuff, wouldn’t there? I mean, even if you never came on to me again, it would still be on my mind, and sooner or later, I’d get hot nuts...” He shrugged. “Hell, I’m only human.”

“I think you mean barely,” Stanley said.

“Anyway I don’t want to be part of that team, Stanley. One case, everybody will forget about it soon enough, especially since we wrapped it up pretty fast. If I continued working with you, though, well, pretty soon, people would start to wonder, they’d think maybe there was something going on between us.”

“I just had my dick up your ass, damn it. There is something going on between us.”

“Was,” Tom said. “And we’re both going to forget about your butt fucking me.”

“Maybe you’re going to forget it, but I’m not.”

“Well, you can savor it in your memories all you want, I kind of figured you would, but, publicly, as far as anyone else is concerned, forget it happened.” His tone was angry, but after a moment of Stanley’s icy silence, he said, coaxingly, “Please. I’m asking you as a favor. I told you, it isn’t going to happen again. I wanted to do something special for you. That was the most special thing I could think of.” He strapped on his holster, put his jacket on over it. “And I don’t want the other guys getting any ideas. About us.”

“Crap. Let them think what they like. Who cares?”

“I care. I don’t want to look at them and see in their eyes what—well, what’s in their eyes when they look at you, if you want me to be honest.”

Stanley snorted. “That’s the great weakness of dull-minded people. You think everybody else thinks the same as you. Let me explain something to you, lover, that every gay man, even every ever so slightly gay man, discovers eventually for himself the minute you accept that you’re different is the minute you become normal.”

“Normal for you, maybe. I don’t want them looking at me that way.”

“I should think it would be worth it, for the sake of...” He left the sentence unfinished.

Tom looked hard at him, as if he knew perfectly well what had been left unsaid.

“Some people want everything for nothing,” Stanley said.

“I’ll settle for nothing for nothing.” Tom held out his hand. “I’ll see you around the station, okay?”

Stanley ignored the hand. “But I’m not allowed to run up and give you a kiss, I take it.”

Tom took his hand back. “Good night,” he said.

He was at the door when Stanley said, “Actually, Tom, I’ve decided to quit the force.”

Tom paused, one hand on the doorknob, to look back at him, but he didn’t say anything. He was remembering winters back in Missouri, the way the river—the one he’d tried to swim across—the way it iced up in the winter, but never completely, solidly, never enough so that you could walk out on it. Thin and brilliant, and as quick to melt as it had been to form. It looked safe enough, but if you tried to walk out on it, it cracked beneath your feet. He could feel ice cracking now.

“This,” Stanley made a gesture with his good hand, as if he were talking about the room, “it isn’t me. I’m not a cop. I was never cut out to be one. It was just something I wanted to do to... oh, hell, it doesn’t matter why, does it? The point is, it was a stupid move. It’s time I faced that.”

He’d made his mind up before Tom had even shown up, was convinced that it couldn’t be changed. But he would kind have liked for Tom to try to change it.

He didn’t. He only nodded, still wordless, and let himself out.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“It’s okay. It happens to guys sometimes.”

“Sure,” Tom said.

She nestled into the crook of his arm. It was the same blonde as before. He doubted that she’d be back for a third try. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Right.”

They were silent for a long moment, Tom staring up at the changing pattern of light on the ceiling.

“Do you want me to give you some head?” she asked finally. She reached down and took hold of his dick, shook it back and forth. It was as floppy as an empty balloon.

“Actually,” Tom said, scooting away from her, her fingers falling away from his cock, “I think I’ll call it a night. It’s been a kind of rough day.”

He got up, began to dress in the dark.

“You can turn on the light if you want,” she said.

“No, this is okay.” He continued in silence.

She lay on the bed watching him, not much more than a shadow among shadows. She’d have liked to turn on the light. He was pretty good to look at. But she was afraid it would make him more uncomfortable.

“So,” he said after a few minutes. “Thanks anyway. You take care, okay?” He went to the door, didn’t bother to come back and kiss her. The light from the hall cast him in a kind of bas-relief for a moment. He turned back, gave her a quick wave, and was gone, the door closing quietly after him.

On the stairs, he paused, wondering where he wanted to go. Not home—and no point heading for another bar. What would that accomplish? He could pick up another woman, he never had any problem with that, but what if the result was the same? That would really freak him out.

So, no, not home, and not a bar, either. But, where then?

For some reason, he thought of the Castro—and as quickly asked himself why he would want to go there? All those queers, all that Saturday night shuffle. Anyway, what if somebody spotted him there, how would he explain it? Say, one of the guys from the station.

Only, why would any of them be there either, if you thought about it? Something flitted through his mind. Hadn’t Stanley said something, a long time ago, about a couple of the uniforms at the station? For sure he was probably just being a smart ass, like he always was. But it would be embarrassing to run into one of them all the same.

Which brought him, of course, full circle back to Stanley, which was exactly who he had been trying not to think of, since the night, nearly two weeks ago, when he’d said goodbye. Because, he just didn’t know, not even after all this time, exactly what he did think of Stanley.

He’d thought, at the beginning, that he knew exactly how he felt. And then there had been those times, when it was all turned around, like all of a sudden, Stanley had become someone special to him, in a way he couldn’t fathom.

How could that be? He was straight. He liked women. Liked them a lot. Well, if he was honest, he wasn’t sure he really liked women all that much, not the woman-ness of them, anyway. The clothes and the questions and the whole man-woman routine, the drinks and the dates and the mornings after (he couldn’t remember one of them fixing him breakfast, now that he thought about it) which could be a pain in the ass. But he liked pussy, and that was where you found it. The rest, you just had to go through to get to the end result, so to speak. It was what they wanted of a man, expected, if they were going to give him what he was after.

He liked Stanley, too, just not the same way. He liked the fact of Stanley well enough. It was the *facts* of him that were wrong. The physical facts, for starters. Okay, Stanley had kind of a cute butt. Not like most guys had. Stanley’s was round and pouty, and at a glance, it could pass for a woman’s butt.

The problem was, on the other side of that butt, he stuck out in all the wrong places. His chest, where he should have stuck out, was flat, and where there should have been a warm, moist valley, there was a definite hello.

He’d told Stanley, back when they’d first partnered up, that he wasn’t a philosopher. His conscious thinking was mostly focused on his current case, and getting laid. He didn’t think much about what kind of life he led, or what kind of person he was. He was a cop. Cops didn’t think about it, they *did*. If someone was pointing a gun at you, taking time to think could get you killed.

When he did think about stuff, though, as he had been doing a bit more of late, he had a funny kind of feeling that maybe there wasn’t a lot there, behind the badge and the gun and the dick, like maybe he was missing some central core that other people had—which would explain a lot about the way his life had gone.

But when he thought about that, it seemed as if maybe that was what Stanley had offered him, something central, something fundamental. That missing core. Only, was Stanley the core he wanted? Maybe he was better off empty than filled with the wrong stuffing. Plus, there were too many issues that couldn’t be resolved, the way he saw it. That sex shit. It was always going to be there. Always going to be a problem. After a while, they’d hate it, wouldn’t they? They’d hate one another. He didn’t want Stanley hating him. Especially, he didn’t want that.

He let himself out the front door of the apartment building. He was on Sutter, not far from downtown. A depressing kind of neighborhood, really, although it must have been kind of upscale at one time. The

apartment buildings, lining both sides of the block, looked old and weary, but they must have been younger once. Everything had been younger once.

His pickup was down the street. He walked to it, opening a stick of gum as he went and popping it into his mouth. He paused with the key in the lock, looking up and down the street indecisively.

The Castro?

§ § § §

Stanley and Chris were at a bar in the Castro, not talking much. Stanley had told him some of it, not all. He felt sure Chris could guess the rest. Luckily, you didn't need to spell everything out for an old friend.

"Incoming at three o'clock," Chris said.

Stanley looked in the direction Chris had indicated. A tall, lanky looking guy, cowboy-type, had come in from the street. He ambled up to the bar, ordered a beer, looked around—and grinned at Stanley.

"Plus, he's cute," Chris said.

He was, too. Another time... "Yeah. I guess so," Stanley said.

"You guess so?" Chris narrowed his eyes at him. "It's the Neanderthal. Right?"

"Tom? He's an asshole."

"So then why are you mooning over him this way?"

"I'm not mooning. Anyway, he's an asshole with possibilities."

"Like, you're going to save him from, what? From himself?"

"From asshole-dom. He's not happy there. I know he's not. The man's life could be so much better, if he just..." He bit off the rest of what he'd been going to say, clamped his lips tightly shut.

"If he married Stanley Korski and settled into gay domesticity? That's what you're thinking, isn't it? It's the way your marital-oriented little mind always works. You wanted to marry me. Which would have been incest, for Pete's sake."

Stanley finished off his beer, took his keys from the bartop. "Look, you know, I think I'll call it a night."

"And do what?"

"Go home. Go to bed. Alone," he added for emphasis.

"You've got to be kidding. It's ten o'clock, on a Saturday night. This is the Castro. It's illegal to go home to bed alone at ten o'clock on a Saturday night. Anyway, you've got a cast on your arm."

"My left arm," Stanley said. "Doesn't interfere with the homework."

"You know, Sweetie, I remember something I read once, in a novel, I don't remember which one, but the author said there are wolves that run with the pack and there are lone wolves. Some guys are born to be lone wolves, Stanley. You can't change them."

Stanley seemed to consider that for a moment. He smiled faintly and leaned close to give Chris's cheek a peck. "You have fun. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

He gave the lanky cowboy a quick, dismissive wave with his good hand as he went past him and headed out of the bar. The cowboy looked briefly disappointed, and quickly looked around for someone else. Chris smiled at him. No point in wasting a Saturday night. The cowboy smiled back, and moseyed along the bar.

Stanley paused outside. The sidewalks were crowded, a constant parade of guys and fewer girls strolling in both directions. Stanley watched the show for a moment, aware that one or two of the passersby looked him over.

He'd spoken earlier of the emptiness of Tom's life, what it lacked. But maybe Chris was right, maybe with Tom it wasn't entirely a question of gay or straight, maybe he was simply one of those lone wolves.

And what about his own life? He couldn't just at the moment pretend it was altogether happy either, and

he didn't think of himself as a lone wolf. Though it did seem things ended up that way a lot.

Inside, with the noise and lights of the bar, with Chris and a cute cowboy giving him the eye, he'd managed to keep the reason for his unhappiness at bay, carefully walled off. Now, alone in the crowds that thronged the sidewalk, the walls crumbled, a triumphant Tom Danzel leapt the moat, took possession of the citadel of his thoughts and emotions.

His frightened thoughts and emotions, that scattered in panic from the invader. At least the conqueror would find no prisoners there to torture into telling him the truth—who could even point to where the truth lay. That was something even Stanley himself didn't know.

When they had been together, Stanley had known clearly that he was in love with Tom. He could not now pinpoint when that exact moment had occurred, but he was sure, or nearly sure, that there had been one. More than one.

What he was entirely sure of, though, was that he also hated Tom, clearly, unquestionably, hated him for not being that ghost-love that had haunted him, it seemed, all his life, luring him into bars and parties, into relationships that even as he began them he knew were not *the* relationship, were doomed to failure. The ghost that mocked him from the shadows even as he consummated each doomed marriage. And, yes, honestly, there had been some moments in their relationship when it had seemed that he had found, at last, what he had been looking for, in Tom's arms.

Someone bumped into him, mumbled a quick, "Sorry," jarring him from his thoughts, sending the ghosts back into their shadows. Without the ghosts, though, he felt all at loose ends. He wanted... but, that was the problem, he didn't know what he wanted. Exactly.

Or maybe he did, exactly. Only, it didn't matter, he wasn't going to get it. Tom had made that plenty clear, hadn't he? And he was right. Probably.

Across the street, a thin crowd of people began to drift out of the Castro Theater. He checked the marquee: *The Letter*. He loved that movie. He thought of Bette Davis, kneeling on the floor, rolling those eyes, "No, with all my heart, I still love the man I killed."

Maybe I should have killed him, he thought. Maybe I should have let Tanya shoot him. I could spend years eloquently mourning my lost love, and who could deny my claims?

He looked down Castro Street, and spotted a pair of broad shoulders, moving in the direction of 17<sup>th</sup> Street. For a moment, he almost followed them.

For what? he asked himself. They were the wrong shoulders, whoever they belonged to. He turned up the collar of his windbreaker. It had begun to rain, fat drops that fell randomly, some here, some there, like the wind had confused them. The arm in the cast had begun to itch where he couldn't get to it.

All of a sudden, for no reason that he could fathom, his father popped into his head, with that disappointed look that had become his everyday expression.

*Well, we're all of us disappointed, aren't we, Pop?* Stanley asked himself. *Some of us just have to fucking deal with it.*

He started for his apartment. The rain came down harder. People put up umbrellas or ran for doorways. He reached the corner, waited for the Walk sign. A steady stream of cars sped by, flinging up spray, lights glittering on raindrops.

The Walk sign came on but he continued to stand where he was. A crowd came up from the Muni station behind him, people jostling him in their haste to get across the street. On the other side, The Peaks was crowded, he could hear the voices and the music spilling out the door.

He looked in the direction of 17<sup>th</sup> Street. The shoulders had long since vanished. What was he thinking, anyway? They were hardly likely to be Tom's. And even if they were, what could that mean? A lone wolf didn't change his spots. Did he?

No, that was a leopard. A lone wolf—well, who knew what they did? Or didn't do?

He sighed, and turned and began to walk down Castro toward 17<sup>th</sup>, not so much following the shoulders



as an old dream, one that just wasn't ready yet to die.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lecturer, former writing instructor and early rabble-rouser for gay rights and freedom of the press, **VICTOR J. BANIS** is the critically acclaimed author ("*...a master storyteller*" *Publishers Weekly*) of more than 150 published novels and nonfiction works, and his verse and short pieces have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies. His novel *Longborns* (Carroll and Graf) was picked as best gay romance of the 2007 on AfterElton.com. His latest novel, *Lola Dances*, was published by MLR Press in March, 2008. Next up, *Deadly Nightshade*, MLR Press, summer 2008. Visit Victor at his website <http://www.vjbanis.com>.

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Founded in 1994, The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project is a grassroots, non-profit organization founded by a gay male survivor of domestic violence and developed through the strength, contributions and participation of the community. The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project supports victims and survivors through education, advocacy and direct services. Understanding that the serious public health issue of domestic violence is not gender specific, we serve men in relationships with men, regardless of how they identify, and stand ready to assist them in navigating through abusive relationships.

GMDVP Helpline: 800.832.1901

On the Web: <http://gmdvp.org/>

#### **THE GAY & LESBIAN ALLIANCE AGAINST DEFAMATION/GLAAD EN ESPAÑOL**

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) is dedicated to promoting and ensuring fair, accurate and inclusive representation of people and events in the media as a means of eliminating homophobia and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

On the Web: <http://www.glaad.org/>

GLAAD en español: <http://www.glaad.org/espanol/bienvenido.php>

#### **SERVICEMEMBERS LEGAL DEFENSE NETWORK**

Servicemembers Legal Defense Network is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, legal services, watchdog and policy organization dedicated to ending discrimination against and harassment of military personnel affected by "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT). The SLDN provides free, confidential legal services to all those impacted by DADT and related discrimination. Since 1993, its inhouse legal team has responded to more than 9,000 requests for assistance. In Congress, it leads the fight to repeal DADT and replace it with a law that ensures equal treatment for every servicemember, regardless of sexual orientation. In the courts, it works to challenge the constitutionality of DADT.

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The GLBT National Help Center is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization that is dedicated to meeting the needs of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community and those questioning their sexual orientation and gender identity. It is an outgrowth of the Gay & Lesbian National Hotline, which began in 1996 and now is a primary program of The GLBT National Help Center. It offers several different programs including two national hotlines that help members of the GLBT community talk about the important issues that they are facing in their lives. It helps end the isolation that many people feel, by providing a safe environment on the phone or via the internet to discuss issues that people can't talk about anywhere else. The GLBT National Help Center also helps other organizations build the infrastructure they need to provide strong support to our community at the local level.

**National Hotline: 1-888-THE-GLNH (1-888-843-4564)**

**National Youth Talkline 1-800-246-PRIDE (1-800-246-7743)**

**On the Web: <http://www.glnh.org/>**

**e-mail: [info@glbtnationalhelpcenter.org](mailto:info@glbtnationalhelpcenter.org)**

If you're a GLBT and questioning student heading off to university, should know that there are resources on campus for you. Here's just a sample:

#### **US LOCAL GLBT COLLEGE CAMPUS ORGANIZATIONS**

<a href="http://dv-8.com/resources/us/local/campus.html">http://dv-8.com/resources/us/local/campus.html</a>	
GLBT Scholarship Resources	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/6fx9v6">http://tinyurl.com/6fx9v6</a>
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Texas A&M	<a href="http://lgbt.tamu.edu/">http://lgbt.tamu.edu/</a>
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