



DEADLY WRONG

Victor J. Banis

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Chapter One

"Quit? No way, Korski, no way you're quitting the force."

Stanley Korski suppressed a sigh. It just went to prove, the way he saw it, you could never please some people. For starters, he certainly had known when he hired on some months ago with the San Francisco Police Department, as part of an affirmative action hire (and giving up a perfectly good interior decorating job), that they didn't want him in homicide. That prospect hadn't even seemed likely when he joined the force. San Francisco PD had gay officers, certainly, but none quite so openly and evidently gay as Stanley. The transfer to homicide had happened later, and no one had made any pretense of being happy about it. Certainly not Police Lieutenant Mallory, head of the homicide detail.

Now, they didn't want him to quit.

Lieutenant Mallory held a big brown cigar in his fleshy mouth. City ordinances prevented his lighting it. There was no smoking anywhere in the building. He chewed on it instead and rolled it from one corner of his mouth to the other, the pink tip of his tongue occasionally making a sly appearance.

Staring at it, Stanley Korski found himself thinking of a brown penis. A kind of small one, admittedly, but he'd had enough experience to know that the myth about the enormous phalluses of Negroes was largely that: a myth. You ran across them here and there, but there were plenty of black men with teensy weenies, too, porn fantasies notwithstanding.

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The shape and the color were right, though, and he found it surprisingly easy to imagine the Captain's thick lips wrapped around one, rolling it to and fro, his tongue flicking at it from time to time.

Stanley fought back the grin that threatened, knowing full well he would never be able to explain what he found so amusing. He was having enough trouble explaining things as it was.

For years, Stanley had dreamed of joining the police force; specifically, of becoming a homicide detective—Homicide Inspector, as SFPD called their detectives—something, he had felt pretty certain all the while, the powers that be in San Francisco's homicide department wouldn't want him to do.

He had made it, though, eventually, by way of his work as a gay liaison with the police department, that affirmative action hire, and, most of all, a politically charged murder with gay overtones, that, people higher up had decided, was right down his alley.

Now he was trying to quit the police force, and they didn't want him to do that, either. Worse, Stanly Korski couldn't tell his Lieutenant why he wanted to quit. That was something else he'd never be able to explain. He had given a weak excuse instead: "I don't think I'm cut out for it."

"Not cut out for it? Are you kidding me, Stan?"

"Stanley," he said automatically. He hated being called Stan.

"Whatever." Mallory took the penis—*oops, the cigar*—from his mouth and used it as a pointer, stabbing in Stanley's

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direction with it. "The point is, you did good. You did great, actually. Your very first case, that drag queen killer—"

"Actually, she was—" but the Lieutenant waved away his objection.

"Tom says it was you worked the whole thing out, too, beginning to end. And that's from Danzel, he's one of the best detectives on the force. If he says you're good ... well, Christ."

"Tom's just being modest," Stanley said.

What he couldn't say was that Tom Danzel was the reason he was quitting the force. He wasn't about to explain to the Lieutenant that he had fallen in love with his partner on their recent murder case. Even if he had been tempted to explain it, he knew Tom would never forgive him. Tom was so far in the closet the back door probably opened onto the African continent. Maybe even Nepal. China, at the least.

He puzzled over that for a moment. Which was actually further, Nepal or China? Whichever it was, he was sure it wasn't far enough to encompass Tom Danzel's closetedness.

And Stanley knew without a shadow of a doubt that Tom would wring his neck if he ever breathed a word to anyone on the force about what had happened between them in the course of that investigation. Happened three times. Four, if you counted a practically spontaneous eruption. He had barely gotten Tom's erection in his hand that time when it blew up, after which Tom had promptly passed out, dead drunk. So, make it three and a third, maybe. Three and a quarter, at least. But who counted?

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The important thing, the key point, was that it was not—Tom had made this clear—was not going to happen again. Not ever. Zero. No way, Josefina.

Which, of course, Stanley could not comment on at all in the present circumstances, even if he'd been tempted. And fear for his life overrode all temptation. Tom would kill him, literally. His would be the department's next murder to investigate. No question. It even made him nervous to remember those three and a half occasions while he was pleasuring himself in solitary fashion—not enough to make him forget about them, but it made him nervous. What if Tom somehow found out about his masturbatory fantasies? The man was a detective, after all.

"Even so, you saved his life, didn't you?" the Lieutenant insisted, fortunately oblivious to Stanley's fantasies. "And you put yourself in grave danger while you were at it, which proved everybody wrong, the shit they'd been saying about you." He had the good grace to look momentarily nonplussed as he realized what he'd said, practically admitting the bias that had existed in the squad room toward Stanley.

He went on, talking quickly, like Stanley might not have noticed. "Plus you got yourself a broken arm, nailing your perp. Hell, you're a bona fide hero, Stan. The boys all look up to you. Everybody says, you're a natural born detective."

He said the last with gusto, as if he really meant it, although both of them knew it was a bald faced lie. The others snickered when he came into the homicide room. They looked at him with barely disguised loathing. That, he could have endured. What queen hadn't suffered snickers, if not far

worse? The very day he'd taken his first baby steps, as he'd heard it, an uncle had said, "He walks funny, don't he?" and people had been laughing since. Who cared? That sort of scorn just made gay men tougher. People thought of straight men as tough, all the Bruce Willis and Sylvester Stallone stereotypes, but the truth was, your average gay man was far tougher than those swaggering he-men.

What he could not endure—what he hadn't the courage to face—was that the next time they met, Tom Danzel might look at him the way the other detectives did, might himself snicker in scorn.

"It was all luck, my figuring things out. It was all about gays. I came to it with a background none of the others had. That's all."

The Lieutenant grew serious, the cigar stationary for a moment. "Look, Stan, we leapfrogged you into homicide, you know what I'm saying? There's guys wait years for homicide, and you got assigned in, what, two, three weeks?"

Stanley didn't know what to say to that. Didn't know what he could say. It was true. He knew he ought to be grateful they had promoted him the way they had, right past lots of guys who should have made the cut. Which was another reason for the others to resent him. Resent him? Hell, they hated his guts.

He knew, too, that his sudden and miraculous promotion hadn't happened out of any respect for his intelligence or for any innate detective talent the higher ups might have sensed in him. He had only gotten assigned to that murder case because the victim, the first victim, had been a county

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supervisor, and gay, and a cousin of the mayor to boot. And they had promoted him overnight from rookie patrolman to homicide inspector because the killer was a drag queen. Stanley had no illusions about why they had chosen him either. It was not just that he was gay. They had plenty of those on the force, in and out of the closet. They chose him because he was a bona fide queer, a three dollar bill. Just the sort, as they had seen it in their straight, we-don't-understand-you-people minds, to track down a drag queen killer. Or, as they saw it, though political correctness would have prevented anyone's saying it: send a sicko to catch a sicko.

The point was, they had wanted the murder solved fast, and they thought his "special insights," which was how it had been phrased at the time, would be useful. As it turned out, they had been right, but still ... special insights? It sounded like he designed lingerie for cross dressers.

The Lieutenant looked at him steadily for a moment, and sighed. "Listen, I'm going to put it to you straight. The word came down from on high: keep Korski in homicide. You walk, my ass is in a sling."

That, however, the image of the Lieutenant in a sling, was more than Stanley's imagination could summon up. He sighed too, and shrugged. He'd have been willing to bet money when he had walked in here today that they would be deliriously happy to accept his resignation. Certainly the other detectives, who had made no secret of their animosity, would be. Turning cartwheels, he'd have imagined.

"Okay, Stan..." The Lieutenant leaned forward on his elbows. Paused to loosen a purple and acid green tie that threatened to choke him.

"Stanley."

"Stanley, tell you what. You went through a serious ordeal, your first case, and it was a dangerous one. First cases are always tough, and this one was a bitch, I know that. I can see why you'd be kind of freaked out, having to jump off a balcony to save Danzel's life—"

"It wasn't actually—"

"Here's what I think. Why don't you take some administrative leave? Say, a month. Hell, make it six weeks. Give some serious thought to what you want to do. Then, you come back and see me again. If you still want to quit the force, well, okay, it's your decision. But think about it some first, okay?"

"I guess it can't hurt to think about it," Stanley agreed, but without enthusiasm. As if he hadn't already thought about this very issue for weeks, without coming to any satisfactory kind of conclusion other than just quit.

It wasn't that he hadn't liked solving a murder case, or that he wouldn't have liked to solve another one, although he had discovered that the *idea* of homicide detective was more fun than the reality had been. What he had known before he got that case was only what he had seen in movies and read in books. In real life, it hadn't turned out to be very much like that. In real life, for instance, there were actual bodies to deal with. Dead bodies. What was the fun in that? The last guy he had picked up in the Castro had been as dead as a doornail,

even if he was still breathing. He'd been no fun at all, as it turned out. Which was pretty much how he felt now about homicide.

Moreover, he was willing to grant that he wasn't really cop material. He got scared, too scared, too easily. He was a devout coward. That was a problem for a policeman.

That was a technical matter, however. The really big problem was, if he came back to homicide detail, one of two things would happen. Either they would team him up again with Tom Danzel, and nothing would make Stanley happier, except that Tom would be furious. He had made it abundantly clear he did not want that to happen, that he didn't want to work another case with Stanley as his partner.

One case, as Tom had explained it all too plainly, everybody will forget about it soon enough. 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.

Never mind the assorted pastimes that actually had occurred on those three and three fourths occasions. There was no denying Tom could be a real asshole. Even being in love with the man, Stanley wasn't blind to that fact. But, as Stanley had explained to his best friend, Chris, "He's an asshole with possibilities."

The alternative scenario for his return to the force was that they'd team him up with one of the other inspectors, none of whom wanted anything to do with him, never mind that he himself would spend the whole time wanting to be with Tom and looking over his shoulder in case whatever detective he

was partnered with decided to do something about his homophobia. This was the kind of dilemma he couldn't exactly share with the Lieutenant, however.

"Great. Let's leave it at that. Six weeks." He came around the desk to clap a hearty hand on Stanley's shoulder. "We'll talk again after that. I'm betting money you'll change your mind."

"Maybe," was all Stanley would say.

Heads did not exactly turn as Stanley walked out through the homicide section, but he knew that everyone was watching him regardless, trying to decide if he was going or staying. He had learned earlier, a homicide squad room was more gossip prone than any ladies' bridge club.

Tom Danzel was seated at his own desk in a far corner. More than anyone else in the room, he studiously avoided looking at Stanley. Several pairs of eyes watched covertly to see what notice he might take of Stanley's departure. Stanley watched him too, covertly as well, but not the slightest flicker of an eye indicated that Tom was even aware of Stanley's passage through the room.

So much for that hope. Which, really, hadn't been much of a hope at all. Tom had made his feelings clear—it was all about the other detectives: *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.* Quote, unquote. Stanley had listened to those words repeatedly in his head, remembering every single one of them, could diagram them, tell you exactly what syllables got the accents. Could probably set them to music. He resisted the urge to hum a melody.

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And Tom's words represented, Stanley thought, probably more honesty than the situation warranted—personally, he felt honesty was sometimes overrated. Every once in a while, maybe a big fat lie would be better for everyone concerned. Better for him, anyway.

But there it was; the very horns of the dilemma. If he came back to the department, he would definitely not be working with Tom. And whoever else he worked with was not going to welcome him with open arms. In reality, he could well be in more danger from his fellow detectives than any criminal they might go after. Being a cop did not make you homophobia free. And homophobes could be hazardous to the health of someone as obviously gay as he knew he was. To a three dollar bill, cop homophobes were especially dangerous.

Outside the Hall of Justice, he sat in his car, trying to think what he wanted to do. A vacation, he thought, and then thought about his bank balance. Homicide detectives by whatever title did not make anywhere near the money a good interior decorator could.

Okay, a vacation some place cheap. Something he could afford—but what would that be? The ferry to Sausalito? A movie at the Metreon? A stroll through Golden Gate Park?

No, of course, it had to be someplace far enough away that he wouldn't be carrying Tom Danzel with him.

So, then, what did it cost to get to Mars? Or, at the least, the moon? He was pretty sure that was further than Nepal, and he was absolutely convinced Nepal wouldn't be far enough. Or China either. He made a mental note to look at an Atlas when he got home. Which of them was further, anyway?

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Once he'd acquainted himself with what lay south of the border, he'd lost any further interest in geography.

He adjusted the mirror so he could see himself in it, and did not like what he saw. *I never knew how pathetic you are*, he told himself.

What I did for love.

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Chapter Two

There was no sign outside the shop on an almost invisible alley off of Union Street, nothing but "Wayne Cotter" in discreet, one-inch letters on the glass of the door. Wayne Cotter Interiors did not advertise. No store signs, no billboards, no telephone directories. Nothing at all, in fact, in the telephone directory—the phone number was unlisted.

"What would I get out of the phone book," Wayne was fond of asking. "A bunch of nouveau riche lookie loos?"

The lack of promotion mattered not a whit to the wealthy matrons of Marin County, of Pacific Heights and Presidio Terrace, and Hillsborough to the south, who knew to a woman the telephone number and the location in the little alley, who suffered any inconvenience and who waited, sometimes as long as two years, to pay an interior designer exorbitant amounts of money to abase and ridicule them while he spent their fortunes with relentless unconcern either for costs or his clients' opinions.

"I am the artist," he would say to any and all objections. "And, if you have to ask how much..."

"I could buy a new Lear Jet for what the pool house cost me," one of them had commented recently, but it was said more in the nature of a boast than a complaint. To hire Wayne Cotter was to set the seal on your ascendancy. It said, in the clearest tones, that you had arrived at the very upper, upper echelons of Bay Area society. To hire anyone else earned you a prominent and irreversible spot on the B list.

Wayne never forgot. They all knew as well, to a woman, that Cotter Interiors was not an elective course in their higher societal schooling. It was required.

Before his career move to homicide inspector, which Stanley now thought of as his fall from grace, he had worked with Wayne. Of course, decorating, at however exalted a level, was the kind of work that engendered snickers from gays, who saw it as the ultimate stereotype. Still, it paid fabulous money if you were good at it, and Stanley was. Truth to tell, he had enjoyed it, and the prestige that came with it in certain quarters. If it hadn't been for his father, for his father's disappointment in him and his obvious disapproval of Stanley's line of work, he would most likely have stayed with it.

Luckily, when he'd joined the force, he had parted on amicable terms with his employer. Wayne, a distinguished older man not given to emotional outbursts, was happy in his own understated way to see him.

"Dear boy, how nice to see you," were his actual words.

"Just to let you know," as Stanley explained it to him, "I may be looking for work again."

"Always welcome," Wayne said. "I've got a job coming up soon. Perennial divorcee, hates men, can't get enough of them. No taste and lots of money from one source or another."

"The pelts of all those men, one would imagine."

"Exactly. The perfect combination for those in our field of endeavor, wouldn't you say?"

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"Mmm." Stanley screwed up his face. "I had this idea a while back. I wonder how she'd feel about chairs covered in foreskins?"

"Sounds lovely." Wayne smiled. "Should be right down her alley. Yours, too, come to think of it."

"Thanks, I'll let you know for sure if that alley opens up for traffic."

Satisfied that in any event his rent was covered, Stanley headed for his apartment on the less expensive fringe of the gay Castro neighborhood, determinedly not thinking about the decision that he thought had been made and now had to be rethought. Across the great Tom Danzel chasm of his life, it was no doubt wisest to concentrate on one perilous footbridge at a time.

He stopped in the Mission on the way, at his favorite bakery. "When in doubt, eat it out," was a motto of his. He'd planned to get half a dozen pecan shortbreads, which they did particularly well at Julio's. That had stretched to a fabulous New York style cheesecake, which he knew from past acquaintance was very nearly as good as the ones from Junior's in Brooklyn, the *ne plus ultra* of cheesecakes. He added a pair of blueberry muffins for breakfast and, just in case the muffins didn't do the job, a giant Danish flaunting its wanton sweetness with cherry and cheery disregard for all health considerations.

He left with his arms loaded with little bags, his spirits picking up for the first time that day. Fruit, nuts, dairy—all the makings, as he saw it, of a sensible diet. He wasn't much of a cook, though he had perfected the art of bacon and eggs,

which he considered the ideal send off to a man after a night of strenuous engagement. Otherwise, he was of the conviction that junk food, and especially sweet junk food, had been created especially for his benefit. Everything had its proper place in the grand scheme of things, as he saw it, and he understood with a completely clear conscience where a cherry Danish fitted in.

The phone was ringing when he let himself into his apartment. He juggled the bags to the floor, left his keys dangling from the front door lock, and caught the phone just before it switched to the answering machine.

"Stanley?" The voice on the phone was familiar, and distant, too—one of those voices that you knew you ought to recognize, and couldn't quite. "It's Libby," she said, not waiting for his reply. "Libby Hunter. I don't know if you'll even remember me."

Libby? "Yes, good God, of course I remember you. But it's been ... well, how many years?"

She laughed, and the voice now was altogether familiar to him, memories flooding back. Libby Hunter...

* * * *

Summer. In the woods behind Libby's house. Oak trees and maple and walnut and beech, and a half dozen others he couldn't name, their shade so deep it was twilight in midday, the ground thick with fallen leaves and rotting vegetation.

He was not quite fifteen, struggling with the whole issue of coming out, with his newly acknowledged, and that only begrudgingly to himself, attraction to other boys. Just

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beginning to realize that when you are fourteen, not quite fifteen, being different, being freakishly different from the rest of your age group, was a monstrous burden to bear.

"We shall be brother and sister, why don't we?" Libby was saying, seating herself decorously on the ground, spreading her denim skirt about her. "Or cousins, if you prefer."

He sat beside her, cross legged. She gave him a shrewd look. "Or even kissing cousins. But I suspect that my kisses are probably not the kind you'd like."

He turned beet red. "What do you mean by that?" he asked, half suspecting that he knew exactly what she meant.

She mocked him with a Gioconda smile. "Be honest, now. Wouldn't you rather prefer Robbie Melanson? For kisses, I mean?"

His face got redder still, practically glowing in the dim light. "What are you trying to say?" he stammered, unconvincingly. "Are you suggesting I'm gay?"

A little tinkle of a laugh. "My pet, I'm not suggesting anything. You can be whatever you are, so far as I am concerned. And, if not gay," she shrugged, and her smile got altogether wicked, "well, if it's just lack of experience that's the problem, I could seduce you. You are rather attractive, you know. In your own owlish way." She leaned closer to him. He could smell her perfume—something expensive, he thought. Even then, even at fourteen, he knew good perfume from bad. Which in itself was a clue, wasn't it? How many fourteen year old boys did? "Would you like me to seduce you, Stan?"

"Stanley," He corrected her automatically, his head swimming. At least every male in school and probably the town's entire male population fantasized about getting it on with Libby Hunter, and here she was ... hmm. Was what, exactly? Was she actually offering herself to him? He could hardly believe it.

And wasn't at all sure how he felt about it. Male vanity prodded him to encourage her, even while a part of him was noting that her body, though undeniably voluptuous, lacked the particular shape that had lately begun to haunt his fantasies. Still, at fourteen going on fifteen, things are not yet altogether jelled. Lots of conditioning still at work in there.

"Well, sure, of course I would," he said, summoning up what he thought was an air of braggadocio. The way the guys smirked when they lied to one another about their experiences. "Why not?"

"Really?" She leaned toward him. He put his arms around her in a clumsy embrace and she leaned hard against him, and they managed to fall backward onto the pine needles.

It was a long kiss. A valiant one. And, it was soon evident, to no avail.

"Well, now we know why not," Libby said, calling it quits and sitting up again, but she looked coyly at him from under her lashes "Or, is it just that I am too plain and dowdy for your tastes?"

"No, don't be silly," he said, totally mortified. "You're the prettiest girl in school, everyone knows that. It's just ... oh, hell, what you said before, it's the truth. I do like boys. I think, anyway. I've never actually done, you know, anything.

And, yes, I have a crush on Robbie Melanson, just like every girl in school."

"Not quite every girl." She patted her hair. "Personally, given a choice, I'd opt for Betsy Norden. She is an airhead, but my goodness, that body. But I guess most likely you haven't noticed her chest—too busy admiring Robbie's I'm sure."

He stared at her openmouthed, so astonished that he forgot about his humiliation—or so he considered it up till then. Betsy Norden, the cheerleader?

"But she's ... are you saying that you're..." but he couldn't summon the nerve to put it into words.

"How on earth do you think I recognized a kindred spirit?"

"But, if you're, you know, if you like girls, why did you ... I mean, what just happened? Why did you want to ... with me?"

She stood up, brushing some errant leaves off her skirt. "Oh, I didn't really think anything was going to come of it," she said. "But I thought it might help clear things up in your mind. Cousin," she added with a wink.

And it suddenly struck him as so outrageous, he laughed out loud. After a moment, she laughed with him, and took his arm, pulling him to his feet. "Come on, Cuz, I think you owe me a Coke after that, don't you? And we can compare fantasies. Do you really have a crush on Robbie? He is good looking, but, such an ass. Plus I have it on good authority, he's very small."

"How on earth...?"

"Girls do talk," she said. "Same as boys. Now, Harvey Wallace, I hear he packs a large suitcase. Like an elephant's trunk, is how I heard it."

"Harvey? But, he's very..."

"Yes, very. But, still..."

He had been grateful for the friendship, or, for its new dimension. Unfortunately, it was short lived. He only saw her a couple of times after that, before her family moved away to Southern California. They'd exchanged a couple of letters, and things had just died away on their own, the way they did. When you're young, just sorting out your own life can be a full time occupation. It was hard keeping track of someone else's.

Libby was the first person, though, who'd gotten him to really face his homosexuality. He couldn't forget that.

* * * *

"How could I forget you?" he said into the phone. He carried the phone with him back to the shopping bags and rummaged out the cherry Danish. Breakfast was too far away to wait. "How are you? What have you been doing? You're still in Los Angeles?"

"Bear Mountain."

"Oh, yeah, I remember. It's, uh, in the mountains, right?" Which was surely a good guess.

"San Bernardino Mountains, east of Los Angeles. It's a busy ski resort in the winter, with not much happening in the summer. A few locals fishing the lake, some tourists escaping the smog. Quiet. Pretty though."

"Sounds cool." There was a long silence, that funny, filled silence you get sometimes on a phone line, like the sound somebody makes when they're holding their breath. It had been more than ten years since Stanley had heard from Libby—longer since they'd actually talked. "So..." he said, and then, again, "How are you?"

"I'm fine. Well, no, not really, there's something ... I thought ... aren't you in police work?"

"How on earth would you know that?"

Her laugh was familiar and, for the first time in the conversation, free of stress. "Oh, I keep tabs on you, Cuz," she added, in a voice that he remembered from their teen age explorations.

"From Bear Mountain?"

Another laugh. "Okay, okay, I've got a friend in San Francisco. You're not the only one who can play detective, you know. And, she sent me some newspaper clippings, all about this big murder case that you solved, and, well, that's why I'm calling you. You remember my brother, don't you?" A brief hesitation, the stress back in her voice, making it sound old. "Carl?"

"Uh, yeah, sure. Sort of." He had to think. Carl was younger than Libby. Five years younger, or seven, something like that. The last time Stanley had seen him, Carl had been maybe eight years old. Not like they'd been buddies, or anything. He was just the little brother, sometimes hanging around, mostly on his own.

"He's in ... Carl's had some trouble. He got arrested. For killing someone."

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"Carl?" Stanley couldn't help sounding surprised. He tried to remember Carl Hunter, to summon up some picture in his mind. Not a bad looking boy, but not someone you noticed much. Skinny, undernourished looking. Quiet. Almost mousy. Not the kind you'd imagine killing someone.

"You mean murder?"

"They say involuntary manslaughter. It was ... I'm not sure what it was. He confessed to it, is the thing."

"Well, then..."

"And then he turned right around afterward and said he didn't do it. I don't know what to believe."

"What do the police think?"

"That's just it. They think he did it. I mean, he did confess, after all. It took all kinds of hoopla even to get him out on bail, Mom had to pledge her house, practically everything she owns, and I just about emptied the bank account. It was a lot of bail, and I can't imagine why. They said he might run. Which is just so silly, if you knew Carl. Carl has trouble finding his way across town sometimes, and it's a small town. Anyway, the District Attorney says he's putting him on trial."

Stanley tried to assimilate the information, but he could not come up with any reasonable explanation for why, after so many years, Libby would be calling him with this news.

"It sounds like you need a lawyer. I don't know anybody down that way, but I have a friend here who works in a law office, I can—"

"Thanks, but that wasn't why I was calling you." Another hesitation. "Stanley, do you think you could come here? To

Bear Mountain. There's something not right. I just don't believe Carl could hurt anybody."

"But ... well, sure, but to do what, exactly?"

"To investigate this whole business. I need someone to give me some answers. Someone I can trust."

"But, hey, you've got a police department there, right." She made a snorting sound. "And, you know, even if I were there, I'd have no jurisdiction. I mean, down there, I'd be just a private citizen."

"A private citizen who is also part of their own little club. Cops are friendly with other cops, aren't they? They cooperate with one another, right?"

"Some of them." Stanley was thinking about the men in the homicide room. Fat lot of cooperation he'd get out of any of them. He tried to imagine the town of Bear Mountain, in the San Bernardino Mountains, east of Los Angeles.

"Rednecks," he said, thinking aloud.

"The locals? Of course. That's why they're so quick to want to toss Carl in the garbage dumpster. He's not one of their type, you know what I mean?"

"Oh, absolutely, I know exactly. Libby, do you remember what I was like at all?" He finished the Danish, licked his fingers, and decided one blueberry muffin would be plenty in the morning, which meant he had an extra one to deal with between now and then. He went back to the shopping bags. "Because, I haven't gotten any butcher over the years. Your locals are just as likely to toss me into the garbage dumpster."

"Maybe so. But you are a cop. A big city cop. I'll bet they'll be impressed to hell and back just having you show up."

I'll bet they won't, Stanley thought.

"Plus, we'll pay for everything. You can fly into Burbank, and I'll pick you up. And you can stay at my place, and use my car. It'll cost you practically nothing. And Bear Mountain is a pretty little town."

Stanley thought about all that. What could it hurt? He remembered Tom's frequent remarks, that he was a magnet for trouble. But he wouldn't actually be investigating a real murder in this case, would he? Not like the last one, where someone wanted to kill him, and almost succeeded. From what Libby had said, what had happened was more like an accident. He would just be there to clear up some confusion. What could be the harm in that? Certainly he wasn't going to be in any danger.

Besides, he was on leave, and feeling down about Tom, and San Francisco was in the middle of its June Gloom, gray, foggy days when the sun never made more than a token appearance, and which, despite its label, some years lasted from May through September. The relentlessly wan sky could make a depressed individual feel twice as sad. And he already had a good head start.

Plus, he'd been wanting a vacation, hadn't he? A vacation with no expense attached to it, or a least, minimal expense. Which was exactly what Libby was offering him. It was like the answer to a prayer.

He thought about a small town in the mountains. Breathing the crisp, clear air, the sky above a blinding blue;

hiking through Christmas tree scented woods; swimming in a mountain lake, the crystalline waters sparkling in the sunlight, or perhaps sailing gracefully over its surface in the moonlight. In his mind's eye, he saw himself lolling on silken pillows while a handsome gondolier serenaded him. The only traffic noise the occasional call of a moose.

"Do they have mooses there?" he asked, taking a bite of the muffin.

"Moose? There's a lodge, I think, or is that Elks. What on earth makes you ask that?"

He ignored that, thinking after all his question had probably been a dumb one. Where did they have mooses, anyway? Probably Nepal, alongside Tom Danzel's closetedness. "I guess I could do a visit," he said. "But, I can't promise it would do any good."

"Let's not worry about that," she said, sounding delighted. "Let's just think of it as an overdue reunion between cousins. And the rest ... well, you can talk to Carl. Anyway, he'll probably tell you far more than he would his big sister. And I just know you'll straighten this whole business out in no time."

He decided he really needed the second muffin.

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Chapter Three

He couldn't just leave town without seeing his dad, although it was never certain whether his dad would even know him.

The senior Korski was an hour's drive away, in a rest home in Petaluma—Home Gardens, though in Stanley's mind there was nothing at all homey about the ungainly post-Victorian painted in a ghastly almost pink, like raw chicken thighs, with dingy gray trim. Probably it was a kind of talisman. You couldn't picture yourself growing old, alone and incontinent, in something called Home Gardens, could you? Though he supposed they could hardly have called it The Pits, however appropriate.

The building sat like a brooding hen in the middle of a couple of badly landscaped acres. Stanley parked in the graveled lot and made his way inside without any eagerness. At best, these visits were a crap shoot. He never knew what to expect. Some days, Peter Korski seemed not to recognize him at all, sat the entire time in a kind of stupor. Not conscious, and not unconscious either, more as if he were seeing into another dimension of reality altogether, a universe into which Stanley could not follow.

Other days, he was entirely aware—of his surroundings, of the mean reality of his present life, especially of Stanley and his visit. These times weren't any more pleasant, though, because when he knew Stanley was there, he knew too that he hated his son, and why. From the day Stanley had come

out to him, he had never forgiven Stanley for being his son—for being his homosexual son.

These visits were like a contest of wills, Stanley determined to go on caring for the old man, to show his love and his respect, in what even he knew was probably a futile effort to reclaim their long ago father-son relationship; and his father, equally determined to turn his back on that past, to refuse the gifts of love Stanley offered him with such desperate hope.

In a way, then, days like today were easier. Peter Korski showed no sign of recognizing his son, said nothing, seemed totally unaware that Stanley was even there with him.

"Hey, Dad, how're you doing?" Stanley said with forced cheer as he came into the room, even though the nurse had already told him it was "one of his bad days." She didn't know, of course, how bad some of them could be.

The greeting went unacknowledged. His father sat at the open window, looking out at the old cemetery that abutted the nursing home's terrace. A stone angel in the distance stared unblinkingly back at him, both of them apparently oblivious to their surroundings.

"Nice day out there," Stanley said. He pulled a chair over to the window, sat where his father couldn't help but see him. Peter Korski turned his head, as if to look at him, but really, looking through him. Stanley might have been invisible.

Stanley stayed for half an hour, dredging up remarks to make, asking questions and hardly pausing for the answers that he knew weren't coming. Throughout the whole thirty

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minutes, his father continued to stare in the direction of the cemetery, saying nothing, offering no response.

Stanley's mother—Peter's wife—had died in a car crash years ago. Peter, who had been stoned at the time and driving, blamed himself, but there had always been plenty of guilt to go around. Stanley got his share of it, as had his sister Irene.

When Stanley had finally confessed to being gay, his father had taken it as some kind of confirmation of their guilt, of their mutual failures as father and son, though Stanley had no idea how that connected with his mother's death in his father's mind. Sometimes he even thought his father wished it had been his son who died in the crash, and felt guilty for wishing that.

But, really, Stanley had very little grasp of what went on these days in his father's mind. Even when his father was lucid, he had no inclination to share his thoughts, only his anger. It seemed as if he blamed Stanley for the relentless unraveling of his life over the years since the accident. Probably, Stanley sometimes thought, he blamed him as well for the steady erosion in his mental faculties.

Still, Stanley kept coming back, kept hoping, even knowing the situation was hopeless. At times, he felt like one of those orphaned children, abandoned by parents who had just one day driven away and left him behind.

He couldn't let go of the dream that one day his father would come back for him. He was also painfully aware of the rest of it: he couldn't rid himself of the fear that in some way he had indeed failed his father. Not in being gay—he couldn't

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help that, and wouldn't change it if he could—but there was something more, surely, that he could have, should have done. Perhaps if he had only been able to explain it better, when the explaining might have mattered. Or maybe simply if he had loved more, or better ... that he had failed was self evident, but he could never quite grasp how.

He was preparing to leave when, suddenly, his father looked directly at him and recognition flashed across his face. Stanley's heart jumped.

"Yes?" he said, in both hope and dread.

"Andrew," his father said, clearly, not a trace of confusion. "I didn't recognize you at first."

Stanley's hope flickered and died. He had no idea who Andrew was. There was only himself and Irene. His father had no brothers, only a sister who had died years ago. And his father's name had been Joseph.

The smile faded and a shadow crossed his father's face. His brow wrinkled, his mouth turned down as if he were going to cry. "It wasn't meant," he stammered. Confusion overtook him again. He shook his head, as if to loosen his thoughts.

"No, it's Stanley, Dad," he said, coming back to where his father sat by the window.

The eyes went blank again. He turned away, and looked out the window at the stone angel across the way.

* * * *

"Had a pleasant visit?" one of the other patients asked Stanley as he was leaving.

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"Peachy," he said. One had to be thankful for small favors, he supposed. At least this time his father hadn't growled his disapproval. Hadn't actually said, as he often had, that he'd rather not see him. There had been only that puzzling mention of a name that rang no bells for Stanley.

It was Stanley who had been stuck with making the arrangements for his Dad to be placed at Home Gardens. His sister, Irene, hadn't been able to take the time away from her family.

"Couldn't you find some place closer to where you are?" she had asked when Stanley told her about Petaluma.

"Rest homes in San Francisco are pricey," he explained. He didn't add that he didn't want his father any closer, that once a week visits were probably all he would be able to handle. Irene didn't even bother with that much. In the five years that Peter Korski had been at Home Gardens, his daughter had been to see him once.

"I've got a husband and kids," she said whenever Stanley pressed her. "I can't just drop everything and take off whenever I feel like it, the way you do."

That, her single visit, had been the highlight of those five years for the older man, something he had talked about for months afterward. Stanley's weekly trips were resented, if they were acknowledged at all.

Yet for all the present grief, Stanley's memories were of a mostly happy childhood. Maybe not Disneyland happy, but certainly unmarked by hate or abuse or even, until that crash, anything that could be called trauma.

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He remembered his parents as being affectionate with one another, devoted. He remembered hugs and laughter and loving glances—or thought he did. A child's eyes see things so differently. Colors are brighter, glee is more gleeful, stars are not just stars but great celestial lights. Maybe the happy childhood he remembered had only been a succession of adequately pleasant days, burnished by memory into something more than it had been. Maybe his memories weren't memories at all, just dreams.

When he had gathered his father's personal belongings together, emptied out the big old house in which he and Irene had grown up, he discovered that there were almost no souvenirs of their mother. Peter Korski, divested of his wife, had apparently tried to divest himself of any reminders as well.

Stanley had found one old scrapbook, buried in a box full of miscellaneous papers and quasi-important documents. He'd found a high school graduation picture of Martha Korski, then Hubble, a copy of their marriage license, a trio of photographs from their wedding. His father looked surprisingly much the same—only, fewer lines in his face, his eyes not yet dead, his grin still hopeful.

Stanley had studied the pretty young woman in the pictures with him, but the link to the mother he had known wouldn't come. The mother he remembered had been busy a lot, forever making lists and checking things off them, not harsh with her children so much as preoccupied. This woman's face was so empty of any care, radiated nothing but happiness, a blithe expectancy of a shining future.

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She might have been a stranger. Perhaps she was.
Memories could make a prisoner of you.

* * * *

What he had no memory of was an Andrew—and yet ... and yet, the name teased him from some dark corner in the far recesses of his mind. Not a memory, exactly. A dream, maybe; or something overheard as a child and hardly registered? As clear as if spoken aloud at this moment, he remembered his father saying, "Little pups have big ears."

Back in San Francisco, in the not-quite Castro, he went to the closet where he'd stored that box of mementoes, took it down from the shelf, and spread its meager contents on the kitchen table. There was nothing he hadn't seen before—the scrapbook, the few photos.

And a baby's bib. He'd never really given it much thought, nor paid it much attention, had always just assumed it was his, or Irene's, and had only wondered why, of all the baby things that must have accumulated over the years, they had kept that single item.

Why had they, then? And why, in ridding himself of very nearly everything else, had his father continued to hold on to this insignificant, one would have thought, item of infancy?

Fingering it now, turning it over in his hands, he saw what he had never actually noticed before: initials, so carefully embroidered into the flowery edge of blue and white daisies that they appeared at a casual glance to be part of the design: AK

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Chapter Four

Libby met him at Hollywood-Burbank airport. At a glance, spotting her beyond the security point, she looked practically the same to him as she had ten years earlier—she was thinner, her skin more tanned, her blond hair cut boyishly short. Her costume, too, was mannish; a Pendleton shirt in blues and greens, khakis, desert boots. She was still pretty, though, and somehow, despite her costume, and with not a trace of makeup, she managed to look feminine. He noticed, as she seemed not to, men noticing her. Lots of men. He thought briefly about a Pendleton shirt, and decided against it. Probably it would make him look like a lesbian.

Up closer, he could see there were lines about Libby's eyes and at the corners of her mouth, but she had the same warm, affectionate smile and her green-gray eyes still had that glint of impish amusement. He leaned to take a kiss on the cheek, and returned it in kind.

"You haven't changed at all," she said. "Good flight?"

"These days, in my opinion, the best flight is the one you don't have to take. This one was short, at least. This is all I brought." He indicated a small carryon.

She was driving an oldish Ford van, the blue paint faded and stained here and there with rust. "It's not stylish, but I can carry a ton of junk around in it," she said, tossing his bag on the rear seat. "Did I tell you I'm painting now? Some ceramics, too, a bit of woodcarving. Very artsy fartsy. But mostly the painting."

"You were always the best in art class," he said, clambering into the torn front seat beside her. "The best in everything, as I remember."

"Except boys," she said, laughing. "I flunked out there."

"I wasn't much better. Not from lack of interest, I might add."

"And no luck with Robbie Melanson? Remember him?"

"Yes. I remember him, I mean, and no, no luck. I must have been the only one in our class. From what I heard he was an equal opportunity slut. He was in art class, too, wasn't he? Maybe I should have offered to paint him."

"Or smear something on his body." They laughed together. It felt like old times. He was glad he had come. "I have my own shop, too. Crafty stuff. Mostly junk for the tourists, that's what sells. You know, toothpick holders made out of pine cones, pillows covered in ants' bellies. But, occasionally we sell a good piece, which is nice. Especially nice when it's one of my paintings."

They were on a freeway in minutes, and then another one, heading, if he had any sense of direction left, south and east. Traffic was unbelievably thick. San Francisco was bad enough, in his opinion, but this was like something out of an infrequent driver's nightmare, eight lanes of vehicles, bumper to bumper, strung together like pieces on some giant sized kinetic artwork.

Libby hit the brakes as a gray Datsun cut too close in front of her, like a cat at the chase. It hesitated briefly, seeming to sit back on its haunches for a moment behind a lumbering

Cadillac, and then sprang around it too, gaining maybe a foot or two for the trouble.

"Is it always this bad?" he asked, indicating the road beyond the windshield, the sea of bumpers and randomly flashing brake lights.

"Gets lots worse sometimes. At least it's moving. Rush hour, you mostly just inch along, slower than walking. They call the Hollywood Freeway the world's largest outdoor parking lot. Once we get off the interstate, though, it'll get better." She glanced sideways at him. "So, Cuz, how goes it with you? Still single?"

He made a face. "Unfortunately. I thought for a bit there was someone, but, well, you know."

"That gorgeous cop, the one in the paper with you?"

He looked surprise at her. "What makes you think that?"

"His picture. I know your type. He reminded me of Robbie. Only hotter."

He sighed. "He was. Is. And, yes, I had kind of a crush on him."

"Kind of a crush?"

"Okay, a major case."

"Which was not returned?"

"Apparently not. They've recently designated my bed the handicapped parking zone for romance." This was not a subject he felt much like pursuing. He had come to get away from Tom Danzel, as far away as he could get. He asked, pointedly, "So, what about you? You settled down with anyone?"

"My luck's not much better than yours, it seems. There was a girl, Brenda. She just cut things off about a month ago."

"What happened? Or shouldn't I ask?"

"Oh, it's nothing embarrassing. Just part of the territory. Bear Mountain territory, really. It can be a little difficult for some to adjust to."

"Don't tell me I'm going to have to deal with dangerous animals and wild men—though, now that I think of it, a wild man or two wouldn't be so bad. Therapeutic, maybe."

She laughed. "They're more crude than wild. And, no, Bear Mountain isn't like some John Wayne frontier town. More the opposite, actually. It's very quiet, you know. Not a lot to do. The scenery is the best part of it. And, what happens is, these city folk, we call them flatlanders, they come up to visit, and at first, they love it. Everything is so peaceful, no traffic, no crowds, no pollution. After day or two, they're ready to move to the mountains, get away from everything. A lot of them end up doing just that."

"It's no time at all, though, before they start missing the city. Missing the very things they loved getting away from. Evenings sitting on the deck watching the sunset start to seem less enthralling. They begin to think, when you've seen one sunset, you've seen them all. Hiking a mountain trail turns out to be less fun for them than walking the malls. A beer down at the local tavern doesn't compare to the Saturday night scene in West Hollywood. Fishing on the lake is less fun than trolling the boulevards."

"Brenda was a city girl, is what you're saying."

"Big time. She tried, I'll give her that. She lasted eight months. Longer than most. But, I could see the signs after the first couple weeks: the growing restlessness, the 'why don't we drive down the hill' suggestions, repeated with increasing frequency. It's okay, really. I liked her, a lot, but to tell you the truth, I've gotten used to being on my own. I kind of like the solitude. Live alone for a couple of years, you're ruined for anybody."

"Gee, that's a depressing thought. I've been living alone now for, let me think, almost a year and a half."

"Which gives you a good six months to find somebody, before you're past your sell by date. Ah, here we are, much nicer now."

She took an exit off the freeway, drove past some interesting Victorians at the edge of an obviously old town and a few minutes later, they were on a quiet, two lane road that followed for a mile or two along a rocky creek bed showing evidence of heavy and frequent flooding sometime in the past, but that was now no more than a dry swatch of white, like the shed skin of a snake. The road shortly began to lift itself out of his inland valley and to climb, gradually at first and then more sharply, between gentle green slopes where fruited bushes clustered by the roadside.

"Blackberries," Libby said when he asked about the bushes.

"Blackberries? They grow on bushes? I thought they came in those little plastic cartons," Stanley said. "Are they really the kind you can eat?"

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"Theoretically. But you wouldn't want to. They spray along here regularly, some kind of herbicide, to keep the growth down. Fire prevention. By late summer, this will all be dead brown."

The road turned sharply left, rose more steeply, gentle curves becoming real snake tails, the rush and roar of the freeway now just a memory behind them. Theirs was the only vehicle on the road.

In what seemed no time at all, they were in the mountains. Stanley looked off to his left, where the land dropped sharply away, nothing but a too-flimsy-looking crash barrier between them and the sheer drop to the valley floor. He was glad that the van's overworked engine kept them traveling slowly. He wouldn't want to do this road at high speed.

Below them, the air pollution spread in a layer, brown and ugly below and dazzling blue above—the way the liqueurs separated in a *pousse café*. Way down there the road they'd just traveled twisted its way back to the flatlands, while ahead it took them ever higher. On the right, scrub and the occasional field of grass and brush, and more hillsides sloping up to distant gray-purple peaks crowded with stately pines, and nearer still, along the road, clouds of blue lupine and the golden California poppies. And over it all, that sky, bluer and bluer.

"It's beautiful," he said.

"It is. At least, what nature made is. Men have found endless ways to fuck it up, of course. At least they've tried. All kinds of rampant development, makes you want to cry, to

see how they've ravaged the place. But they haven't yet found a way to erase the natural beauty. You'll see the lake, Bear Mountain Lake, in a little while. It's manmade, actually, one thing they did right. Well, there was water there when they first found it, more like a swamp, which they made into a lake back in, umm, I think the twenties. For years, it was the largest manmade lake in the country, but it isn't any longer. Lake Mead, I guess. Or probably a bunch of them. I guess Bear Mountain Lake's pretty small, as lakes go."

"This is bear country, I take it?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you, with that name? But, not really, not any more, at least, except way back in the woods. Mountain lion, too, but you never see them. Not unless one sneaks up on you from behind, and then it's too late. And rattlers, the big old mean Timbers. You have to be careful hiking in the woods, especially in spring, when they're out looking for some action."

Stanley made a mental note: scratch mountain hiking. He hated snakes and had no desire to get acquainted with mountain lions or bears, or anything more ferocious than a wanton mountain man. He liked his nature better viewing it from a deck, with a cold martini in his hand. His idea of roughing it was a morning without a cup of coffee.

"So, then, how did Bear Mountain become Bear Mountain? That name, I mean."

"Oh, there were bears, a lot of them, a long time ago, when some ranchers from down below came up here. Nineteenth century. Or eighteenth, maybe. They were in pursuit of a pack of renegade Indians who'd stolen a bunch of

their horses. I don't think they ever did find the Indians, or get their horses back. They camped up here, in the flats. By this time, they were about out of food, but apparently then there were still plenty of bear wandering close by, so they organized a hunting party, and shot a bunch of them. And, once their bellies were full, they started looking around and realized they had found someplace special. Some of them just stayed, and others began to join them. And when man started moving in, the bears started moving out. There are still a few of them around, but they don't come into town. Almost never, anyway. They had to round one up a couple of weeks ago, wandered in late one night, right down the main drag, like he had some shopping to do."

"I'm not sure I like the idea of going shopping and meeting a bear."

"You don't have to worry about them, honestly. They're very shy creatures."

"Hmm. Well, if I should encounter one, I'll do the polite thing and excuse myself," Stanley said. "I do hope they'll remember their manners."

"You'd be more likely to run into one of those rattlers, really."

"That's certainly comforting."

She laughed. "Stanley, I'm teasing. The only animals you are really likely to encounter are some rambunctious rednecks, but they're more talk than action, believe me. Bear Mountain is nothing if not dull."

"After what I've been through, that sounds exactly like what the doctor ordered."

Clouds had begun to form on the distant horizon, big fluffy white cumulus, the kind that in seemingly no time could darken, become thunderheads and turn into a storm.

"Rain?" Stanley said, pointing with his chin. She followed his direction.

"Maybe. We get lots of storms in the summer. It's a pretty good drive down to the desert in that direction, by the road, but really, it's just a straight drop from the other side of the mountain. So you get that hot desert air rising, meeting the cool mountain air. That's in the daytime. At night, though, the desert cools off too, so there's fewer storms then."

He found himself staring at the clouds. They seemed to grow perceptibly darker as he looked at them. Something flashed, too quick for him to be sure if he had really seen lightning or not. It gave him a little anticipatory shiver. He was used to San Francisco summers. It almost never rained from March until October, until you began to wish for a shower, even a good sprinkling.

The prospect of real rain, far from diminishing his pleasure, gave him something to look forward to. Plus, there was lots he would like to have washed out of his life. A good rainstorm could do that for you, if only symbolically.

There goes the heartache, splash; there's the lonesome nights staring up at the ceiling over my bed, splash; here's old Tom Danzel, down the drain, splash, splash, splash.

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Chapter Five

They drove for half an hour or more, chatting about mostly inconsequential things, the sort of business old friends catch up on when they haven't seen one another in years: mutual acquaintances, common memories, a silly escapade or two.

The mountain road straightened, became a street, a ragtag assortment of houses alongside it, a few trailers, the signs of population gradually multiplying. A glimpse of water on their right, seen through the house and trailers, quickly became a lake, aquamarine near the shore, nearly purple further out. In the distance white rocks, topped with scrubby pines, marched right down into water that was dark, almost black in their shadows. On the water's surface, the far mountains floated on their own image.

"Bear Mountain Lake," Libby said, waving a hand.

"I'm looking forward to some swimming."

"Well, you can, of course." Said without a lot of enthusiasm.

Uh oh. "But?"

"It's cold. Really cold. We're in the mountains, remember. But there's always a few hearty ones out there splashing around. Polar bears. You know the type, they go swimming in Siberia."

"Hmm. No sharks in the water, though? And no piranhas?"

"It's funny you should ask that. Somebody caught a piranha a couple of summers back. Probably somebody's pet,

you know what I mean, until they got tired of it and dumped it in the lake."

"And people still go in the water?" he asked, disbelieving.

"They said it wasn't one of the flesh eating kind."

"A vegan piranha? I didn't know there were such things."

She laughed again. "I seriously doubt if there are, but they'd have to say that, wouldn't they, they wouldn't want to scare the tourists? Anyway, it was just the one."

"Ah. A bachelor vegan piranha." He'd just supposed piranhas hung about in troops, like French Legionnaires, waiting to make a meal of the unwary camel. He wrote himself a mental list: no swimming. No mountain hikes. No late night shopping. And almost certainly no handsome gondoliers. An idea occurred to him. "They sell vodka here, right?"

"Sure. In the supermarkets. This is still California."

"Good." At least one of his favorite pastimes remained open to him.

The lake hid itself behind some houses, reappeared, hid itself. Something was missing, he thought, and pondered what. He remembered a trip a few years earlier to Switzerland, to Lake Lucerne, where he was almost certain they had neither bears nor pumas nor rattlesnakes, and no vegan bachelor piranha legionnaires.

In his mind's eye he saw Lake Lucerne, spreading itself silkenly, seeming forever, under the Alpine sun, the little crescents of white and pink...

"Sailboats," he said aloud. "There are no sailboats."

"Different kind of lake, different kind of people. They use outboards here, or inboards, the ones with a bit more money. Or rowboats, the ones with less. We don't get the sailing set, I'm afraid. It's not that kind of resort. Not chi-chi enough. Not at all chi-chi, in fact."

So far, he thought, Bear Mountain was falling far short of what he had envisioned. Still, it was a pretty setting. He could imagine savoring the view from a deck, a martini, so cold it was gelid, in hand, something Shubert on the stereo.

And it was a vacation, at least, a change of scenery, and who knew, maybe one or two of those rednecks would be interesting. He rather fancied men with a few rough edges to be polished by the right and knowing hand. Always something to look forward to. Once he got this other business straightened out, about the accident.

Which was, he reminded himself, why he was here. "So, this business with Carl," he changed the subject, "He's out on bail, you said."

"Yes. Hannah—you remember my sister?"

"Sort of. She was the oldest, yes?"

Libby nodded. "Three years older than me. Big Sis. You know how it is, always stuck taking care of us little ones. I expect she'd have liked to drown us in the lake a time or two, but so far she's managed to cope. And just about the time she must have thought she was finally quit of a couple of younger kids, Mom started fading. These days, she needs looking after, and Hannah got stuck with that too."

Stanley thought back to their teens. Even though he and Libby had been friendly, he had only rarely visited her home.

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It occurred to him now that hardly anyone had, as if in some unspoken agreement.

He wasn't sure why, though. It had been a pleasant enough middle class home, nothing grand, but far from shabby. He remembered Hannah as, even then, something of a dominant force in the family dynamic. The mother, Penelope (who could forget that name?) he remembered as querulous, and the father—but that memory failed to materialize. Stanley hardly remembered the father. He must have been there on at least one or the other of Stanley's visits, but if so, he had left no more than the vaguest of impressions.

"Your mom is convalescent?" He caught up with Libby's remarks.

She shrugged. "Some. Not as much as she likes to believe, if you ask me, but she manages to keep Hannah worn to a frazzle most of the time."

"How are they with this business of Carl's?"

Libby shrugged. "Hannah's the same as she's always been. As for Mom, well, she's always spoiled Carl, refuses to believe he's done anything wrong." She looked sideways at Stanley. "You might as well know. You'll get all this eventually anyway, but, Carl's always been a handful. He's not a bad guy, really, never was. He's just one of those people, you know, the roses always have too many thorns, the mud pies turn out to have cat poop in them. It's like he carries this black cloud overhead wherever he goes. Wasn't there a guy like that in the old funny papers, in Little Abner, I think it was?"

"Joe something or other."

"Right. Anyway, Hannah's the one who's mostly had to deal with that. I'm sorry to say, until recently, I kind of just kept myself out of it. Partly, it's the lesbian thing. You know what that's like. You feel like the black sheep of the family, whether they see you that way or not. So you keep your distance. Which saves everybody embarrassment."

Stanley nodded. He did know. In his case, it wasn't his imagination either. Probably it wasn't in Libby's case either. It was just another aspect of being gay. You were a part of the family, just not the best part.

"What about your folks? Didn't they ever help? With Carl, I mean."

"Dad died, must be ten years ago now, not long after we moved here. They said it was some kind of flu, but, I think, really, he just quit, if you know what I mean. He was one of those men, it seemed like life was just more than he could manage. And Mom—well, even before, when we were younger, I don't know if you remember, but Mom was never the June Cleaver type. She didn't seem to me like she ever took much notice of Dad. I couldn't swear if she even noticed when he died."

She made an apologetic face. "That sounds awful, doesn't it? I don't mean she was ever some kind of ogre. She's got her good points, but, so far as Carl was concerned, a firm hand was never one of them. And I think—this might just be sibling jealousy, I suppose—but we always thought she favored Carl. I thought that, at least. Hannah never said, but she wouldn't, she's too long-suffering. The truth is, though, to

be honest, Mom spoiled Carl rotten. He's always been 'her little boy.'"

Despite Libby's effort at neutrality, a note of bitterness had crept into her voice. Stanley said nothing. That kind of sibling jealousy was hardly rare. And at least, whatever resentment Libby might have harbored toward her brother, she was trying now to help him out of a jam, which spoke of familial loyalty, at least, maybe even love. You didn't go to bat for someone you didn't care about.

"Maybe that's why he never developed any backbone," Libby went on after a thoughtful pause. "He's ... oh, well, you'll see for yourself soon enough. He's at my place. He has a little trailer, Mom got it for him a few months ago when he said he needed his own space, even though I thought he was kind of immature for that kind of independence. It was a condition of the bail thing, though, that he had to stay with one of us. And what I started to explain earlier is, Hannah's plate is already full, taking care of Mom. So I raised my hand and took him in. It hasn't been bad. He's been pretty subdued since—since the accident."

She looked across at Stanley. "Should I tell you about that? Or would you rather get it from him."

"From him, I think. I want to hear it without prejudice."

"Fair enough."

They drove along the water, more houses here, the occasional business, a bar or two. The houses became a town, the two lane road becoming a street that followed the gentle curve of the lake.

"We're up about six thousand feet," Libby said. "Closer to seven thousand on some of the slopes. There, that's Sugarloaf." She pointed over his shoulder at a rounded lump of mountain. "As in Rio."

"I think the original is somewhat more spectacular."

"Of course. But that's the Andes, these are only the San Bernardinos. No competition. What I was going to say, though, about the altitude: the air is a bit thin here. You may find yourself getting short of breath. Especially if you do anything strenuous. At least until your body acclimates. Best to take it easy for a day or so."

"I won't lift anything heavier than a cocktail glass, I promise."

Libby turned onto what was apparently the main street of Bear Mountain, lined with shops and restaurants. She pulled up in front of one of the shops. The sign above the door said "Bearfront Gallery."

"This is my little emporium," she said. "I'll sleep here. There's a room over the store. You can stay at my place while you're here and keep my car to get around in." She tossed him a set of keys. "The little Toyota there, the white one. Follow me."

She led him back part of the way they had come, turned down a side street, and pulled up at a small, rather bare looking cabin practically on the water's edge. A stretch of grassless, rocky ground passed for a front yard, the only "landscaping" a handful of daisies planted in the center of a tire that must have once helped a big-rig along the freeway. Firewood was stacked off to one side in a neat pile.

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The cabin itself was a plain rectangle with a redwood deck, absent of any furnishing. From the side, as they drove up, he could see the corner of another deck at the back, and only a few yards from that, the lake lapped onto the rocky beach in gentle undulations. A small boat with a too-large looking outboard motor on the rear bobbed up and down in the water.

He got out, stretching, breathing deep of the cool mountain air. It tasted thin and chilly. It was hard to think that no more than four hours ago he had been in a taxi on the 280, in a river of traffic, heading for SFO.

"This your place?" he asked.

"No, Hannah's. My cabin's a couple of streets over. I thought Hannah would want to say hello. Well, really, I knew she'd want to check you out." She paused. "And you might as well know, she's aware of the gay business. You, as well as me."

"And from the way you say that, I take it she's not overly happy about it?"

"She tolerates me, let's put it that way. And she will you, too, of course. You're here to do us a favor, after all. Just don't expect hugs and kisses. Come on in."

She opened the door, stepped aside for him to go in before her. Hannah must have heard them pull up, was already walking across the room toward them as they came in.

"Stanley. It's been a long time," she said, coming to offer him a firm handshake. A fluffy white poodle danced around her feet, unable to decide whether she was glad to see

visitors or not. Hannah stepped on a paw, producing a yelp of dismay.

"Josephine, you need some air," Hannah said, scooping the poodle up and carrying her to a sliding door that opened onto the rear deck.

The diversion gave Stanley a chance to look Hannah over. If he hadn't already known, he'd have guessed the two sisters' sexual orientation was switched around. Hannah looked butcher than Libby. She was taller, both big boned and lanky, where Libby had a kind of delicacy about her. Hannah was wearing jeans and cowboy boots, and an old Niners sweatshirt, torn at one armpit. Her height and sturdy build, and a long, aquiline nose, gave her a stern appearance. Her hair was longer than Libby's, pulled back tightly into a pony tail and held together with a wide rubber band. Maybe, Stanley thought, this was just the way mountain women dressed. Or, maybe Hannah had looked in the mirror a long time ago and realized frilly wasn't her best style.

Her eyes were arresting, though—large and brown, but so dark that they could appear black when she frowned, as she had at the poodle, and she had an aura about her, again almost mannish, of strength. He wouldn't want to arm wrestle her, he was sure.

He gave the cabin a quick once over. The front room was long and narrow, and decorated in what he quickly thought of as "mountain comfortable." Bare wood floors that probably got cold in the winter, with a big stone fireplace at one end that maybe offset that. A couple of worn corduroy sofas faced one another from opposite walls, an afghan in bright zigzags

of different greens tossed over one of them. An old fashioned console model television sat cattycornered at the fireplace end, with a Barcalounger parked directly in front of it.

And, here and there, evidence of a sometimes convalescent. One of those hospital beds you can crank up to a sitting position was folded in two at the moment and pushed against the wall next to a sofa. What looked like an oxygen tank sat in one far corner, an assortment of vials and pill bottles and gauze littered the top of a table beside the recliner. The room overall was a bit cluttered, suggesting not so much slovenliness as lack of time, or interest in cleaning.

Hannah tossed the poodle unceremoniously out to the deck and slid the glass door quickly closed before the indignant Josephine could dart back in. "That dog's a damned nuisance," she said. "If it was up to me..." She turned back in time to see Stanley's glance at the medical paraphernalia.

"Mother has a touch of emphysema," she said. "And a very mild diabetes. Plus whatever else she can find in the latest medical journal." She gestured toward the kitchen that could be seen through an open doorway at the end of the room opposite the fireplace. "I just made some coffee. Or I've got some cold beer, if you'd rather."

"A glass of wine would be nice, if you've got any."

She had to think about that for a moment. "I do, as a matter of fact. Nothing fancy, a chardonnay, I think. Probably not cold, though. I could drop an ice cube in it." She gave him a dubious look.

"That works for me," Stanley said. "I'm not a very pissy type."

"Good. I'm not either," she said. "Libby?"

"I'll have the coffee. I want to do some painting once I've dropped Stanley off. If I have a glass of wine, I'll take a nap instead."

Hannah led them into a kitchen that looked more feminine than she did—dainty curtains with little blue flowers sprinkled on them, wooden chairs with matching ruffled cushions tied on.

"Have you seen Carl yet?" Hannah asked, finding the bottle of wine in a cupboard and a corkscrew in a drawer. It turned out she didn't need the corkscrew: the bottle had a twist off cap. She looked at the label. "I said chardonnay, but it's Sauvignon Blanc. That do?" She raised an eyebrow in Stanley's direction.

"Fine with me."

"I'm taking Stanley to see Carl next," Libby said. "I thought you'd want to see him first."

Hannah took a large wine glass from a shelf, held it up to the light from the window to inspect it and, deciding that it passed muster, dropped a couple of ice cubes into it and filled it with the pale yellow-green wine. She handed it to Stanley and busied herself with cups and coffee for her sister and herself.

Stanley took a tentative sip. "Nice," he said, which was an exaggeration, but only a bit of one. He nodded his approval. At least it was cool and dry, and after the hassle of getting here, refreshing.

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"Well, you can't expect too much for two ninety-nine at the Safeway. I don't even remember why I bought it, to tell you the truth, or when."

Hannah was apparently not the gracious hostess type, Stanley decided. Or could be she wasn't altogether happy to see him. Conflicted, maybe, wanting Carl's problems straightened out, and not overly glad to have a homosexual seeing to it. She wasn't rude, exactly, but there was no enthusiasm for his company, either.

She poured coffee for Libby, handed her the cup wordlessly. Stanley had the impression they didn't share a lot of the affection you saw between some pairs of sisters. Probably, he thought, that too was the lesbian thing. That could create real sibling hostility, but even where it didn't go that far, tolerance did not necessarily negate disapproval. And maybe that had something to do, too, with her coolness toward him.

Although, in fact, now that he took a further moment to observe her, it was not hostility that he sensed in Hannah so much as an air of major resignation, of chronic discontentment. Maybe it wasn't just the gay-lesbian thing she resented. Maybe it was life in general. He suspected she was one of those who didn't feel alive without some grievance, something to be unhappy over. He'd known one or two like that. Sooner or later, everyone did. They weren't easy people to be around, let alone to live with.

A bell rang somewhere in the rear of the house. The two sisters exchanged glances, Hannah's grim, Libby's commiserating.

"That's Mother," Hannah said. "Excuse me." She disappeared from the room.

"Mom heard our voices," Libby said. "I guess I should have thought to keep them down. She hates being left out of anything. A dollar says Hannah will have to bring her out here to meet you."

Luckily Stanley didn't take the bet. He stared out the window. Not much to see, really. The rear deck with a couple of plastic chairs; a short distance away, a metal shed, then another stretch of that rocky, grassless earth sloping down to the water and the little outboard tethered there.

He took another sip of his wine, and Libby held her cup thoughtfully in two hands. The both of them had their heads cocked, listening. After a moment, they heard the unmistakable sound of wheels on hardwood flooring—which explained the lack of rugs, he realized—and a minute later, Hannah was back, pushing her mother before her in a wheelchair.

"Stanley," Penelope Hunter greeted him from the chair, her smile artificially wide, her eyes bright enough to hint at some powerful medications at work. "Are we glad to see you."

"It's nice to be here," he said, feeling a little awkward. Hannah's barely welcoming manner had vanished altogether. She stood behind her mother's chair in a humble pose that had not a trace of humility in it, her thin lips tightly compressed, her eyes hooded. Libby's face had grown noncommittal.

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Mrs. Hunter appeared determined to offset their lack of enthusiasm however. "And I hear you're a big time homicide detective," she all but chirped.

"Inspector. In San Francisco, we're Homicide Inspectors. And not so big time, either. I worked on one homicide. I got lucky, more than anything."

She pooh-poohed that suggestion with a wave of a hand that looked much younger than her face. She was older, of course, than the few times he had seen her in the past, and admittedly he hadn't paid any great attention to her then. She had been the mother of a school friend, was all.

He thought now that she had probably been pretty, if only fleetingly. There were women, and men, who got better looking as they got older: Barbara Stanwyck in her Big Valley days, came to mind. Penelope Hunter's, however, had been the kind of fragile prettiness that faded all too quickly. Hair that he remembered as yellow had turned to a dirty looking white and grown thin, and her face was deeply lined, not just at mouth and eyes, but furrows running across her forehead and a turkey wattle below her chin.

She was deeply tanned, though, and she did not look to him particularly disabled. Her legs, under a plain cotton nightgown, looked entirely capable of carrying her around the house without need of a wheelchair. Of course, appearances could be deceiving.

"Anyway," she said, the strained smile growing broader still in a determined show of bonhomie, "I am absolutely sure you will clear up this nonsense about Carl in no time. The

very idea of Carl's hurting anyone—there couldn't be a gentler boy in the whole world. You remember Carl, don't you?"

"Just barely," he said, and when her face sort of crinkled into disappointment, he added, "He was younger."

"Carl was only eight, Mother, when we moved away."

"Right," Stanley said. "And when you're older, a six or seven year difference in age doesn't seem like anything, but when you're fifteen or thereabouts it's an unbridgeable chasm. At that age, you don't pay a lot of attention to eight year old boys. And vice versa."

She recovered her enthusiastic confidence. "Yes, I suppose that's true. Well, you'll just love him..." She paused there for a split second, seeming to hear what she had just said, and probably remembering what she must know about Stanley's personal life. "He's such a likable young man, I know you two are going to hit it off just fine. You'll see, mark my words, the minute you see him again, you'll know he's not a murderer."

There was something unconvincing about her confidence, Stanley thought. Her voice had a false ring to it. Did she really believe Carl was guilty, he wondered, despite her protests to the contrary? Or was she just one of those women for whom artifice is the norm, who couldn't evoke sincerity even when they absolutely were?

"It's not murder, Mother," Hannah said, the first she had spoken since they came into the kitchen. "It's involuntary manslaughter. An accident, pretty much, is what that means."

Mrs. Hunter made that dismissive gesture again with her hand. "La de dah, that's just as silly. And it's not true. Carl says..."

"I think," Libby interrupted her, "probably Stanley needs to hear the details directly from Carl." She picked up her car keys from the counter where she'd laid them.

"That's true, I'd rather hear them with an open mind," he said, taking his cue from Libby. "And speaking of Carl...?" He finished his wine and set the empty glass on the counter.

"Yes, let's. Anyway, you must be tired," Libby said. "And I need to get back to the shop." She bent down to give her mother a quick peck on one cheek. "I'll stop by later. Do you need anything from the store?" This last directed at Hannah.

"No, we're fine," Hannah said, but her mother quickly amended, "You know, I have just had a sweet tooth something awful, all day long. I keep thinking about some delicious chocolate chip cookies. They do them very well down at Earhart's bakery."

"Mother, your sugar..." Hannah started to say, but Mother was uninterested in the warning.

"My sugar's been reading just fine," she said emphatically. "And I don't think one or two cookies will hurt me, do you, dear?" This last directed at Libby.

"I'll stop on the way," Libby said.

Neither of the daughters offered to bake cookies, Stanley noted. Even with his limited culinary skills, he knew that was not such a great feat. At the very least, there were those packages of cookie dough at the markets, all you had to do was slice them and pop them in the oven. Apparently, family obligation covered duty, but it didn't stretch to chocolate chip cookies. Not home baked ones, anyway.

"Did they give you my cell phone number?" Mrs. Hunter asked.

"I don't think, Mother..." Hannah started to object, but her mother's face took on a stubborn expression.

"I want you to call me directly as soon as you find out anything," she said to Stanley. "I want to be kept informed of everything. You see he gets the number, Libby. Have you got a cell, Stanley?" He recited the number for her. "You write that down," she told Hannah. "In case I need to get in touch."

Hannah looked resentful, but she wrote the number obediently on a sheet from the memo pad by the phone and handed it to her mother. Mrs. Hunter fairly snatched it out of her hand and tucked it into a pocket of her dress.

"Just in case. By the way, Libby, have you seen my amethyst ring? It's disappeared from my jewel box."

"Haven't seen it. Hannah?" Hannah gave her shoulders a disinterested shrug. "I'm sure it's here someplace, Mom. It'll turn up."

"I hope so. It's worth a fortune. Oh. Where's Josephine?" she suddenly demanded.

"I tossed her out on the deck," Hannah said, looking for just the briefest of moments pleased with herself.

"Well, you can just toss her right back inside. Go on, now."

Hannah seemed about to argue, but she went through to the front room. They heard a door slide on its tracks and a moment later an indignant Josephine bounded in and leapt directly onto Mrs. Hunter's lap.

"There's my little snookums," she crooned, welcoming a wet tongue with her own lips. "Was you scared, outside all by

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your little self, hmm? All those big bad animals out there, Heaven only knows what could happen to my little girl."

Seeing the glance Hannah threw the dog, Stanley was not altogether sure Josephine was any safer inside.

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Chapter Six

Not until he was outside did Stanley realize how uncomfortable he had felt inside. Hannah's austere appearance and manner—she lacked only a black robe and a silver cross to have portrayed an inmate of some old and bleak Spanish convent—and Mrs. Hunter's artificial cheeriness alike had unnerved him in some way he couldn't quite fathom. Neither's attitude had quite matched their words of welcome, but why should either of them resent his being here?

Not, he thought, a question he ought to pose to Libby. To say that he felt suddenly unwelcome could only make her feel guilty for asking him to come in the first place. And maybe he had only imagined things. He was tired, and so far this mountain escape that had seemed so promising when it had been offered was appearing less and less agreeable. He focused instead on the question that had occurred to him in the kitchen.

"Are chocolate chip cookies really a good idea? I should think, if she's diabetic—"

"Oh, that's an exaggeration, really, her glucose levels are barely elevated. Mother likes to dramatize. Come on, I'll lead you over to my place, and you can meet Carl."

"Thanks, but I think the first thing I'd better do is stop by the local police station and let them know I'm in town. Just in case I need back up, or anything. Plus I don't want them arresting me for interfering in a police investigation."

"Good idea. You want me to come with you?"

"No, I think I can handle it." He didn't want to explain that he half expected them to laugh him out of the station. San Francisco cops didn't take him seriously. He couldn't even imagine the reception he was going to get from a bunch of mountain cops. He thought he'd rather it happen without any witnesses to his anticipated humiliation. "So, where's the station? And where's your cabin? And keep in mind, I'm one of those people who gets lost easily."

"Not in Bear Mountain. There's just the main drag, it follows along the lake, everything branches off of that. I'll lead you back to my shop. The police station is three blocks past it. When you're done there, you head back the opposite direction, second traffic light, hang a right, two blocks, go left. It's the only cabin for miles painted bright yellow, and there's a bear in the front yard." She added with a grin when he looked startled, "A carved wooden one, one of my masterpieces that no one wanted to buy, so I took it home for a pet. I'll call Carl to tell him you're on your way."

"Which raises the question, will he be staying there? With me?"

She frowned. "Not if you don't want him to. He could go over to Hannah's. But it's a little crowded there. Anyway, you'll each have your own bedroom at my place, and there's two bathrooms, so he won't really be in your way. Carl's pretty good at staying out of the way. Too good, maybe. He seems to disappear into the woodwork sometimes."

She was half in, half out of her car, when Stanley thought to say, "Oh, your mother's cell phone number?"

She found a scrap of paper in the glove box of her van and wrote the number down, handing it to him. "Not that you really need to bother, you know. It's just extra nuisance for you. Whatever Hannah or I hear, believe me, she'll hear it too. You couldn't keep anything from her if you tried."

Which he thought was probably true. Still, she had asked. He tucked the scrap of paper into his shirt pocket without looking at it.

"Oh," Libby threw him a parting remark. "Carl, he—he stutters. Not all the time, just when he's nervous. Some people get flustered by it."

Great, Stanley thought. I get to spend my vacation babysitting Porky Pig.

"I'm never flustered," he lied.

* * * *

The Bear Mountain police station was an unremarkable cinder block building just across from the local post office. There were none of the elaborate security precautions you found in the San Francisco stations. Apparently mountain bad guys were less prone to murderous rages aimed at the constabulary.

A uniformed officer sat behind a check in counter working at a computer. He stood when Stanley came in and walked to the counter.

"Hep you?" he asked.

Stanley showed him his badge and his SFPD identity. "I'm looking into a local crime. Unofficially, of course, just a favor

for an old friend. I thought it best to check in with you first, just to let you know I was in the area."

The officer took the ID, looked from it to Stanley, sizing him up in a way with which Stanley was all too familiar, not quite managing to suppress a smile, like a patient parent smiling at something silly but cute her kid has done.

"Well, see, we don't have any unsolved cases at present," the officer said. "Maybe there's been a mistake."

"The Carl Hunter case," Stanley said. "His sister called me, asked me to check things out."

The officer's smile faded. He stared blankly at Stanley for a long moment. "Wait here," he said finally, indicating a row of wooden chairs along one wall. He waited for Stanley to seat himself on one of the chairs, as if he suspected Stanley might try to follow him, before he disappeared through a door behind the counter, taking Stanley's ID with him.

The wait was a lengthy one. Stanley got up and strolled to the window to look out. He could see the lake from here. How cold would the water be? He was a swimmer, had been a diver in high school, but he preferred the heated water of a pool. Natural bodies of water made him uncomfortable, wondering what might be lurking under the surface. He thought of those vegetarian piranhas. Was there really such a thing? And Libby hadn't said about sharks, or giant man-eating squid. He flashed on a scene from a movie, this enormous giant squid, and divers ... wasn't it John Wayne?

The officer reappeared. He opened a gate at one end of the counter. "Chief'd like to see you," he said.

Stanley gave him a cheery smile, unreturned, and walked past him. The officer nodded toward the door at the rear, standing open.

A tall, beefy man in uniform was just getting up from a desk as Stanley came through it. He stretched across the desk to offer Stanley his hand. "Chief Burger," he said, "Bear Mountain Police," and indicated a chair to Stanley. "Have a seat, Officer..." he paused to look down at Stanley's ID.

"Korski. Inspector Stanley Korski. San Francisco Homicide."

The chief smiled at him, rather patronizingly, Stanley thought. "Well, Inspector Korski," emphasizing the title, "welcome to Bear Mountain. Bound to be a big change from Frisco but I think you'll find it a beautiful place to visit. We're awfully proud of our little town."

Stanley cringed. Locals hated to hear the city called Frisco. It was San Francisco or, just "The City."

"Yes. It's lovely, isn't it?" Stanley agreed.

The chief grew more serious. "Only thing is," he said, handing Stanley's card and badge across the desk, "Officer Patterson said you were looking into a homicide. We haven't had a homicide in four, maybe five years. I'm a little confused..."

"Carl Hunter," Stanley said.

The Chief's chuckle was just short of a guffaw. "Well, now, you see, that isn't really a homicide case, more of an involuntary manslaughter. And there isn't anything to look into, not any more. Never really was. Boy killed another fellow. They were quarreling, Carl pushed the kid, the kid hit

his head on a rock when he fell. It was accidental, which is why it's manslaughter and not homicide. Still, the other fellow is just as dead as if it were deliberate, and this Carl Hunter, he confessed to it right off the bat, so..."

"I understood he'd changed his story later."

The Chief sighed. "If you've investigated very many homicides," he said, and paused to give Stanley time to tell him how many. Stanley didn't. It had only been one case, but he didn't see any point in bringing that into it. "You'll know," the Chief went on after a significant silence, "that's a fairly common occurrence. They get to thinking about what's going to happen to them, they talk to a slick lawyer, he convinces them to change their story..."

"I don't think this was lawyer's advice. I think Carl decided on his own that his first statements had been wrong."

"Have you talked to Carl yet?"

"Actually, no, I..."

"Do you know him?"

"Only slightly. I mean, I knew him a long time ago, when he was little. I'm more acquainted with his sister, actually, Libby. Do you know her?"

Again, the barely suppressed grin. "Yes. We know Libby Hunter. Most folks hereabouts know her." Translated, Stanley thought, they knew she was a lesbian. A San Francisco queen and a local lesbian, his attitude seemed to say, how important could their concerns be?

"Carl Hunter is, I don't know any polite way to say this, but the boy is a born loser. He's been a royal pain in the backside for years. I don't mean he's done anything really

bad, up till now. He hasn't, far as I know. But I don't know how many times we've picked him up, busted him."

"For?"

The Chief shrugged. "All kinds of shit. Little stuff. Truancy. Drugs, a lot. Mostly drugs, I guess, mostly marijuana, a few pills, nothing hard core. Drunk, too, even when he was little. You know, it's kind of sad when you've got to pick up a twelve year old for drunk. And disorderly."

"How disorderly?"

"That was the time he was taking a piss in old lady Bryant's back yard, in broad daylight, where she didn't have to more than look out her kitchen window to see him. Like I said, nothing serious, just all the time like he was on a different track from the rest of the world."

He paused as if considering what he'd said, and nodded his head, satisfied with it. "A born loser," he said again.

"Still, like you say, nothing serious, just the kind of stuff a wayward kid does."

"I don't know how many kids take daylight pisses in somebody's yard. When they know the woman's at home, right there where she can see them."

Maybe he wanted her to admire what was on display, Stanley thought. Boys did like to show off, especially if they have something to show off. But he thought better of saying that aloud. Maybe boys were different in the mountains. Though he sort of doubted it.

The Chief cocked his head, grinning. "Did they tell you there was a witness?"

Stanley's eyebrows went up. "No."

The grin got broader, kind of a "gotcha" look. He nodded his head. "Anetta Beasley. She saw them together, just before the, uh, the accident. That's why I asked how well you knew this Carl Hunter. It seems him and Donnie—that's the dead boy's name, Donnie McIntosh—seems they were engaged in, how should I put this?" His lips pursed, disapproving. "Mrs. Beasley said they were fornicating. Orally."

Stanley had to think about that. "I'm not sure what that means, exactly."

It was the Chief's turn to raise an eyebrow. "No? I'd have thought you would. I mean, coming from San Francisco and all. It's the sort of thing doesn't happen much here, this being the kind of town it is. A man's town, you know what I'm saying. Guys around here, they most of them drive pick up trucks, wear boots, that kind of thing. But, now, San Francisco, you hear about all the queers there, I just figured..." He shrugged.

"Yes. I've heard that too, about San Francisco." Stanley couldn't help thinking of the gay men he knew in San Francisco who wore boots and drove pick up trucks. "What I meant was, fornicate doesn't usually refer to oral sex. That means sexual intercourse—you know, one individual poking in and out of the other."

The Chief scowled and held up a hand in warning. "I'd just as leave not hear any details of these activities. If it's all the same to you. I go to church on Sunday mornings, every Sunday. I don't want to take that kind of filth along inside of me, to the Lord's embarrassment."

"I understand. The Lord knows, I wouldn't want him embarrassed. My point was, it's generally one or the other. Fornicating or oral sex. So I've heard, anyway."

"Is that right? I'll have to take your word for it, I wouldn't know about that. Like I said, it's not the sort of thing goes on here in Bear Mountain. I expect that's about the first time it's ever come up."

You might be surprised what comes up, and when, Stanley thought, but did not say. He'd known more than a few of those outdoor types who were all woman under their macho garb, and he'd be very surprised if there weren't a few of them around Bear Mountain. But he decided for the moment it was best not to shock the Chief with that information. Plus, it might be better for the fornicators, too, if the local police remained blissfully unaware of their presence.

"And this witness, she saw the accident, how it happened?"

"Not exactly, no. Not all of it. She was disgusted when she saw what they was up to. You can understand that, I reckon. A good Christian woman."

"Absolutely. So, what exactly did she see, this Christian woman?"

"Enough. You understand, she didn't hang around for the whole show. Can't say I blame her any for that, being disgusted as she was, and all. See, what happened was, she was looking out her bedroom window, happened to see what was going on between those two, the oral fornicating business, just plain didn't care to see any more. So she pulled

her curtains closed. But, she looked out the window again a few minutes later..."

"Changed her mind, evidently."

The Chief ignored the sarcasm, if he even noticed it. "By that time, they'd finished what they had been doing, apparently. They were standing now, arguing. Pretty fierce, she says. Then Carl, he gives the other boy, Donnie, a big shove, and Donnie falls to the ground, and Carl stomps off. Mrs. Beasley, she says she didn't pay them any more mind until Donnie was found later that night, dead. Like I said, he hit his head on a rock when Carl knocked him down. She told my officers what she had seen, and when they went to pick up Carl, he told them, yes, that was how it had happened, just the way she said. So, they arrested him. Like I told you, there's no mystery about any of it."

Stanley thought about all that. On the surface, it certainly sounded like everything was cut and dry. Still, he had promised Libby. And he was getting a vacation out of it, even if several of his planned activities had been curtailed. "It doesn't sound like there is, I'll admit," he said.

The Chief leaned back in his chair, crossed short fingered hands across his belly, regarded Stanley for a moment.

"Look, I'll tell you what. You talk to Carl, okay? You tell him, things will be a lot simpler for him if he just takes his punishment like a man instead of making a lot of fuss. Won't be any major punishment either, I reckon. He pleads guilty, chances are he'll get off with a slap on the hand. No biggie. If it comes to a trial, well, who knows what a judge will hit him

with? He could find himself in prison for a few years. Not the pleasantest place for a young man, so I hear."

"I'll tell him that," Stanley said. "In the meantime, I hope there won't be a problem with my looking around while I'm here, see if I turn up anything that might be of interest? To your investigation, I mean."

"You're welcome to look around, course, if it makes you feel better. Unofficially. You learn anything new, you come to me with it, okay? This is Bear Mountain's business. I'm just extending you a professional courtesy. Policeman to policeman." He actually managed to keep a straight face when he said that.

"I appreciate it."

The Chief got up from his chair to indicate that the interview was over. "Course, so far as turning up anything of interest to our investigation, as you put it, bear in mind, our investigation is over. A boy is dead. We know how it happened and who did it. Nothing much more to investigate, the way I see it. Inspector," he added.

Stanley got up too. "Then it can't hurt anything if I sniff around a bit," he said.

"I guess it can't hurt anything."

For all the good you'll do, his expression said.

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Chapter Seven

The bright yellow paint made Libby's cabin easy to recognize. In shape and size it was like her sister's, but with a six foot tall wood carving of a standing bear in place of the tire garden. White shutters at the windows gave it a homier appearance and a pair of chairs and a rocker swing invited one to sit on the front deck. A smaller pile of firewood was stacked at the side. You expected a happy person to live here.

Stanley climbed the three wide steps to the deck, wondering if he would even recognize Carl, wondering how one started off a conversation under these peculiar circumstances. Wondering if maybe he didn't want to check out one of the local taverns first and get himself a stiff something. Or a drink, even.

That question at least was answered for him as he reached the top step by the opening of the front door. A young man appeared in it, watching Stanley's approach with an air of apprehension.

"Hi, you must be Carl," Stanley greeted him, and Carl replied, in a nervous stutter, "L-L-Libby told me you'd be here s-s-shortly."

Carl Hunter might have been good looking, Stanley decided, if it weren't for that hangdog air that hung about him like the scent of garlic to a French chef. He was tallish—though to Stanley, who was only a hair under five eight, most men were tallish—and he was lean, almost but not quite to

the point of skinny, like one of those racing dogs. His body, what you could tell of it in the loose fitting and not very clean clothes, was nicely proportioned: wide shoulders, long legs. He and Hannah had apparently taken after the same lanky side of the family, presumably the father's. Libby was more like her mother.

But the wide shoulders seemed to have developed a permanent slump, and hair that, freshly washed and groomed, was probably an attractive, rusty-hued auburn, hung dank and unkempt around his ears. He looked out at the world through dull brown eyes that appeared dimmed down by a chronic bewilderment, as if he didn't quite grasp where he was, or why. You had to wonder what had sapped all the vitality out of a man who was, after all, not much more than eighteen years old, nineteen at best, a time that should have been the time of his life.

Stanley offered a hand and Carl took it, saying, "Th-th-thanks for coming." The shake he gave Stanley was firm enough, but he snatched his hand back quickly and stepped aside for Stanley to lead the way inside.

Here, too, the emphasis was on what Stanley had now dubbed "mountain comfortable," but the impression was less stark than it had been at Hannah's. An assortment of chairs in neutral shades, all of them looking comfortable, and one long sofa covered in wide wale corduroy. Rag rugs on the floor provided a burst of color, and a copper bowl, polished to a silken smoothness, held a careless arrangement of blue and white pansies. There was a small television atop a bookshelf, but the main entertainment seemed to come from an

elaborate stereo system that took up much of one wall. Carl crossed to it and turned Emmy Lou Harris down to a murmur.

"Your sister and me, we go back a long ways," Stanley said. Another awkward silence. Unlike with Libby, he and this young man had almost no common past to fall back on. Stanley laughed a little nervously. "It's funny, meeting you like this, as if we were total strangers."

"I remember you." Carl said it quickly and clamped his lips shut, as if he had said too much.

After a moment, Stanley gestured to one of sofas. "Let's sit down, why don't we?"

"Do you want a b-beer, or something?" Carl asked, remembering his manners.

"No, I'm good."

Carl sat, head bowed, hands clasped between his parted knees. Stanley contemplated the sofa and instead took a worn leather chair facing him. Another one of those silences descended.

"So," Stanley ventured after a moment. "I guess you know why I'm here?"

"Yes, sir," in a formal kind of voice.

"Oh, Stanley please. And, maybe for the moment, forget I'm a cop. I'm not, really, not here, I mean. I'm just here as an old friend. To see if I can sort anything out."

"Okay."

More silence. "So, what if we start with what happened," Stanley prompted.

"They didn't tell you?"

"I got their version. The police I mean. But, as I understand it, you've changed your story since then."

"S-sort of."

It was like pulling teeth from a stuttering hen. Stanley suppressed a sigh. "Why don't you tell me what happened. The way you remember it."

"Okay."

More silence. "Let's see, this other young man, Donald, wasn't it...?"

"Donnie, Donnie McIntosh."

"They tell me the two of you were, umm, seen in a compromising situation ... There was a witness..."

"Old Mrs. Beasley," Carl said in a voice dripping scorn, the first emotion he had shown. "I saw her, just for a second, at her bedroom window, staring out at us. She whipped her curtains closed, but I know she was peeking out the side the whole time. The bitch. Wouldn't want to miss the show." All said without a trace of a stutter.

"I'd say you're right. That type, they complain, but they like to catch all the action." He paused, but Carl had nothing further to offer. "She says you had a fight about something, that it got violent, you threw him to the ground..."

"It-it wasn't like that."

"This woman is lying?"

Carl sighed and lifted a finger to his mouth to chew on a nail. If Libby hadn't warned Stanley about the nervous stutter, he would probably have seen Carl's behavior as a kind of resistance, resentment, but it was obvious Carl was all a-jitter, and painfully shy to boot. "N-not exactly," he said. "I

just think, well, she didn't see what she thought she saw, is-is all."

"About the blow job? He wasn't sucking your cock?" Maybe some shock tactics would help.

Carl's face reddened and he looked down at his shoes. "Okay, he was. And he wasn't. It was, it was a f-fucked up situation."

"I'd say so," Stanley said dryly. He didn't know any way to make this easier for the young man. He waited, but Carl was apparently waiting too.

"So, what was it with you two, exactly? You and this Donnie? Lovers, tricks, what?"

"It was nothing like that. I'm not into guys, really. I can't say I've never fooled around, 'cause I have. If a guy wants to give me, you know, a blow job," in an odd sort of modesty, he blushed over the common vulgarity, "hell, why not, the way I see it. It isn't like women are crawling all over me day and night. It beats jacking off, is what I mean to say. Which is about all I do otherwise."

"Was that what it was with you and Donnie? Your regular head station?"

"No, not until ... well, no, n-not really. It was more like ... see, I don't know if they told you, I'm what they call the town loser..."

"They?"

Carl looked surprised by the question. "A lot of people. The locals. Because of all the drugs, all those busts. I guess you heard about that."

"Some."

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"Well, it's true. I don't p-pretend to be any kind of angel. So, yeah, I guess you'd say I'm the t-town loser. Everybody pretty much shuns me, even the d-druggies—I don't have the money most of the time to score, meaning if we're going to get h-high, it's on their dime. After a while, they decided my company wasn't worth it. C-can't say I blame them, really."

"And Donnie?"

"He was the town q-queer." He said it in a sullen voice, seeming more concerned for Donnie's reputation than he had been for his own. "You know, half the guys in town, when they c-couldn't get laid, they would come around looking for a b-blow job or a quick butt fuck, and after he got them off—Donnie never turned anybody down. His motto was, like, any guy, anytime, anywhere—well, then they'd beat the sh-shit out of him more times than not. For sure, they didn't invite him to their p-parties. Mostly, if they saw him on the street in the daylight, other people around, they p-pretended they didn't see him, or make fun of him. Call him names. You know how it is."

Stanley did know. Any fairly obvious gay man did. The big difference was in how they handled it. It had never been much of a problem for him. The people who put him down were mostly the ones whose opinions didn't interest him anyway. Ignorant louts, he had long since developed a hard shell of indifference to their taunts. But some gays took it all to heart, formed their ideas about themselves from the ideas of disapproving others. Donnie clearly had been one of those.

"He must have had a real problem with self esteem."

Carl laughed, without amusement. "Not really. He didn't have any s-self esteem to have a problem with. Neither of us did, I guess." He thought for a minute. "Anyway, over time, we just sort of g-gravitated to one another. Nobody else wanted us, except when they wanted to use him—like a t-toilet you take a piss in, you know what I mean, that's all it was with the guys and him. But, the thing is, he was kind of a sweet kid, really. I mean, considering all the shit he took. It was his old man, you know. Hell on wheels kind of guy. Used to beat the tar out of the kids—there was a d-daughter too. She lit out a long time ago. I heard she was working the streets down in L.A., p-peddling her ass, I mean, for a while, before she OD'd. But old man McIntosh, he got the first piece, you can bet on it. He used to f-fuck both the kids, Donnie said. Equal opportunity b-bastard."

"What about the mother?"

"He'd long ago beat any fight out of her, beaten her into a bottle. He had a hot temper. That's what finally did him in. He got in a fight with some guy in a bar, got his ass k-kicked big time. The guy left him out cold in the parking lot of the W-way Down Tavern. He was there for a long time, half the night maybe, people going in and out saw him. Nobody offered him any help. Nobody could stand the f-fucker. Anyway, sometime during the night, he must have come to enough to try to drive home. He never made it, missed a curve, wrapped the car around the tree."

"I'm guessing there weren't a lot of mourners."

Again, that bark of a laugh devoid of any amusement. "Too bad it didn't happen a lot sooner, maybe Donnie wouldn't

have been so fucked up. Hell, he was only thirteen, fourteen, something like that, but this shit, it had been going on since he was real little. Up till then, though, Donnie had been a kind of lay-low guy, but after his old man died, it wasn't anytime before he was flaunting himself, made no secret of being queer. Did everything but rent a billboard to announce it. Sometimes I wondered if he was looking for someone to take the old man's place, if that makes any sense. Anyway, I don't imagine there were too many weeks somebody didn't knock him around, whether they got their jollies first or not."

He paused again, looking into the distance, remembering. "But, like I say, he was sweet. And bright, too, I couldn't imagine what he saw in a dumb hick like me, but the funny thing was, he always kind of, like, looked up to me. He was the only person in my whole life who ever did that. I mean, my Mom makes a big thing about how much she loves me, and Libby's good to me, but, well, it's like, they never really knew me, if that makes any sense."

"I think so," Stanley said.

"And, to me, Donnie was like a kid brother. It wasn't anything special, what we had going—not much of a friendship, really. We'd just get t-together, shoot the shit, sometimes smoke some pot." He raised his eyes and looked directly into Stanley's. "All that shit people are saying, about Donnie being into drugs—he wasn't, not really. A joint sometimes, but that was about all."

All of which was very interesting, Stanley thought, but it was a long way from the twenty-four-thousand-dollar question. He asked it outright. "How did he die?"

Carl shook his head and ran a hand over his eyes. "I d-d-don't know, I t-tell you." The stutter back, more pronounced than ever.

"You confessed to his murder."

He sniffed. "I thought I had k-k-killed him. I don't mean, intentionally. We were—oh, m-m-man, it's kind of hard to talk about."

"You're going to have to talk about it. Sooner or later. Probably a lot. It might as well be with me." Stanley hesitated. Carl remained silent, staring down at his hands with an expression of anguish. "This witness, Mrs. Barkley..."

"Beasley."

"She says she saw the two of you, having sex. He was—she put it more delicately, but, he was sucking you."

Carl looked at some place over Stanley's head. "We didn't ... well, we did, kind of."

"How do you kind of get a head job from someone?"

"He wanted to. He tried to. We were high. This was out in the little park by the lake. We were sitting on the bench there. Toking. Talking a little, not much. Just kind of chilling out. And then, out of the blue, Donnie reached over and started feeling me up. It surprised the hell out of me. The two of us, we'd never done anything like that. I don't think I'd ever even thought of it, not with him, and I'd never dreamed he did either. And then, there he was, fumbling with my fly, taking my dick out. It kind of freaked me out, to tell you the truth."

"But you didn't stop him?"

He looked particularly uncomfortable with that question. "No. N-not at first, anyway. It was ... oh, hell, like I said, we were totally high. And it had been a long time since I'd had any kind of action. I don't think I'd even jerked off for a while, not in a day or two."

Which, Stanley thought, was pretty close to abstinence for a nineteen year old boy.

"So, sure, I got hard in a second, soon as he took hold of it. Just automatic. And, when he put his mouth on it, when he went down on me, well, shit, it felt good. How can somebody sucking your cock not feel good, you know what I'm saying?" Stanley nodded. He couldn't argue with that.

"Only, it d-didn't, either, it d-didn't feel right, somehow. I thought about all those guys, t-taking advantage of him, all the time using him, and his old man and everything, and it made me feel totally weird, dirty, sort of, using him the same way they did, like I was just another one of those d-dicks."

He flexed and unflexed his hands, getting more excited as he talked, his legs beginning to jump spasmodically, his voice getting tighter. "I p-pushed him away. I got up, kind of staggering, you know, trying to put my d-dick back in my pants."

As if he were reenacting the scene, he jumped up suddenly from the sofa and began to pace in a circle, his words coming faster now, too fast to stutter. "And he got up too, hanging on to me, trying to keep hold of it, begging me to let him do it, saying how he really wanted to, all kinds of crazy shit about how much he loved sucking cock, and what a good job he'd give me, how happy he could make me. It was fucking

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unreal, the whole thing. We must have looked crazy, dancing around in a circle, fighting over my cock—we were stoned—and—and then, I shoved him, hard, and he kind of spun around, and f-fell down." He stopped cold for a moment, stopped pacing even.

"And, I walked off, stuffing myself back into my pants, telling him—fuck, I don't know what I said, exactly. I was pissed. At him. At myself, maybe more than him. For getting hard. For liking it. I don't know. I went home. That's the last t-time I ever saw him."

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Chapter Eight

He went silent, breathing hard, blinking rapidly. Looking at him, Stanley saw a glint of moisture in his eyes.

"And he hit his head when he fell." It was a statement of fact.

"That's w-what they say. So, I guess I did k-kill him, even if it was accidental. When they asked me, I told them, that's what happened. I shoved him and he f-fell and hit his head. So, yeah, I said I killed him. Only..."

He looked directly at Stanley again. "Only, later, when they'd locked me in that jail cell, when I started thinking about it, you know, kind of like replaying it in my head, the thing is, I would have sworn, when he fell, he fell face down. I remembered, saying, when I was walking away, I said something like, 'if you want to eat something dirty, eat some real dirt.' Like, you know, his face was in the dirt, was what I meant. But, when they found him, he was lying on his back, and his head was on that rock. The one that cracked his skull open. But, if he landed on a rock, cracked his skull, wouldn't I have heard it?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. I'm no forensic expert, but skulls crack pretty easily, as I understand it."

Carl considered that. "I sure as shit thought he landed face down." He paused for another moment of thought. "So," he said, "you think you can get me off?"

"That's a question for your lawyer. I'm just, well, I don't know exactly what I'm doing, to be honest. A favor for your

sister, mostly. I promised I'd look around some, see if I could learn anything that might point the locals in another direction. But, you know, they're talking involuntary manslaughter. You're looking at, worst case scenario, maybe five years. It's not like you're going to the gas chamber. Your first felony, heck, if you cooperated all the way down the line, you could even get off with probation. I'm not saying you would, I'm just saying, maybe. Prosecuting attorneys, they're generally pretty busy, judges too. They like to settle if they can, without a trial. Saves everybody time and trouble. And money."

"Plead guilty, you mean?" Stanley nodded, watching closely to see what reaction that got. Not much, though. Carl's face showed no emotion. It was like the distress he had shown a moment earlier had been switched off somehow—or, buried so deep you'd need some serious digging to find it.

"I could do the time," Carl said eventually, more as if he were speaking to himself than to Stanley. "Hell, it seems sometimes like I've lived my whole life in some kind of prison. So, that's not it. It's just..." He paused. "I just don't like the idea of people believing I k-killed Donnie McIntosh," he said in a firm, clear voice. "I don't like even thinking myself that I did it. 'Cause, I swear to you, I don't believe I d-did. At first, the way they described it to me, I thought maybe that was how it came down, but now..." He shrugged and shook his head.

Stanley sighed. Carl probably was a loser. Everybody else seemed to think so, and he seemed to think the same thing himself, though that may have been nothing more than those

other opinions influencing his own. Self esteem was a fragile thing in some people.

He was convinced, however, that Carl wasn't just giving him a song and dance about the death of Donnie McIntosh. If he was any judge of character, Carl honestly didn't believe he had killed Donnie. What's more, he had convinced Stanley as well. Stanley didn't believe it either.

But if that was true, it meant something was wrong. Deadly wrong. Because it could only come down to one thing: if it hadn't happened the way the police had described it, the way the scene appeared when they found Donnie, then someone else had killed him, and not accidentally.

It meant murder, plain and simple.

Or, murder plain, he corrected himself—but, so far as he could see at the moment, not so simple. Murder never was, he'd begun to realize. And hadn't he come here for a vacation? Because he had been certain there wasn't really any murder involved? He sure hadn't come here expecting to solve a murder case. The last one of those, someone had tried, very hard, to kill him, as a result of which he had sworn off of murder investigations. Or had tried to, until SFPD had refused to accept his resignation. He sighed. Tom was right. He was a magnet for trouble.

He considered just bowing out of this situation. The police were convinced they had it solved. The likelihood that he would be able to prove anything to the contrary was slim.

Still, whatever his misgivings, he believed the story that Carl had told him—and Carl, and Libby, were expecting him to

help right what was, almost certainly, a gross injustice. Just how he was supposed to do that, though, he hadn't a clue.

"That's going to be a hard defense to sell," he said. Carl gave him a quizzical look. "Donnie trying to molest you. You defending your honor."

He was surprised at what a smile did to Carl's face, and he realized with a shock it was the first time in this whole meeting that Carl had smiled. For the first time, too, he could see why little Donnie might have wanted to molest him. Smiling, dimples showing, and shed for the moment of his usual hang dog look, Carl was actually kind of cute. Not movie star good looking, but like the kid next door you'd surreptitiously watch cutting the lawn and occasionally fantasize about getting into his pants, if only on an off night. When you were feeling particularly horny.

Slow though he might be in some ways, Carl nonetheless picked up on the change in Stanley's reaction to him. The dull brown eyes watching Stanley glinted slightly with a new kind of interest, grew speculative.

"It wasn't, you know, the idea of a guy," he said, in a lower voice, not a trace of a stutter, looking at something over Stanley's head. "I mean, I already said, I've always swung both ways. Like, I'm straight myself, straight enough, I guess, but it never bothered me any if a guy wanted to get something going. It was just Donnie I didn't want to do it with, him and me being kind of friends, and the history he had, all those guys poking him steady, taking advantage, what they did, it just didn't seem to be right. But, that was just him."

He paused, waiting to see if Stanley was following his reasoning, decided that maybe he hadn't made himself clear enough. "That doesn't mean, you know, I'd say no to, well, someone else, if they wanted to. I guess, to tell the truth, I kind of dig messing around with a guy. The right guy, anyway." He swallowed hard, added in a quick rush of words, blushing slightly, "Like you, Stan. If you were interested."

"Stanley." And, for a brief moment or two, Stanley was interested. He'd lost out on the man he was in love with back in San Francisco, nothing but grief was ever going to come of that. It had been a while since anything had come, period.

And it wasn't hard to imagine that Carl looked kind of nice under the clothes he wore with so little style. Most likely way better out of them than in. Probably, he'd clean up nicely, as the saying went. Plus, even in the loose fitting pants there was a promising bulge at the crotch, or had that grown slightly in the last minute or so?

But, no, he couldn't. He wasn't yet that far past Tom Danzel. Despite doing without since their last encounter, and notwithstanding that he'd had some chances with other guys, nobody had yet tempted him enough to do anything about it. And Carl was *kind* of cute, at best. Not cute enough to take him over that gulf.

"Thanks," he said, wanting to let him down gently, "but, it's kind of a cop rule, no hanky panky with the suspects."

Carl's smile faded. "Cute" went with it. He morphed back into what he'd been before, the kind of weary and uninteresting guy you could walk right past in a bar and hardly notice him at all.

"And, speaking of cop stuff," Stanley added quickly, wanting to get off that subject, "what about Donnie? Can you think of anybody I should talk to? Someone who might be able to give me some insights? Where did he live, anyway?"

"With his Mom. But I don't know how much she can tell you—if you even catch her sober, which you probably won't. She lives out at the edge of town."

"Anybody else?"

Carl pondered that for a minute. "There was this therapist he was seeing, Miller, I think his name was, or, Stiller. He's got an office at one end of the mall. I'm supposed to see him too, soon as Libby gets an appointment made. But I think Donnie was seeing him pretty regular."

"What about all those guys Donnie was doing? Can you give me any names?"

"Hell, that's easy. Leaf through the phone book over there, pick a name. Any name, just about. You'd be surprised how democratic a hot set of nuts makes a guy. There was even a priest, according to what he told me."

"Was there any special guy, though? I mean, one who took advantage of him on a regular basis, or maybe someone Donnie might have favored?"

He had to think about that for a bit, chewing his lips. "There's a biker, name of Rack. I don't know if you could say Donnie favored him, exactly, but they had some kind of relationship, I never quite figured out what. Twisted, for sure. Love-hate, I guess is what they'd call it. I think Rack was maybe the most regular. For sure he was the meanest, too."

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He thought about that for a moment. "But, it was funny, it was almost like Donnie liked him the best, you know what I'm saying? Like he had a special thing for the one who treated him the worst. Rack was always taking him behind the restrooms by the lake, or in back of the bar—behind a tree. I heard Rack fucked him one time at the movie theater, in the back row, while the movie was playing. Didn't seem to matter to him where, or even whether anybody else saw them, and I doubt if he skipped more than a day or two between times. Donnie said he was one of those repeat shooters, could get off two or three times in a row without any problem. Usually knocked Donnie around some, too."

"Afterward, I take it."

"After, before, in between loads. One time, so bad he broke Donnie's arm. He's an all round mean son of a bitch."

"Like Donnie's daddy, maybe?"

"Maybe. Yeah, probably."

"So, where would I find this Rack?"

"He hangs out at The Handle Bar, it's a biker place. But you don't want to go there." He looked Stanley up and down. "It's kind of a rough joint. They see someone come in who's, well, you know..."

"A sissy?"

"No offense. But, like I say, it's probably not a good idea for you to go there. Not alone, anyway. And I'd go with you, but I'm not old enough. Besides, I don't think that would make much difference to those guys. I mean, I'm not the kind of guy they'd back off for."

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Stanley glanced at his watch. "Well, I'm not going there tonight, anyway. I'm hungry, and it's been a long day. I'll think about all that tomorrow, at Tara." He hesitated. He didn't really know what was expected in this arrangement—meals and drinks and such. Sharing quarters with a stranger was awkward.

"I saw a little coffee shop a few blocks away. The Wagon Wheel."

"It's pretty good. Their meatloaf is okay. And the pork chops. Stay away from the fish."

"I was going to stroll down that way, if you want to join me."

"Thanks. I had some pizza just a little while before you got here. That'll do me and there's still a piece left if I get hungry later."

"Well, then."

* * * *

Strolling down to the restaurant, Stanley was glad after all that Carl hadn't come. There were things he needed to think over, and he did that better on his own.

Like, the big question: what really had happened to Carl's friend, Donnie? If the accident hadn't happened the way everyone else believed it had, then—regardless of the Chief's assurance that murders didn't really happen here in this little mountain town—someone had definitely committed murder. And left Carl holding the bag for it.

But, how am I supposed to sort that out, he wondered? Knowing no more than he did about Carl, and even less about

the victim? He wished momentarily that Tom were with him. Whatever failings Tom had as a boyfriend, he was a first rate detective.

He quickly squelched those thoughts. There had been a time or two in the past when Tom had shown up at the last minute, like the cavalry, to save Stanley's bacon. That wasn't going to happen this time, however.

And my bacon is just fine, Stanley told himself. Even if it wasn't exactly sizzling at the moment. He just hadn't found the right skillet.

He stopped for a drink at the bar attached to The Wagon Wheel, almost said, as he would have in the Castro, "A Stoli martini." He glanced at the bartender, a small man with an unkempt beard and dirty tee-shirt, and at the other patrons sitting along the bar, all of them drinking beer. To a man, Budweiser. Out of bottles, too, not a glass to be seen.

"Vodka, rocks," Stanley said instead. That at least a bartender couldn't mess up. God alone knew what this grizzled specimen might do to a martini. The vodka, a label he didn't recognize, had a kerosene taste. It would be hard to become an alcoholic here, it seemed to him. He made a mental note to check the supermarket and see what brands they carried there. This was still California, the vodka capitol of the world; the western world, anyway. Even in Bear Mountain, there must be a premium brand or two. He left the drink half finished and went next door to eat. A baked pork chop, at half what he'd have paid in San Francisco, and pretty good to boot.

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After dinner he strode along the town's main commercial street. The village of Bear Mountain was self-consciously "Alpine." Stores were made up to look like miniature chalets, with rough hewn logs, railed verandahs, steep-pitched roofs. Jolly little men in lederhosen decorated many a sign, looking about to burst into yodel at any moment.

About midway along the main drag, an enormous ski lodge sat on the far side of the street, away from the lake, and what was obviously a ski slope soared upward beyond the lodge. In winter no doubt the slope was lighted and sheeted in snow, people skiing well into the evening hours, but there was no snow now, and no lights on the slope. Enormous towers marched upward into darkness, the cables strung from pole to pole just visible against the sky. Empty gondolas hung from the cables, shuddering and rattling faintly in the breeze.

Hadn't he imagined gondolas before, when he was considering the trip? But not of this kind. That had been all about Venice, the canals, handsome gondoliers in bright sashes, singing. It was hard to imagine anyone standing in one of these dangling cars, serenading him. Yowls of terror seemed more likely. Did people really ride up the mountainside in those rickety buckets? Just to slide back down again?

Even the lodge itself, despite windows aglow, had an air about it of waiting for better times to come, its vast parking lot mostly empty, the music and the stale beer smells drifting from an open door more forlorn than welcoming. A ski resort in summer had an awkward look. Like a beach hunk in off-season raiment that failed to show him at his best.

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Despite the off season, though, a smattering of summer tourists strolled about, in and out of the shops. Stanley walked in and out of a few of them as well, found the usual touristy trinkets, postcards, tee-shirts, even little dolls in lederhosen, though he had yet to see any locals dressed so colorfully. There was the inevitable new-age shop, with its crystals and its patchouli, and, more surprisingly, a tattoo parlor. In the street, a few cars drove slowly by, their occupants presumably looking for places to park or, more likely, something to do. Of night life, the town seemed conspicuously bereft.

Libby's gallery was closed, though he saw lights in the rear and in the apartment above, indicating she was there. He paused on the sidewalk outside. She'd said she had some work to do, hadn't she? He knew that, by all rights, he should ring the bell by the door, tell her that he had changed his mind, that he wasn't the man for this job.

It was true, he had solved one murder in San Francisco, but with sheer luck and Tom Danzel's help. He wasn't an idiot. He knew perfectly well that he wasn't a real homicide detective. He had neither the temperament nor the equipment, mental, emotional or physical. He owed it to Libby to tell her that, now, before wasting any more of her time or her hopes.

And yet, he couldn't stop thinking of the boy who had died, despised and ridiculed by the very men who used him for their selfish pleasure and their convenience, cared for by no one but the young man accused of killing him, who probably loved his friend more than either of them had ever grasped.

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Little Donnie McIntosh hadn't just been murdered, either. He had been robbed—of his innocence, of his dignity, of any chance of happiness. Now the authorities wanted to rob him even of justice.

How could he walk away from that? Because if he did, no one was going to step up to the plate in his wake. Not just one life lost then, but two—because almost certainly Carl Hunter would never recover from the damage of being convicted of Donnie's death, of having killed his friend.

He walked on, torn. At the far end of the street, before it turned and became highway again, he found a little church. Not a mission, he knew that the Camino Real hadn't extended in this direction, up into the mountains, but an old church, nonetheless, and interesting looking.

In San Francisco, the roughly carved wooden doors would have been locked for security purposes, but when he tried them, these opened with only a faint squeak of protest. He went in. The interior was small and Spartan, its plain walls freshly whitewashed. Stained glass windows splashed Technicolor puddles across the floor—amber, vermilion, green. The scent of old candles, of incense, hung about the wood and plaster saints that lurked in little niches in the squat columns.

A feeling of nostalgia descended upon him. At one time he'd attended a church much like this one, and he felt a momentary sense of peace in the silence that hovered as palpably as the potpourri of familiar scents. He paused to look around. Along the wall to the right, candles flickered before an altar to the virgin, and opposite it, a statue of Saint

Anthony, with candles of his own, fewer than the virgin's, but still plentiful. A lot of prayers answered, presumably.

Rejoice with me, for I have found that which was lost.

But when he remembered those familiar words, he unexpectedly found himself thinking of what Carl had said about Donnie's abusers: "Even a priest..." The memory brought him up short.

Had Donnie McIntosh come here, seeking solace, to kneel before the Saint of lost causes? Had he found peace here, however fleetingly? Had his prayers been answered, or had he only found himself delivered over to yet another tormentor? *Wherever God erects a house of prayer, the Devil always builds a chapel there.*

A carpet of vivid red ran down the center aisle, making him think of a dying boy's blood pouring into the sand. He followed the crimson path down to the low rail, carved of pine—probably locally, he thought. Behind a simple altar, a painting of the ascension served as reredos, brave in its heady use of bright colors to achieve a beatific, if not an altogether artistic, effect.

Stanley had heard no one come in or disturb the quiet, but someone cleared his throat behind him and he turned to find a priest watching him from a distance—a small man, remarkably young for his snow white hair, with wide set eyes and a thick lips that gave him a sensual appearance when he smiled.

"Did you wish to make a confession?" His voice had a thick accent. Mexican, Stanley thought, or Spanish.

"Thank you, no." Stanley smiled apologetically. "I'm afraid I'm just an intruding tourist."

"There are no intruders here," the priest said, making a sweeping gesture with one hand. "You're a visitor to Bear Mountain? Perhaps I could give you a tour of our humble church. You were admiring our Saint Anthony. It's quite a lovely one, is it not? It was, how does one say, *un don en Dios*. Through the auspices, as it were, of a generous worshipper."

Stanley listened politely, his smile fixed, but it was Carl's words, not the priest's, that rang in his ears. *Even a priest ...* Of course, that might have been an exaggeration, Donnie's or Carl's. Or, even if true, there was no reason to suspect it was this particular priest. One read of all those abuses, scandals—but that was surely still only a small number of wayward priests when one considered the overall number.

Still, the sense of peace that he had felt when he first came in had abandoned him and he found that his earlier disquiet had returned in full force.

"Perhaps some other time," he said, starting back up the center aisle. Midway, though, he paused and looked back. "Father, to be frank, I've come to Bear Mountain to look into the death of a young man. Donnie—Donald McIntosh. Did you know him?"

"I knew of him." The smile vanished. A veil seemed to have fallen over the priest's face—or perhaps that was only a trick of the dim light and the flickering candles. And Stanley's imagination.

"Did he come here, to Saint...?" Stanley realized he didn't even know the name of the church.

"To Saint Boromeo's? Perhaps. I can't really say."

"But you never saw him yourself? Never took his confession?"

"No. I never took his confession. Everyone is welcome here regardless, of course. We are here to offer comfort to the weary, and solace to those who are troubled."

Stanley could not help thinking of one who had assuredly been troubled, and who presumably had found no solace here.

"Good night, Father," he said, and turning his back on the motionless priest, followed the red carpet to the vestibule. The wooden doors complained again faintly as he went out.

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Chapter Nine

Outside, he retraced his steps along the main drag and turned down the street that led to Libby's cabin. Except for the village, there were no streetlights and no sidewalks along the streets in Bear Mountain. After the brightness of shop lights, the darkness was even thicker here. He kept to the verge, walking carefully. None of the houses he passed showed any signs of life, but a dog growled a brief warning off to his right.

Headlights came up behind him, lighting his way temporarily, sending his own grotesquely elongated shadow dancing before him. A dark sedan, gray, or maybe deep blue, drove slowly by, and once past him, picked up speed.

Hadn't he seen that car before, creeping by just like this as he had come out of one of the shops downtown? He watched the taillights brighten as a foot touched brake pedal, and dim again, disappearing a moment later around a corner.

He gave his head a shake. He'd been too long in San Francisco, probably. You could get paranoid. More than likely, this was some out-of-towner, looking for a rental address. Or just plain lost. And not at all the same car he'd seen earlier. How many dark sedans were there in the world?

Anyway, why would anyone be tailing him? He'd only gotten into town earlier the same day. Not enough time, surely, to make any enemies. There was the gay thing, of course. Gay bashers could pop up anywhere. No doubt Bear Mountain had its share of them. But the usual thing would

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have been taunts and jeers out an open window as they drove past. These windows had been closed, the car's occupants silent.

He turned up the path to Libby's cabin, and paused to look again at the street, but no dark sedans reappeared.

Tom would say his imagination was running away with him. Most likely, Tom would be right.

* * * *

The cabin was dark when he let himself in, the door to Carl's bedroom closed, no light showing underneath it. He undressed in his own room, but he didn't feel ready yet for sleep. A search in the closet revealed a man's oversized terry bathrobe, well worn to the point of tatty—Libby's, he had no doubt. He couldn't exactly see her entertaining gentlemen callers. He slipped the robe on and let himself out onto the back deck.

An owl hooted, scolding, then everything was quiet. A breeze had come up, making miniature wavelets on the lake, the water lapping gently at the rocky shore with little cooing sounds. The scent of the pine trees was cool and pungent of resin. Distant across the lake he could see lights and beyond, darkness against darkness, he could just make out the rounded shoulders of the mountain Libby had called Sugarloaf.

A rush of wings swooped downward and something squeaked, faintly and briefly. The wings rose upward and vanished into the trees. That owl, no doubt, settling down to enjoy supper.

On the far shore a car's beams, so tiny they might have been fireflies, disappeared in and out of blackness as it passed trees, houses, rocky outcroppings. On this side of the lake, to the right and left of where he stood, irregular oblongs of light splashed across the shore from the windows of other houses, but it was all shadow here, the neighboring houses dark. Weekender cottages, most likely. "More weekenders," Libby had said, "than full time residents."

He looked up and down to get his bearings and decided Hannah's house was only a short distance that direction. And where was Carl's trailer? He'd be willing to bet, not far. All of them, lined up in a row along the lake's shore. Oddly regimented for what was, really, a very dysfunctional family.

The moon's reflection lay on the lake, a pewter platter. Stanley looked up at the original, white and round, just clearing the treetops. For a moment, he couldn't think what was funny about the sky. It dawned on him that there was none of that electric glow that always hung over the city. He'd never seen the moon so enormous, so luminous, nor so many stars, the blackness above teeming with them, like giant asters.

As he watched, the moon got tangled in the branches of the trees. Stanley thought of Selene, the moon goddess of the old-time Greeks. On a night like this, surrounded by the beauty of nature, it was easy to see how the ancients had come to believe in her.

Out of nowhere, Tom Danzel popped into his mind again. He stared across the gleaming surface of the water, remembering what it had been like to feel Tom's arms about

him, the taste of Tom's lips on his own ... the romantic setting only intensified the ache he felt inside himself.

A faint cough made him turn his head, and he saw that Carl's bedroom opened onto the deck. Its sliding door stood open. More conscious now of his immediate surroundings, Stanley caught a faint whiff of marijuana. Apparently Carl was awake, lying in the dark, smoking a joint.

Does he know I'm out here?

For a brief moment, he thought about going to the open door, stepping through it. He felt pretty sure Carl would welcome him. He could have arms about him this night. Warm flesh next to his own. He needn't feel so utterly alone.

Something hinted past him in the darkness, not quite brushing his cheek. A bat? Or the breath of some divine voice? What did it whisper? Life was a teaching, wasn't it? In which case, what did he need to learn? Because he had a feeling he was flunking the course.

He gave his head a shake and turned to go back inside. Whatever might happen in the dark warmth of Carl's bedroom, it wouldn't do anything for that ache in his chest. He would still be alone. If it wasn't the right one, the right arms, you never escaped the aloneness.

It only got worse.

He paused to look over his shoulder. The moon had struggled free again of the branches and sailed triumphantly into the nighttime sky, smiling down at him and making the surface of the lake ripple with silver undulations, like water nymphs cavorting in the darkness. A star winked at him. The moonlight was so pure and white he almost felt as if he could

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cup it in his hands and drink it. *Le feu de Dieu*, the French called it: the fire of God.

He didn't exactly believe in miracles. Still, he mouthed a silent prayer to the moon goddess, and went in.

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Chapter Ten

For San Francisco Homicide Inspector Tom Danzel, it had been the worst couple of months of his life. He was sure he had never felt so miserable—or understood it so little.

Stanley Korski, that was for sure. Whatever was going on in his life, little Stanley Korski was at the very center of it. But, what exactly "it" was, he had no clue.

If he had been a different kind of man, he might have gone so far—though it would have been a major stretch in any case—as to think he had fallen in love. But that was impossible, totally beyond any stretch of the imagination. Stanley was queer. He wasn't. That was the black and white of it, despite anything that had gone on between them, all of which could easily be explained away.

It felt, though, a lot like he had felt once or twice in the past, when he thought he had fallen in love with one female or another. On the other hand, his assessment of his feelings had proven to be pretty unreliable in those instances, too. He had long since concluded that he didn't have any idea either what exactly "falling in love" meant.

There were people he loved, in a manner of speaking. Women people. He thought so, anyway. And things he loved, for sure. Fucking said women people, especially. He'd gotten his first piece of ass when he was thirteen. She was fifteen. An older woman.

He hadn't look back since, had gone through his life industriously collecting all the trophies he could, convinced

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that his was a special gift he was meant to share with all the hungry, horny women of the world—and in all fairness to himself, many of them had seemed to share his opinion. If he got a goodly share of the pleasure out of the encounters too, well, who was to say that wasn't his due?

It had always seemed to him as if this was a perfectly sensible, agreeable way to proceed. Truth was, he had never needed much from life: a roof over his head, some food, a reasonable amount of booze, the occasional joint—and lots of pussy. That had always been enough to keep him happy.

Until Stanley had entered his life—and turned it upside down, in ways he simply could not understand. As a for instance, he'd always enjoyed having his dick sucked, without getting overly excited about it. It was just another kind of foreplay, a build up to the real things—until Stanley. Then, he had experienced a whole new level of sexual excitement, a "real thing" in itself and not just some prelude.

Try though he might, he couldn't explain the difference to himself. It was just a mouth, wasn't it: two lips, a tongue, a throat? You put the knob of your dick between the lips, somebody sucked on it, tongued it a bit, took it down the throat. He'd had scores of women perform this on him. It had been nice, and nothing to write home about.

With Stanley, he'd found himself flying to the moon. But he couldn't think of any reason why it should have been so different from everything in the past.

Even the simplest things were different, too—even kissing had suddenly turned into something entirely unlike what he had experienced with that long list of female partners.

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Kissing, for Christ's sake. That had always just been a way of getting started, a warm up exercise. Like, how excited could a guy get over just locking lips with someone? It wasn't, in his opinion, a manly thing to get excited about. Kissing was for women. Men did it to make women happy. Okay, if you wanted to put it exactly, they did it to get women turned on, which made the man happy, in return for which, it was then up to him to make the woman really happy. Which required something more than kissing.

Only, kissing Stanley had been, again, like nothing he'd ever experienced before. Like, that first time, it had caught him so completely by surprise. It wasn't just that it felt good, it had felt, well, so utterly right, when by all logic it ought to have felt wrong, shouldn't it? Not as if it had been his very first kiss. That mouth, those lips, that tongue ... sweet, like nectar, soft as velvet. Most surprisingly, kissing Stanley had made him—he didn't know how else to put it—had made him happy.

Other stuff ... okay, he'd never actually had anybody rim him before, so that didn't really count. Probably, if a chick had done that to him, he'd have enjoyed it just as much as with Stanley. Probably, way more.

But the weirdest thing of all, the totally weird thing, had been when he took Stanley's dick up his ass. That had only happened once, and he'd done it then just as a favor, a special gift, and not out of any desire to try it out. Something that had never occurred to him to try with anyone else, let alone desired. What it had been, really, was not so much a sexual activity as a goodbye gift, because he had made up his

mind on his way to see Stanley that night that it would be their final get together, that whatever they had going between them, it had to end.

That was where it had ended, too, and he had been glad he'd made the sacrifice and given Stanley his cherry, to soften the blow of saying goodbye, because he genuinely liked Stanley, and he knew Stanley was going to take it hard, having everything come to an abrupt end the way Tom had decided.

And, yes, the experience had been every bit as painful as he'd suspected it would be, an ordeal, really—except, ever since, whenever he thought about it, it didn't seem as terrible in retrospect as it had at the time. Like something he could possibly do again, in the right situation. Not for pleasure, not for his own pleasure certainly, more like an accommodation, with the right individual. Only, it was impossible to think of doing it with anybody other than Stanley.

Plus, and this had really come to aggravate him, every time he thought of that, of Stanley fucking him, it occurred to him that he had never gotten around to nailing Stanley in return. Who, let it be said, had a really cute little ass on him. He had noticed that a lot while they had been working on their case together. Cute little buns, all round and firm and pouty looking, you couldn't help thinking how they would feel riding them to town.

So, shouldn't he have gotten himself a piece of that, once at least, before he had called everything off? Even knowing it wouldn't be like pussy. Couldn't be. Still, it was a cute little

butt, and it looked, kind of, like a woman's. It looked like it would be great to fuck.

Or, maybe it was better he hadn't done that. Because calling things off had been necessary, and that might have made it tougher. What if fucking Stanley had turned out to be good, really good? If he'd fucked Stanley, and it had turned out to be sensational, he'd have wanted some more of it, wouldn't he? He would never have wanted their relationship to end.

And it had to end, had ended, that part of it was one hundred percent definite. They were both on the homicide detail. They had solved a tricky case together, and Tom was honest enough to admit that he probably couldn't have done it, or at least, not so quickly, without Stanley's help. He'd have been totally at sea in the ocean of gay bars and cross dressers they'd had to navigate to find their killer, a world Stanley had taken to like some brightly plumed sea bird. One of those pink ones. Flamingoes, he thought they were.

Afterward, though, just with that one case, the others in homicide were giving Tom smirks and doubtful glances, as if they knew, or guessed, anyway, that he and Stanley had graduated from partners to *partners*. To have continued to work with Stanley would have cemented everyone's suspicions. They would be looking at him with the same undisguised scorn with which they looked at Stanley. They would have written him off as queer, too.

So, he'd done the right thing. Broken it off completely, insisted on a change of partners, had gone out of his way to

avoid Stanley, no chance of finding himself in a weak moment doing things he knew he would only regret later.

He couldn't quite grasp, though, why he should want to do any of those things, even with Stanley. He wasn't attracted to men. And it wasn't love, he was pretty sure of that. He had come to the conclusion that love was a talent that other people had and that he just simply lacked.

Still, Stanley was there, wouldn't go away. Like the amputee's missing foot, Stanley continued to itch at him. And how was he supposed to go about scratching something that wasn't there?

Which was as close as he could come to an explanation for why was he coming up the walk now to Stanley's apartment, at almost one o'clock in the morning, with no idea what he wanted to say, or what he was expecting to happen—just that he had this urge, it had overwhelmed him, to see Stanley again.

The itching foot.

* * * *

Only, after a long wait and a second, loud knocking at the door, the kind of cop-knock nobody could ignore, it wasn't Stanley who opened the door. It was ... he had to think...

"Chris, right?"

Chris, pillow-haired, sleepy-eyed, wrapped in a pink silk bathrobe that Tom recognized at once as Stanley's (*a pink bathrobe, wouldn't you fucking know it? Definitely a flamingo*), blinked at him through the open crack of the door.

"Um hum," he mumbled, looking blank for a moment as his eyes went up and down Tom's stocky frame. After a few seconds, his eyes widened. "Oh, wait. You're the..." He started to say "The Neanderthal," which was the nickname Stanley had originally given his homicide partner, and corrected it to, "Stanley's partner. On the murder case."

"Right. Tom." Tom took a stick of gum from his pocket, opened it one handed, and popped it into his mouth, chewing vigorously. "Is, uh, Stanley here?" He craned to look past Chris's shoulder, as if he expected to see Stanley hiding behind him in the dark hallway.

Chris gave his head a shake. "No. He's out of town. He went down to Bear Mountain."

"Bear Mountain? Like, in Southern California?"

"That's the one. He got a call. A murder case. He flew down there to solve it."

Tom felt something do a flip-flop in his gut. Stanley, off solving a murder case, on his own? Stanley, who couldn't draw his gun without catching it on his bra strap? Stanley, whose ass he'd had to save over and over on their previous case.

"Bear Mountain," he said again, because he couldn't think what to say.

Chris nodded. "An old friend. Somebody named Libby. He left her address, I think, and her number. I'll get it for you." He started to move away from the door and turned back to look Tom over more thoroughly. "Unless, you know, you'd like to come in...?"

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It didn't even register. Tom was busy thinking about Stanley, who was almost certainly, at this very moment, getting himself into some kind of trouble. Because Stanley was a magnet for trouble. Probably major trouble, too. Without Tom there to get him out of it.

Chris sighed. "I'll get the address," he said.

* * * *

Stanley's cell phone rang during the night, a cacophony of notes that, if you listened carefully enough, could just be recognized as Can-Can. Half asleep, he picked it up and looked at the number on display, one he didn't recognize. Probably some telemarketer, he thought. He put it back on the nightstand, and went back to sleep.

Carl was nowhere to be seen when Stanley got up in the morning. The door to his bedroom was still closed. Sleeping in, Stanley decided.

He made coffee, found some bread in the refrigerator and a toaster on the counter and made himself some toast. In the absence of anything to spread on it, he dipped it in his coffee.

Coffee soup, they'd called it when he had been a kid. You broke the bread up in a bowl, poured the coffee over it, lots of sugar, lots of milk. A delicious repast with which to begin a winter morning, as he recalled it. On a whim, he got a bowl out of the cupboard, broke the toast into it, added the other ingredients, briefly flashing back on his childhood.

It tasted far less glorious than he remembered. Maybe it was a kid thing, like snow ice cream. He'd tried that too, years later, and wondered why he had enjoyed it so much in

the past. Memory could play tricks. He emptied the bowl into the garbage can and poured himself a fresh cup of coffee.

It occurred to him that maybe one day in the distant future, he'd look back and wonder why he had cared so much about Tom, too. *You're just coffee soup*, he would tell him to his face. *Just snow ice cream*. Let him figure that out. He was a detective, wasn't he?

He was finishing his coffee when Carl appeared in a pair of badly rumpled pajamas, his hair tousled, his face puffy with sleep, eyes red-rimmed.

"Coffee's made," Stanley told him. Carl went by with nothing but a grunt, poured himself a cup, and headed for the bathroom.

"Yes," Stanley said to his retreating back, "'the lark's on the wing, the morning's dew-pearled.'" The closing of the bathroom door was the only reply.

Later, though, dressed in the same clothes from yesterday, showing no evidence of a shower or any grooming, Carl had recovered his manners enough at least to say, "Good morning," and added, which might have been meant for an apology, "I'm not used to having anyone around when I get up."

"It will only be for a couple of days," Stanley said. "I guess we can survive one another that long."

Breakfast more or less taken care of, Stanley asked how to find Donnie's mother, thinking he would start there. As he was leaving, he thought to ask, "By the way, you said you have a trailer of your own. Where is that?"

"About half a mile that way, on the lake front," Carl said, indicating the direction opposite of Hannah's.

"The three of you living so close, all lined up along the shore of the lake," Stanley said, "seems funny, some how."

"It was Mom's idea. She's always had this image of us, one big happy family. As if. Myself, I'd have picked some place way out in the woods. As far as I could get."

"Speaking of her, where did she live, your mother?" Stanley asked. "Before she moved into Hannah's?"

"About a half a mile the other side of Hannah's." He smiled sardonically. "Like ducks in a row, she used to say."

Queer ducks, Stanley thought, but didn't say.

"Where will I find this biker hangout you mentioned?"

"The Handle Bar?" Carl gave him the directions, which consisted mostly of follow the main drag out the other end of town, watch for it on the left. "You're going there?"

"I think I'll have to," Stanley said, without enthusiasm.

"What was that guy's name?"

"Rack. But I don't think..."

"I don't either, much of the time." *Or I probably wouldn't be here.*

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Chapter Eleven

At first glance, Amanda McIntosh's cabin might better have been described as a shanty. Parked in front of it, staring at it from the car, Stanley realized that probably at one time it hadn't looked so bad. It must have been two decades, though, since it had been painted, and the weather had taken its toll. Siding, most of its paint long since flaked away, showed signs here and there of rot, and bare patches on the roof must surely let rain and snow in. A window to one side had been broken, cardboard fastened from inside over the gaping hole.

Compared to this near-hovel, the shabby trailer park just next door might have been Presidio Terrace.

He got out of the car and made his way to the front door, avoiding an overturned garbage can, its contents scattered on the bare ground, and a bag of bottles—most of them vodka bottles, he noted—that had been torn open, the bottles tossed about. Some animal had been foraging. A bear? They weren't supposed to be here, right? Just his luck, he'd meet one AWOL some night. Back in San Francisco, "bear" meant a big, burly guy, and hairy. He'd met one or two of those when they'd been out foraging. Them, he knew how to handle. So it wasn't as if he had no interest in wild animals. He was just selective, was all.

At first he thought no one was home. His knock echoed back to him the way they do from an empty house. He knocked again, just to be sure, and was surprised when the

door inched open and someone said, from an interior too gloomy to reveal a face, "What do you want?"

"Mrs. McIntosh?" Stanley asked

"Who wants to know?"

He held his badge up to the crack in the door. "I'm with the San Francisco Police Department. I'm in town at the request of Carl Hunter's family..."

"Carl Hunter? The one who killed Donnie? Is that who you mean?"

"Yes, that's the one. But, there's some question about what really happened ... would you mind if I came in?"

"What for?"

Which rather caught him off guard. He wasn't altogether sure of the answer to that question himself. "Just to talk," he said lamely. "I'm trying to learn a little more about your son."

The silence grew long. He half expected the door to close in his face. "You're sure you're not a bill collector?" she surprised him by asking.

"Quite sure."

The door swung inward. "But I don't know what I can tell you," she said. "I probably knew him less than anyone. You wouldn't happen to have a cigarette, would you?"

"Sorry," he said, pausing just inside. The door opened directly into what was obviously the cabin's living room, but it was so shaded from the morning light outside that in here it might almost have been night. Curtains were closed at the side windows, and a worn thin plaid blanket had been pinned up over the wide front window.

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It took a moment for Stanley's eyes to adjust to the gloom. He was kind of sorry when they did. Garbage was strewn everywhere, along with more of those empty bottles. Dirty dishes, cups, glasses were stacked on end tables and a scarred coffee table and, he could see through an open doorway, a kitchen counter. The floor was plain wood, innocent of any rugs or even, at a glance, broom. The air reeked of spoiled food and body odors and stale cigarette smoke. He had to resist an urge to gag.

"So, what was it you want to know?" Amanda McIntosh asked. She didn't look much better than her living quarters, a small, scrawny woman with unkempt hair and a belligerent expression on a badly weathered face. Her breath was wheezy, her voice the rasp of the long time heavy smoker.

She turned away from his assessment, sorted through some glasses on one lamp table, found something of interest in one of them, and lifted it to take a sip.

"I thought, well, maybe you could tell me a little about some of Donnie's associates."

"Associates?" She gave a hoarse whoop of a laugh that quickly deteriorated into a wracking cough. "Associates," she said again when she got her breath back. "That's a rich one. You mean all those guys around town punking him day and night? Those associates?"

"You knew about that, then?"

"I'd have to be deaf and blind not to know. It wasn't like it was any kind of secret. He sure didn't care who knew. In the woods, out in pick up trucks, alleys ... this is about the only place he didn't foul with his behavior, and only because I put

my foot down, told him one John in here and he was out on his ass. He got the message. Where else would he go if I threw him out? Who else would have had him but his dear old mother?"

"Okay, then, all those Johns," Stanley said, "can you think of anyone who might have wanted to kill him?"

"I expect there's more than one who'd like to have wrung his neck. Count me among them. Nobody killed him, though, not on purpose. It was an accident. That Hunter kid, the two of them doing God alone knows what, things got out of hand. You go talk to the cops. They'll tell you all about it."

"I've already been."

"Then you know as much as I do, Buster. Look, I just got out of bed. If it's all the same to you..."

Stanley spied a framed picture sitting atop the television. He picked it up. "Is this him?"

"Donnie? That's him," she said in a voice suddenly turned angry. She rummaged around again on the table, found a half smoked cigarette in a dish, and lighted it with a big wooden match. "Pretty, wasn't he?"

Stanley looked at the picture for a long moment. He could see why so many men had wanted a piece of the action. Donnie McIntosh had indeed been pretty. Not handsome, and certainly not masculine, but girlishly pretty—an oval face, pouty little mouth, long lashed eyes. In the photograph, probably a high school graduation picture, he looked downright cherubic. Put a wig on him, some makeup, he'd pass for a pinup queen. In San Francisco, he'd have been a

hot property. There was a drag club there, The Boom Boom Room...

He set the picture back atop the television and gave the room another look. There were no other pictures to be seen. Out of curiosity, he said, "Your husband..."

"Was a rotten son of a bitch. Best thing that ever happened in my life, the day he died. A real blessing, that was."

He noticed she didn't mention the benefit to her son. Did she care about Donnie's life with father? Or even know? Another mother, blinding herself to reality? How could you love your son if you didn't even know him?

"Did Donnie have his own room here?"

"Back there." She jerked her head toward a dark hallway that ran toward the rear of the house. "Last room. You're welcome to look, if you think it'll do you any good."

"Probably not," he said, thinking aloud more than talking to her. "If there'd been anything there of interest, the police would have found it when they looked. Still, it can't hurt..."

"The local cops? What makes you think they'd have been poking 'round there?"

"Weren't they? You mean, they didn't search his room?"

"For what? It wasn't any mystery, how he died. Those two boys were fooling around, doing queer stuff, I already told you. Things got out of hand. Didn't have anything to do with his room. He never brought them here. I said to him, you bring one John into this house and you're out on your ass."

"And he didn't?"

"Course he didn't. I told him once, I told him a dozen times, you bring—"

Stanley's spirits brightened. "And you don't mind if I have a look?"

"Go ahead, makes no difference to me." She dismissed him with a wave of her hand and walked to the kitchen. He heard the refrigerator door open and close as he entered the hallway to the rear.

In contrast to the rest of the house, Donnie's room might have been a spread out of House and Garden. Not that the decorating was anything special: a teen's bedroom, posters on the wall, a surprisingly new looking computer (a gift from a John?) on a battered wooden desk, a worn but clean throw on the single bed.

No garbage, though, no clutter. Except for a light film of dust that had probably collected since Donnie had died, the room looked neat and clean. He'd have bet money Donnie had been as careful of his person and his clothes as he was about his room. He'd run across people like that before. Scrupulously neat, compulsively clean on the surface. The garbage all trapped inside.

The stale cigarette smoke had followed him in from the front room. Stanley crossed to a window, opened it and breathed gratefully of the fresh air. Outside, the mountain slope climbed sharply. A narrow path of worn down grass led upward to a dirt road that slashed like a dueling scar across the hillside—one of the rugged fire roads used by the rangers in the event of a forest fire.

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At the point where the road disappeared into the trees, a man all in black sat motionless on a motorcycle. Silhouetted as he was against the sunlight sky, Stanley could see nothing of his face—yet he had the uncanny feeling that the man was watching the house. Or him

He stared back, and was about to call out a greeting when the motorcycle roared to life. The driver turned it sharply about, sending pebbles scattering, and in a minute bike and rider were gone, leaving a cloud of dust and a diminuendo of noise in their wake.

Just a biker, then, communing with nature, and nothing to do with Stanley or the business at hand or, surely, Amanda McIntosh, who was hardly the sort he could imagine in a romantic liaison with one of those dark knights of the road. He was letting his imagination run away with him again, seeing ghosts at every turning. Tom had accused him of that often.

He turned from the window, gave his attention back to the room, trying to get a sense of its occupant. If he hadn't known, he'd have guessed an ordinary young man lived here.

Until he found the porn in the cardboard box under the bed. Books, magazines, a couple of video tapes, with nothing that he could see on which to show them. And photos. Lots of photos, most of them computer print outs. Many of Donnie, naked. Soft, and hard, his wienie small, little-boyish. Bending over to show his bare bottom, spreading his cheeks to show his hole, kneeling on the floor, mouth open, as if begging to have something shoved into it. A gallery of self abasement.

He wondered who had taken the pictures, and made a mental note to ask Carl if he knew.

Pictures of others, too. There were a couple of Carl, but there was nothing pornographic about these, just ordinary pictures. Carl, fully clothed, standing by a tree in one, seated on some kind of wooden bench in another. Something about his expression—tender, vulnerable, smiling, a sweet smile, really. Stanley was surprised once again to realize how dramatically a smile changed Carl's appearance.

He wondered not for the first time what the relationship between the two young men had really been. More, surely, than Carl had let on. Carl had seen something in Donnie that others hadn't seen, apparently. Donnie, too, seemed to have seen Carl in a way differently from the other men in his life. And yet, he had died trying to give Carl a blow job. The old, crude terms came into his mind, the bitter humor of gaydom: the dick of death. A cock to die for. In Donnie's case, and Carl's, maybe it had been too tragically true.

The rest of the pictures were less circumspect than Carl's. Naked men, generally with stiff organs on display, a few backside shots. Most of the men faceless, heads cut off by the camera, though in a couple hands were held discreetly in front of faces, and in one photo, a big, muscular man, naked and erect, grinned unashamedly through his beard for the camera.

Except for the bearded grinner, who looked like he'd been snapped in a very drunken state, it would have been impossible to identify any of the men in the photos. Stanley flipped through them. Twenty, thirty shots. Who were they?

What significance did they have for Donnie McIntosh? Did he come home from those frequent assaults and masturbate over them? Were these trophies of some sort, or a catalog of his shame?

He went through the photos again, studying them more carefully. A couple of men showed up with some regularity—one recognizable by virtue of his endowment, it must have been a good eight inches in length, and remarkably skinny, like a long pencil with testicles and an enormously thick bush at the eraser end.

The other, shown sitting in a chair in three different shots, looked middle aged, so far as you could tell from his body, his loose belly hanging in folds, member of no distinction, soft in one shot, standing in the other two.

What caught Stanley's decorator eye, though, was the chair, the same chair in which he was sitting in all three photos, or what he could see of the chair. He studied each one closely, concentrating on the chair. Mostly what showed was a gracefully curved wooden arm, and in one, just a bit of a leg and, peeking from behind one stocking-clad human foot, a claw and ball chair-foot. And the merest glimpse of an ornately patterned rug, but not enough, really, to identify the pattern.

The chair was Queen Anne, he thought. It looked authentic, what he could see of it. Maybe expensive. Not likely the sort of thing a biker would have, or your typical mountain man. It suggested someone with a little taste, at least. And probably a little money.

He sighed aloud. What good would any of this do? Pencil dick was unmistakable. He'd know that appendage in a minute if he ever saw it, but how could he? He could hardly run around the town of Bear Mountain asking to inspect everyone's crotch.

And, what if he did find it, what purpose would that serve? He imagined a courtroom, straight out of an old Perry Mason television show, himself in the witness chair, pointing dramatically: *Your honor, that dick is in the courtroom at this very moment. J'accuse...*

The same with the man in the Queen Anne chair. What did any of this prove? That Donnie liked to take pictures of his tormentors, was all. On the surface, at least, nothing linked up with Donnie's death—or, more importantly, cleared Carl Hunter of it.

He wondered about taking the pictures with him. Was that tampering with evidence? Most likely it was. If they were evidence, which wasn't at all clear. The police had shown no interest in them, had they? Anyway, there were lots of them, and who would miss a few? Donnie was gone, and he doubted if Donnie's mother even knew of their existence. Maybe nobody did. Except, of course, the men in the pictures. He looked at them briefly again. Was there a clue there to why Donnie McIntosh had to die?

He chose one of Pencil Dick, one of Chair Man, and one of Donnie himself, a rare portrait, a smiling young man caught in a moment, a mood, of innocence. On an impulse, he added one of Carl and the one of the man whose face was showing. Five pictures. That wasn't too greedy, was it?

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He gave the room a last glance, feeling ineffably sad, and left. He finally recognized the scent, both foreign and familiar, that had teased him since he'd come into the room: furniture polish. Old Pledge. He used it himself, knew the smell well.

If it had been used anywhere else in the house, though, it hadn't been for a very long time.

* * * *

"His funeral's tomorrow," the mother told him as he went out. "If you care." She didn't sound much, he thought, as if she did.

It wasn't until later that he remembered he'd left the bedroom window open.

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Chapter Twelve

It was still early for The Handle Bar. Maybe too early. They might not even be open yet for business. In San Francisco, no self respecting biker bar would be open before noon.

He passed it, turned around, cruising slowly back. A biker pulled into the parking lot, a companion following. They got off their Harleys and strolled together, chatting, to the front door, disappeared inside.

Which meant the bar was open then. There were maybe another three or four bikes outside, and a couple of pickup trucks at one end of the gravel lot, like trucks and bikes didn't mix. Mountain bikers were early birds, apparently.

Okay, the truth was, he wasn't ready for this yet. He couldn't forget Carl's warning about his probable welcome. Anyway, when he looked at his watch, he saw it was a little after eleven. Almost lunch time. Probably it wasn't a good idea to tackle a rough bar on an empty stomach.

He drove to The Wagon Wheel. June, the waitress who'd waited on him the evening before, was on duty again. She greeted him like an old friend, the way they do in small towns, and led him to a booth.

"The apple pie is delicious, fresh baked," she said. "Still warm from the oven."

He handed the menu back to her without looking at it. "I'll have a hamburger, medium, with fries and a diet coke," and remembered that he was on vacation. Surely you ought to pamper yourself on vacation. "Forget the coke, make that a

milkshake, a chocolate one. And add cheese and bacon to the burger."

"That's The Wagon Wheeler," she said, looking pleased by the change in his order. Maybe they expected visitors to pig out. Maybe that counted as protection against the vegetarian piranhas. "It comes with our own special barbeque sauce."

"Heavy on the sauce. And I'll have a piece of that apple pie, too, to follow. Ala mode. Two scoops."

The burger when it came was delicious and gloriously gloppy, the sauce leaving what was almost certainly going to be a permanent stain on his shirt front, and the fries were crunchy crisp and redolent of animal grease, exactly how he liked them. He ate with silent gusto, washing it all down with big draughts of sweet chocolate shake and occasionally dabbing with a napkin at the creamy moustache it left above his lip.

While he ate and dabbed, he tried to think what he had learned. Which, when you got down to it, was not much. A man with a penis like a pencil who appeared to be among Donnie's favorites, and another, middle aged, out of shape, with a Queen Anne chair. Tom might see some way to make use of this information, but for the moment, his mind was blank.

Or, more to the point, for the moment his thoughts were focused on the apple pie, which June set in front of him with a flourish. She waited with an expectant air by the table while he took a tentative taste.

"You're right, it's delicious," he said, and she looked so pleased that he was tempted to ask if she'd baked it herself. She smiled her approval and hurried off to the next table.

He was about halfway through the pie when he became aware that someone had stopped by his booth. He looked up and found an elderly woman staring at him with friendly intensity. She was little, and quite aged, with a round face, wrinkled like a hand too long in soapy water, and sparse white hair, short and choppy as if she'd cut it herself with garden shears. Her eyes, though, steel gray, were as bright as buttons and fully alert. She smiled down at him, the lipless, thin smile of the very old.

"You're the policeman, aren't you?" she said. "The out of town one."

Stanley blinked in surprise, apple-crowded fork poised halfway to his mouth. This was a small town, sure, and he knew how fast gossip could travel around a community like this. Still, this had to be some kind of record. He put the fork in his mouth and said, through a mouthful of pie, "That's me. But—"

"Now, about your boyfriend..." She looked him up and down, button eyes twinkling merrily.

"I don't have a boyfriend."

"Oh, not here. Not yet. But he's coming. As fast as ever he can travel."

She bobbed her head for emphasis. Her grin was positively elfin. Stanley was struck dumb. A boyfriend? On his way here? Chris, maybe, deciding to share the mountain vacation?

Or ... but, no, that was surely beyond the realm of possibility. He didn't know what to say.

June said it for him, suddenly appearing beside her. "Mary, are you bothering the customers? You know Joe will have a fit."

"We were just chatting," Mary said. She gave Stanley another smile and nodded her head again. "I've got to go. They think I'm a nuisance."

"Bye, now," Stanley said. Part of him was sorry to see her shuffle down the aisle between the booths. She looked back once, just as she went out the door. He couldn't be sure, but he thought she'd given him a quick wink.

"Don't pay any mind to Mary," June said. "Folks around town call her Crazy Mary. If that tells you anything."

Which, surely it did, he had to agree. Still, what she'd said, about a boyfriend—he couldn't help his thoughts turning to Tom. What if she really was one of those ESP types? She had known about his being a cop. An out of town cop.

Of course probably half the people in Bear Mountain knew about that by now, small towns being what they were. And she had known he was gay. *Well, gee, Stanley, duh.*

He finished his pie, stopped at the register to pay, thinking that eating in Bear Mountain was certainly cheaper than it was in San Francisco. Back at Libby's car, he slid into the driver's seat and put the key in the ignition, when a tap on the window caught his attention. He looked out to see Crazy Mary standing there, smiling that elfin smile down at him. He lowered the window and smiled back.

"Hi, there," he said. He was thinking he'd ask her about that boyfriend business, but before he could, she surprised him all over again.

"That young man didn't do it. Carl Hunter? He didn't kill that McIntosh boy."

His mouth fell open. "How do you know that?" he asked.

"Because I saw it. I saw the two of them, Carl and that other boy, they were, you know, they were being naughty. And then they had a quarrel over something, and Carl left, and someone came along..."

"Someone else, you mean? After Carl had left?"

"Yes. And he stooped down over that McIntosh boy, he was on the ground, you know, the boy, I mean, and this man hit him in the back of the head with a big stick, hit him hard, and he did it a second time. Then he put the stick aside, and knelt down, and turned the boy over, and banged his head down on this big rock. Ever so hard. I don't know why he was so violent about that, after he'd already bashed his head in. People are funny, aren't they?"

Stanley's gaped. "You saw all this?" She nodded emphatically, looking quite pleased with herself. "Where were you? Didn't this man see you?"

"Oh, no, I wasn't where he could see me."

"Well, then, how did you manage to see him so clearly? Everything he did?"

"The same way I saw your boyfriend." She giggled and wagged a finger at him. "And he's very, very angry with you, too, you can expect him to be in a pet, but never mind, it's

only because he loves you. You be good to him, you hear, he's got lots on his mind."

With that, Crazy Mary turned and marched away across the parking lot without looking back. She turned onto the sidewalk in the direction of downtown Bear Mountain.

Stanley felt like a tire that someone had let all the air out of. For a moment there, he'd thought he had actually found a witness. Wouldn't that have been something? But, Crazy Mary, she'd only seen it in her head. Dreamed it, probably.

He was back in the courtroom, in the witness chair. *Your honor, Crazy Mary saw it all in her dream, it was Pencil Dick...*

* * * *

He drove by The Handle Bar again. A couple more motorcycles in the lot. With the car window down, even from the highway, he could hear music blasting from inside. The volume must have been totally cranked up for it to carry this far outside.

He pulled into the lot, sat with the motor running. A big, hairy man in leather drag came out, gave him a not very welcoming glance as he strolled to one of the bikes and straddled it. Stanley drove out of the lot again. He had just eaten an enormous lunch. Probably you should never tackle a leather bar on a full stomach. Not a straight leather bar, anyway.

He remembered the therapist Carl had mentioned, the one Donnie had been seeing. Miller or Stiller, Carl had thought, with an office in the mall. He decided it would be easier to tackle a therapist on a full stomach. Probably, that was the

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best way of dealing with a therapist. A leather bar, a rough biker bar, he might end up having to run for his life, and you could give yourself cramps running too soon after eating. A therapist, the only danger was falling asleep, and as he saw it, there was nothing wrong with a nap after lunch.

He'd seen the mall before, when they had first arrived in town. It wasn't much of a mall, just a big Safeway at one end and, at a right angle to that, running along the far side of a big parking area, a block of small shops: a hardware store, a pet shop, greeting cards, travel agent—and, at the far end, M. H. Miller, Licensed Professional Counselor with, below that in smaller script: adult, adolescent, family, couples.

He walked back to the Safeway, bought a big bottle of Stoli, a much smaller one of vermouth, a jar of olives—thank Heaven, the town wasn't completely uncivilized—and stashed his purchases in the trunk of the car before he strolled back to the office of M. H. Miller.

The glass door opened to a small reception room: a pair of ivory colored plastic chairs, and a table between them spread with ratty looking magazines, a desk, unmanned at the moment, a telephone with a red message light blinking.

Behind the desk, a closed door presumably led to the therapist's inner sanctum. Stanley was considering whether to knock at the door when it opened, and a middle aged man in shirt and tie appeared, a half eaten sandwich in one hand.

"Hi," he said, and glanced at the empty desk. "Uh, my secretary's out to lunch, but if you'd like to make an appointment, Mister..."

"Korski," Stanley said, stepping forward to offer his hand, "Stanley Korski. And you're Doctor Miller?"

"Mister Miller." He switched the sandwich to his left hand, wiped his right hand on a trouser leg, and shook Stanley's with it. "No doctorate, but I am board certified, fully qualified, I assure you. Did you wish to see me professionally?"

"Yes, but not the way you mean. I'm a homicide inspector, Mister Miller, with the San Francisco Police Department, and I wonder if I could have a moment of your time, to ask you a few questions."

Mister Miller's welcoming smile faded. "What about?"

"Donnie McIntosh. He was a patient of yours, wasn't he?"

Without actually moving, the therapist seemed to withdraw into the room behind him. "I can't talk about my patients. Confidentiality. If you're a policeman, you must be aware of the law."

"Absolutely," Stanley said, "and I wouldn't dream of asking you to violate any confidentiality. I had in mind questions of a more general nature."

"This is relative to what?"

"I'm here at the request of the Hunter family. Carl Hunter? He's the one—"

"I know who he is. But that's all I know, and that he killed Donnie McIntosh. I'm afraid—"

"Allegedly killed," Stanley corrected him, "but it seems there is some question of what really happened." Stanley glanced around, at the plate glass windows overlooking the mall parking lot. Beyond the glass, two women passed,

laughing and chatting. One of them threw a casual glance inside.

"I really think it would be more discreet if we went into your office." Stanley said. He raised an eyebrow in question.

"Oh, okay," Miller said with a notable lack of enthusiasm. "But I think this is going to be a waste of time. Yours and mine. It'll have to be brief, too."

"If you're expecting a client," Stanley said. "I can wait."

Miller stepped aside and motioned for Stanley to come in. "No, come in," he said reluctantly.

Stanley went in, seated himself without being asked in one of the chairs this side of the big mahogany desk—the desk too big, too grand for this shabby office in a strip mall in a mountain village. Miller seated himself in the oversized cherry wood chair behind the desk, laid his unfinished sandwich aside and picked up some papers from the desktop as if he meant to read them. He gave them a quick shuffle, barely glancing at them and, putting them aside, looked across the desk at Stanley with a puzzled expression, as if surprised to see him still there.

"Now, then..." he prompted.

"Donnie McIntosh was your patient, that's correct, isn't it?"

"Donnie—Donald McIntosh was a patient, yes, I can tell you that much."

"And it's safe to say, he was a very disturbed young man."

"I'm not at liberty..."

"To discuss your patient's conditions," Stanley finished for him. "But, that's hardly confidential information, is it? To put

it bluntly, I'm told Donnie was the town queer. Everybody I've talked to seems to know that. Didn't you?"

"Donald was," the therapist paused, weighing his words. "He had a certain reputation, yes."

"He was a regular sexual outlet for a lot of locals, isn't that right?"

Miller picked up the papers from his desk again, looked at them as if he might read the answer there, and gave them another shuffle.

"Mister...?"

"Korski. Inspector Stanley Korski."

"Inspector Korski, yes, Donald McIntosh had a reputation in Bear Mountain. And he was, as you say, a very disturbed young man. He came to me initially in response to a court order. He'd been arrested on a public nuisance charge—he was caught having sexual relations, oral relations, with another man, in a local park. He was given probation instead of jail time, with the condition that he receive counseling. All of this is a matter of public record, so I am not violating any confidentiality by telling you that. Nor by telling you that, even after the court stopped paying for my services, I continued to see Mister McIntosh, to counsel him. I felt that he was someone in dire need of professional help, and I thought that I could help him."

He smiled, a smile which Stanley thought was altogether smarmy. "Sometimes it isn't just about money, not in my profession. Therapists, good therapists, really do care about helping people, you know. We do want to help."

Stanley was unimpressed by Mister Miller's magnanimity. "And the sex," he said in a voice dripping scorn. "I'll bet that was great, wasn't it? I hear Donnie was pretty good at what he did. Did you get the blow jobs, or the other end of the lollipop? I'm told he was very accommodating."

Miller's mouth fell open, his eyes threatening to pop out of his head. For a moment, he looked as if he might explode. He jumped to his feet, shoving the cherry wood chair away from the desk so violently that it nearly toppled over.

"I'm afraid I must ask you to leave," he said, his voice high and tremulous, his face burning red.

Stanley remained seated. "Sit down, Mister Miller," he said calmly. "We've barely gotten started with our little chat."

Miller came around the desk and threw the door to the outer office violently open. It hit the wall with a crash. "Out, now," he said, "Or I'll phone the police."

"I don't think so," Stanley said, still not getting up. "Because I'd have to tell them about you and Donnie."

"There's nothing..."

"I can identify your chair, there," Stanley said, pointing at the one behind the desk. "I've seen it in pictures. Donnie's pictures, almost certainly taken right here in this office. I'd be willing to bet there surely isn't a mate for that chair anywhere in Bear Mountain. And now that I see it, I recognize the pattern in the rug, too."

Miller turned to stare at the chair behind his desk, like he'd never seen it before. He looked down at the rug.

"And if you're going to be flinging doors open dramatically, you really need to watch more Joan Crawford movies, that gesture was terrible."

Miller's face seemed to crumple in on itself. He closed the office door quietly and came back to the desk, the look he gave his chair accusing, as if the chair had spoken against him.

"That is your chair, isn't it?" Stanley persisted. "The one in Donnie's pictures?"

Miller sank into the chair, seeming to grow smaller before Stanley's eyes. "I insisted that he not show my face," he said, his voice so low Stanley had to strain to hear it. "I never even thought about the chair. Who would ever imagine anyone would recognize that?"

"I've got a good eye for chairs," Stanley said. "For male genitalia, too, as a matter of fact. If you'd care to take off your clothes, I could probably identify yours from his photos as well. But we needn't go that far, need we? It was you, in the pictures." He made it a statement rather than a question.

"I thought, what harm could it do?"

"Maybe not to you. But Donnie?"

"I didn't ... you know, I'd never done anything like that, with another male, I mean. I don't know ... he was so insistent. And, the thing is, he was such a sweet young man, really. I thought, if I became his friend, a confidant, maybe I could help him. The people he'd been doing these things with, some of them, they were the worst kind of low life, the scum of the earth. They knocked him around, many of them, treated him terribly. And I thought maybe by going along with

him, by agreeing to what he wanted ... it wasn't ... we didn't actually have sexual relations. It was just a couple of photographs. He said ... it was like a hobby with him. I'd been trying to get him to talk about himself, about his childhood, and he was just beginning to open up. And he said, if I'd let him take the pictures, he'd tell me anything I wanted to know."

He looked directly at Stanley, into Stanley's eyes, for the first time since he had sat back down.

"I was trying to help him," he said in a breaking voice. "He had all these obstructions..."

"And you just happened to get hard. Or, were you trying to get one of those obstructions out of his throat?"

Miller sighed. "Yes, of course. I did let him ... I let him perform fellatio on me. It was only the one time. He was so insistent."

Stanley shook his head and clicked his tongue. "The naughty boy. Forcing himself on you that way."

At least Miller had the good grace to blush and look away. "I didn't..."

"Did you kill him?" Stanley asked.

Miller's surprise certainly looked genuine. "Kill him? Of course not. I understood—didn't Carl Hunter kill him? That's what I heard. It was an accident, that's what everyone said."

"Or not. If Carl Hunter is to be believed..."

"But, is he? A boy like that, he has a reputation of his own locally, you can't exactly believe everything he says, I should think."

"You can't always believe everything anybody says, in my experience," Stanley said. "Even therapists."

Another blush. "I deserve that, I'll admit. What I did was wrong, I admit that too. I should never have—but, I swear to you, I had nothing to do with Donnie's death."

"Maybe not directly, no. But I don't imagine you did much for his self esteem."

He seemed to have no answer for that. He slanted a look across the desk at Stanley. "What are you going to do?"

Already the man's focus had shifted back to himself, to his own plight. It seemed Donnie McIntosh's death did not, after all, mean much to him. Now that Donnie wasn't around to give him head.

"I don't know," Stanley said, getting up from his chair. "Yet." He started from the room.

"I was only trying to help him," Miller said again.

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Chapter Thirteen

Meat Loaf was blasting at deafening volume from wall-mounted speakers. Stanley paused inside the door to look around, giving his eyes time to adjust to the gloom, his ears to the din. His legs to cease melting and assume their usual rigidity. A dozen or so guys sat at the bar, a trio stood by the pool table. Another, off by himself, leaned against the wall, fingering a cue stick.

The Handle Bar was not unlike some of the leather bars in San Francisco. At a glance, most of these guys would not have looked out of place at The Eagle on a Sunday afternoon. And, just like at The Eagle, pretty much everyone looked when he came in. Gay men always checked the newcomers, just in case.

Only, at The Eagle, the glances would have been of a slightly different nature, and maybe just a bit more welcoming. These were curious, and instantly hostile, too. They said, to a man, 'This isn't your kind of place, fairy.'

This is no different from the school play, Stanley told himself. He'd been a detective in that too, had crossed a dining room crowded with suspects, all of them watching with carefully hostile expressions. *Pretend you're just acting a part.*

Most of the patrons continued to stare openly as he crossed to the bar. The bartender, drying some glasses with a towel, glowered at him wordlessly. In a minute, Stanley felt

sure, he'd be told to beat it. Something like that had happened in the school play, too.

Stanley opened his mouth to speak before he could be shooed away. Nothing came out. He could still hear the director's voice: *Cut. Mister Korski, you do know your lines, don't you?* Stanley's throat felt like it had been sandpapered. He swallowed and tried again. "I'm looking for the butler," he said.

No, that wasn't right, that was the play. Now he remembered that damned line. "For Rack," he corrected himself. "I'm looking for someone named Rack."

No answer, just that disapproving glower. Stanley was summoning his nerve to ask again when he realized the bartender was no longer looking at him, but over his shoulder.

Stanley turned and found himself face to face with the man who'd been standing alone at the wall. He was still holding his cue stick, turning it slowly, menacingly, around in his hand. And, as surely as if he'd worn one of those party name tags, Stanley knew this was Rack.

Endlessly horny Rack; abusive, violent Rack; Donnie McIntosh's demon lover, and his constant torment. Stanley knew the type. He had seen them plenty of times before. It didn't much matter if they were gay or straight, they were in a caste of their own, beautiful and dangerous, like those tropical snakes with brilliant bands the color of precious jewels, and deadly venom. This particular snake looked on the verge of striking.

"You're Rack, aren't you?" Stanley asked, and was surprised to find his voice so steady. He was a better actor, maybe, than he had realized. *I'm ready for my close up, Mister De Mille.*

For an answer, Rack nodded and smiled wordlessly.

Stanley stared at him, repelled and fascinated all at once. Rack's face was leathery tan and already lined; in ten, fifteen years, it would look like carved oak, and be none the worse for it: eyes hard as anthracite, lips thin and mean looking. Not what one might call handsome, but he exuded a raw animal magnetism. Stanley felt as if he could almost see the pheromones wafting like the devil's own mist about him.

He was tall, too, six two maybe, six three, lean, but with that whippy look that said he'd be ugly in a fight, and tireless in bed, and as relentlessly unfeeling in one as the other. His chest, furry red, was bare beneath a worn leather vest. He wore Levis, second-skin tight, unbuttoned at the fly, and open so low they revealed a little patch of coppery pubic hair. Another inch, two at the most, and he'd have been flashing naked wienie.

It was crude and vulgar, juvenile, almost—and undeniably sexy, but a brutal kind of sexy. It was without discretion, too, part of the package, aimed at the world in general and not at anyone in particular. But it could be. It could be aimed wherever he chose, and it would have its effect. And Rack was not unconscious of that fact, either.

Only, incongruously, and even as he felt the pull of the man's sexual magnetism, Stanley nevertheless found himself wondering if that wienie almost on display was long and

especially thin. *Is there a polite way to ask about that, Miss Manners? Excuse me, but could I check the lead in your pencil?*

He pulled his eyes away from that gleaming bush and saw that Rack had taken note of his interest. Rack's smile was taunting, inviting and threatening all at once.

"I'm looking into the death of Donnie McIntosh," Stanley said, realizing that his voice had come out higher than he'd planned, and tugging it down into a chest tone instead. "I understand you knew him."

"Knew him?" Rack laughed and looked around. His audience at the bar and the pool table laughed with him. "Fuck, yes," he looked back at Stanley. "It's a small town, you know? I guess there's lots of guys here who knew him. One way or the other." A few more snickers from the bar.

Stanley had this all but overwhelming urge to turn and run as fast as his legs would take him. Which, all things considered, would almost certainly not be fast enough. He tried to think how far it was to the door. Ten feet? Ten miles? His hands were shaking. He clasped them tightly behind his back, and stood his ground. Tom had taught him that: Never let them know you're scared.

Note to self: Self, do not under any circumstances start wetting your pants. They will almost certainly suspect you are scared.

"Uh, since you brought it up," he said, "what way or the other? Just a matter of curiosity, you understand."

"So what is this, another fag investigating a dead one?"

"Gay," Stanley said. He absolutely hated the word fag. It was one thing if another queen used it, but coming from this ... this ... *man*, it really frosted him. Anger gave him courage, overcoming his fear. He absolutely was not going to wet his pants now. "We prefer gay to fag."

"Meaning, you are a fag." He waited for Stanley to confirm or deny it, but Stanley only regarded him coldly. After a moment, Rack gave him an amused sneer. "Let me ask you, fag, aren't you scared, coming into a place like this, all these real men?"

Stanley glanced around. Several of the bikers were watching the scene with undisguised amusement. Behind him, the door opened, letting in a quick flash of light, and closed again as someone came in.

Oh, great, he thought, like they needed reinforcements. There goes my path of retreat. He reconsidered that pants wetting business.

"I cut my teeth on tougher men than I see here," Stanley said, a line he had run across a while back in a book and thought very funny. He hoped he sounded appropriately disdainful. Inside, he was thinking, *Oh, crap*, and wondering again how far it was to the door, and if he could get there before Rack beat him to death with that cue stick.

"Is that right?" Rack said, stepping closer to Stanley, so close that Stanley, short as he was, had to tilt his head back to look up into his face. Close enough he'd hardly have to do more than move his hand ever so slightly to run his fingers through that gleaming pubic hair. Like, say, if he wanted to check Rack's pencil for thickness. Involuntarily, his fingers

wriggled in anticipation. Maybe he could get a good feel before he died. Go out with one in his hand, at least.

"Big talk, little girl," Rack said, "considering there's a bunch of us, and you're all alone."

"Only, he's not alone," a voice said directly behind Stanley. Stanley jumped a foot or so into the air, and looked over his shoulder, and his eyes went wide.

"Tom," he said, hardly able to believe what he saw. "What are you...?"

Rack looked momentarily a little less sure of himself. Tom Danzel was maybe an inch or two shorter than the biker, but his shoulders were about as wide as the pool table across the room, and his arms, even covered as they were by the sleeves of his windbreaker, were obviously massive. And, in any tough guy attitude competition, Tom was a good bet for the gold medal.

"So, who are you?" Rack asked, attempting and not quite pulling off an air of bravado. "His Daddy?"

"I'm the guy who's going to relocate your asshole if you don't take a few steps back."

"Yeah?" Rack said, but he did take two or three steps back. He looked quickly around, but several of the bikers had lost their amusement—and, it appeared, their fascination too. The bartender was busy polishing glasses and looking studiously disinterested. One or two of those sitting at the bar had spun around on their stools to face the other way. Only a couple of them and the trio at the pool table were still watching the confrontation.

Deadly Wrong
by Victor J. Banis

Tom looked at Stanley, the briefest of glances, and nodded his head toward the door. "Go," he said. "Outside."

Stanley had been known to take umbrage when Tom, as was his way, barked orders at him, but just now he did not argue. There were times, after all, when it was best to follow orders, and he counted this one of them.

He went past Tom, but at the door he paused, waiting for Tom. Scared or not, he couldn't leave him there alone. You didn't just walk out on your partner, even a partner who was an asshole. Anyway, the asshole had probably just saved his life.

If Tom had any fears, however, they didn't show. He shot one quick, measuring glance around the room, letting it rest for a fleeting second on the threesome at the pool table, and, turning his back on Rack, strolled with complete nonchalance to the door. "Let's go," he said, pushing it open for Stanley to go out before him.

Outside, though, he moved faster, way fast, grabbing Stanley's arm and practically dragging him across the parking lot. "Get in the truck. The Ram."

"I've got my own—"

"Get in," Tom said angrily, shoving Stanley hard in the direction of the big red pick up. "Now, damn it."

Stanley did. Tom was behind the wheel and swinging the truck around in the parking lot before Stanley even had his seat belt fastened. His door swung wide, slammed shut as the car slewed. Behind them, Stanley had a glimpse of Rack and a quartet of leather clad bikers rushing out the bar's door.

Rack still had the pool cue in his hand and a couple of others were brandishing beer bottles.

Tom spun gravel exiting the lot. Tires squealed as they gripped the asphalt of the highway, skidding directly into the path of a silver SUV. It almost plowed into them and a horn blasted, the driver's angry face visible through the windshield that was uncomfortably close for a few seconds, until Tom had accelerated out of his way with everything the big Dodge had under the hood.

"So, what on earth," Stanley started to say.

"Are they coming after us?"

Stanley hadn't even thought of that. Who would be stupid enough to go after Tom Danzel, even five to one? Of course, they didn't know him. And people did do stupid things.

Stanley swung around in the seat to look out the rear window. The SUV, a Mercedes, had fallen behind but was quickly gaining on them again. With another blast of its horn, it swung around them and passed, going significantly more than the posted speed limit, and cut them off short. A hand, with one finger raised, waved out the window at them.

It's passing, though, had given Stanley a clear view of The Handle Bar and the parking lot, nobody pulling out of it. Rack and his buddies were just disappearing back inside.

"They lost interest, I guess."

"Good." Tom eased up on the gas and the pickup settled down to a less frantic speed. "I hate taking on a whole roomful."

"So," Stanley said, grinning despite himself and looking across the seat at the grim expression on Tom's face, "What

are you doing here, for Pete's sake, in Bear Mountain? And how on earth did you even find me, at that bar, of all places?"

"The wimp back at that cabin." He shot Stanley a frosty look. "Are you doing him?"

"Carl? Don't be silly. That never crossed my mind. Or his either, I'm quite sure. He's the victim. Well, actually he's the accused, but I think he's a victim too. And why aren't you in San Francisco? At work?"

"Rotation. Four days off. I took a fifth one."

"But—"

"Stanley, save the goddamn chatter, okay? I'm in no mood for any of your funny lines."

"Methinks—"

"And no poetry either."

"Okay," Stanley said. Actually, he was thinking of last night's moon, of Selene, the moon goddess, and a silent prayer he'd offered, only half consciously. Silly, of course. But it was a remarkable coincidence, wasn't it?

Only, Crazy Mary had told him, hadn't she, that Tom was on the way? Plus, she had called him Stanley's boyfriend.

Hmm. He wondered what her success rate was.

* * * *

Carl was there when they got back to the cabin, sitting on the sofa watching television. He jumped to his feet, startled by their sudden appearance, and clicked the set off.

"Get lost," Tom said unceremoniously, nodding his head toward the door, and added, somewhat incongruously and without a trace of politeness, "please."

Carl blinked and looked from Tom's face to Stanley's, and back to Tom's. Whatever he saw there apparently answered any questions he might have had.

"Sure, no problem," he said. He went past them, carefully, as if expecting one of them to punch him. They heard the front door close behind him.

Tom looked over his shoulder to make sure he really had gone. "Nobody else around?" he asked.

"No, I—"

"Good." Tom grabbed Stanley and pulled him close, kissed him hard, brutally in fact, his teeth drawing blood from Stanley's lower lip. His scent filled Stanley's nostrils, all sweat and sex—not the funky smell of spilled semen but the sharp animal tang of sex on the rise, like a stallion after a ready mare.

Tom took his mouth away, breathing raggedly, and began to rip Stanley's clothes off him—literally. A couple of shirt buttons flew across the room with loud pinging noises as Tom tore the shirt open.

"Whoa, whoa, Tarzan, I can do it," Stanley said, pushing Tom's hands away and laughing. He made little waving gestures. "Why don't you, you know, concentrate on your things, if we're going to get naked?"

Which Tom did, shedding his clothes in something near a frenzy, so that he was done before Stanley, was bouncing up and down on his toes in some kind of nervous jitterbug, his erection jutting out in front of him at full attention.

The sight of that slowed Stanley down some. He couldn't help it, he had to feast his eyes on it while he undressed.

He'd been so sure it had been forever denied him, and there it was, proud and tall. He got the shirt off, salvaging the rest of the buttons and making a mental note to find the two that had gone sailing—it was a favorite shirt.

He sat on the edge of the sofa to slip off sneakers and socks, stood to drop his trousers. Tom getting more impatient with each passing second—too impatient, as it turned out, to wait for Stanley to slip out of his bikini briefs.

Stanley had barely hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his bikini when Tom pushed his hands away, grabbed the briefs in both of his own hands and gave a mighty tug, ripping them apart so violently that Stanley half lost his balance and fell against him.

Stanley stared down in astonishment at the pieces of cloth that had a moment before been his underwear. He had never heard of anybody doing that. He had never, in fact, heard of anybody being that horny. It was scary. Still, a little ripple of excitement zigzagged down his spine, like an electrical current. Jesus! What had brought this on? *Is it me? He's so hot for me that he has to rip my clothes off?* The electric current went back up, and down again.

He'd have asked that very question, too, about the state of Tom's arousal. Had, in fact, opened his mouth to do so, but Tom was too horny as well for conversation. He lifted Stanley up by his waist and, tossing him over one broad shoulder like a bag of potatoes, strode quickly with him into the bedroom.

Which Stanley found so thrilling he almost came right there and then—until the point where Tom tossed him onto the bed, so unceremoniously that it knocked the breath out of

him, and before Stanley could mouth a protest, Tom had fallen on him, was kissing him again, with a desperate kind of intensity.

And, in a heartbeat, lifted Stanley's legs over his shoulders—which as Stanley well knew was almost certainly, if past experience with men was any indication, a prelude to fucking him in the ass—not, as it happened, one of Stanley's preferred activities. Not one he much cared for at all. Which he was sure he had made clear to Tom in the past.

"Actually, I don't—"

"You do now," Tom said, cutting off any further protests with another kiss, and breaking that just long enough to ask, "condoms?"

"Uh, I don't ... I wasn't expecting..."

"Fuck, you really are a pain in the ass, you know," Tom snarled. He jumped off the bed and strode back into the front room, where he'd left his clothes on the floor.

Stanley watched him bend down, affording a splendid view of his naked backside. Stanley remembered the description he'd once given his friend Chris: the kind of butt you want to bite into and pray for lockjaw. And let him explain that to the boys at the station.

He did so hope this wasn't going to be one of those wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am kind of experiences. He was mentally totting up a list of possible activities, many of them inspired by the view at hand.

Bending, Tom fumbled in a pocket of his trousers, straightened and came quickly back to the bedroom tearing

the foil wrapping off a condom as he came. A hot pink condom.

He came prepared? Stanley thought with another jolt of pleasure. *He came looking for me with a condom in his pocket? A hot pink condom.* Stanley's erection jumped with so much excitement that he forgot all about how he didn't like to take it this way. When Tom dropped to the bed and lifted Stanley's legs once again over his shoulders, Stanley cooperated fully. Sometimes acquiescence was the epitome of tact. Hadn't Thoreau said that? Or was that Xavier Hollander? He was sure he'd read it somewhere. It was easy to get philosopher's mixed up at a time like this.

Or, he forgot his aversion to this pastime right up to the moment when what felt like a red hot baseball bat was suddenly shoved unceremoniously up inside him. He'd have groaned, too, and probably would have lodged another protest, but Tom was kissing him again, hard, all the while driving that locomotive, like the Wabash Cannonball roaring into the station. Smoking as it went.

Well, Stanley thought resignedly, *it is Tom Danzel.* And he did love the man, for better or for worse. Besides, he had prayed for him last night, in a manner of speaking, hadn't he? He suppressed a moan and opened himself as wide as he could to accommodate Tom's determined thrusts. If you wanted to look at it philosophically, he told himself, if you couldn't handle what your man had, you might as well turn in your fairy wings, right? Although it did seem as if Tom had grown another six inches, and about as much in girth.

At least it went quickly, Tom kissing him ceaselessly and all the while pounding him fast and furious with that monster. The pain got less as Stanley got accustomed to it, and anyway, wow, this was the man of his dreams, the one who turned him on like nobody ever had before him, and whom he had thought sure he would never get into the sack with again, and here he was laying atop him, kissing him ardently, having at him to beat the band. Okay, the former was more enjoyable than the latter, to be sure. Still ... Stanley kissed back, and clung to Tom's broad shoulders, and decided that maybe, pain or no pain, he was in some kind of Carnal Heaven. *Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life ... Sing out, Jeanette.*

Nonetheless, it was a relief to realize the climax was near. Tom came with a series of grunts, burying himself to the hilt, his whole body going rigid while he jumped and spasmed inside Stanley. He lay without moving for a long moment; finally, with a long expulsion of breath, he slipped out and rolled onto the bed beside Stanley.

They lay like that for a couple of long moments, side by side, not speaking, not even looking at one another, just getting their breath back. Finally, Stanley said, "So, what was that?"

"Stanley, please don't talk until we're finished."

"Oh." Stanley had to think about that. "We're not finished?"

Tom sighed, turned on his side toward Stanley, putting one arm around Stanley's shoulder, and with his free hand, he reached down and took hold of Stanley's still rock hard erection. He began to stroke it.

"What are you doing?" Stanley blurted out, too surprised to remember the proscription against talking. This was one thing Tom, not so long ago, had said flat out that he was never going to do—and here he was doing it.

"Stanley..." in a warning tone.

"Okay," Stanley said, "I just—"

"Stanley." Sharper. The hand had stopped moving.

"I ... um. Uh huh." Stanley did the lock thing with his lips and nodded. The hand began to move again.

It wasn't the best hand job he'd ever had. For one thing, Tom was holding onto it like he thought it might fly away, and his movements, while steady and rhythmical, were determined more than excited. Stanley felt pretty sure this was the first time in his life Tom had ever jerked off another man. Felt pretty sure, too, that Tom personally was taking no pleasure from the act. The performance was altogether dutiful.

Still, Stanley was in such a delirium at this point that it was unlikely that any attention, however amateurish, wouldn't produce results, and Tom's did. It took little more than a minute of methodical stroking to bring him to a panting climax, his load spurting high into the air and cascading down over his belly, his thighs, and Tom's still moving hand.

Tom continued his rhythmic hand movements until it was clear the eruption was over. Then, wordlessly, he got up, walked into the bathroom, holding his hand out to the side as if afraid of letting his cum-stained hand come in contact with any other part of his body. Stanley heard him taking a noisy

pee. He came back wiping his hand on a towel, tossed it to Stanley and dropped back down on the bed again.

"Can I talk now?" Stanley asked.

"No."

"Like, what was this all about?"

"Stanley, I don't even want to think about what we just did, let alone talk about it."

"Oh." Stanley thought about that for a moment. "Well, then, what about, how did you get here?"

"My pickup," Tom said.

"Well, sure, I knew that, we drove here in it from The Handle Bar. Which, by the way, my car is still there. Libby's car, I mean. We'll have to go back for it. What I meant was, why are you here?"

"Why? To save your ass, why do you think?"

"And I'm glad you did, but, how did you even know I was here, in Bear Mountain?"

"I went by your apartment, and your boyfriend there—"

"Chris. He's just a friend."

"—He told me you were here, that you'd come up here to solve a murder. Jesus, Stanley," he rolled on his side, facing Stanley, "you know trouble zooms in on you like flies to a watermelon. You can't go around the block without somebody wanting to kick your ass, and then you go and come up here to solve a murder, without me to look out for you? Are you nuts?"

"You told me you didn't want to work on any cases with me in the future."

"That was in San Francisco, at the Department. I didn't know you were going to turn into a fucking Sam Spade private eye and go out on your own looking for shit to get into. And, when I found out, well, I must have set a land speed record driving here, I drove the whole night, flat out, and all I could think of the whole way was, somebody's gonna bust his head open—and I got here just in time, too. Do you have any idea what those guys were gonna do to you, if I hadn't showed up when I did? You'd have been lucky to get out of there alive."

Stanley had stopped following this narrative several words back. "You came to my apartment, in San Francisco? What for?"

"To deliver your goddamn mail. What in the fuck do you think I came to your apartment for, Stan?"

"Stanley." He sniffled. "Why are you so mad at me?"

Tom was a long time answering. He sighed again. "I'm not mad at you," he said more gently. "I was just scared, is all."

"For me?" Stanley stopped sniffing and grinned despite himself. Tom was worried about him?

"Plus, it wasn't true, what I said a minute ago, that wasn't the only thing I thought about, driving here. I thought about ... well, shit, if you want to know, I was thinking a lot about what I just did. That's why ... fuck, I was about to explode, thinking about nailing your ass. I could have pole vaulted in and out of the bar. You think that guy's pool cue was something, you should have seen the club I had in my pants. I could have cracked skulls with it."

Stanley giggled. "You were pretty hot. I've never had anybody actually rip my knickers off me before."

To his surprise, Tom laughed too. "Sorry about that. Was I too rough? I get like that sometimes. My nuts take over."

"No, it was great."

"I know you don't like getting fucked."

"I loved it," Stanley lied. "No, really, I did, it was hot. I mean, sure, I know I said I wasn't into, well, you know, that way, but that was by, you know, just anybody. It's different with you. I loved it, honest."

"Stanley you are the world's worst liar," Tom said. He reached a hand across and tousled Stanley's hair. "So, now, tell me about this murder of yours."

"Okay." Stanley hesitated briefly. He lifted his head and looked down the length of their naked bodies. "Uh, should we put our clothes on?"

"No."

"You want to discuss a murder while we're lying naked in bed?"

"Yes." A pause. "It'll save time. After you tell me all about your murder, I'm going to fuck you again, and you can show me how much you love it."

"Oh." After a moment, Stanley said, "You brought two condoms, to see me?"

"I brought a whole box. I keep them in the glove compartment. Don't get all excited."

"I'm not all excited." Tom gave him a look. "Well, a little bit excited. I've never been with a man wearing a hot pink rubber."

"They're not all hot pink. There's different colors."

"What else?" He thought for a moment. "Blue might be nice, wouldn't it, sort of like the Silver Surfer might wear? Or yellow. I don't know about green, though, I mean, the idea of it, being penetrated by a—"

"Stanley. The murder?"

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Chapter Fourteen

Tom listened without interruption while Stanley gave him the abridged version of the story Carl had told him. "I might have left out a detail here or there," he said when he'd finished. "And there's other stuff I'll have to fill you in on eventually."

"Doesn't matter. I just wanted to get your version. I'll need to hear it from him anyway." He paused. "So," he said. The syllable hung on the air, like a dominant chord awaiting resolution.

"Carl's probably still around. You want me..." Stanley sat up in bed, but Tom turned toward him and shoved him forcefully back to the mattress.

"We have unfinished business," he said. "Stay here."

He got up and went back to his clothes, fumbled in the pocket for another foil wrapped package. Stanley got another look at some of his favorite scenery.

"Jesus, I'm starved," Tom said, coming back to the bed and rubbing his belly on the way. "I haven't eaten since yesterday. I only stopped once on the drive, for gas."

A bit disappointed, Stanley said, "There's a coffee shop about three blocks away, if you want—"

"I've already told you what I want." Tom dropped to the bed again.

"Oh." Stanley watched him open the foil package, deftly slip on a condom. "Green? Didn't I say...?"

"What? You don't want this?" Tom took his latex clad erection in hand, brandishing it like a billy club.

"Actually, it's not exactly green, is it?" Stanley said brightly. "More like chartreuse, is what I'd say. It goes with the curtains." Which, now that he gave them a quick glance, were brown and white checked. He turned on his side, his back to Tom. That way, he figured at least he wouldn't have to see an acid green member preparing to enter his anal cavity, like a missile from Mars. "Let's try it like this."

Tom scooted up behind him, already positioning himself, but, just when he had begun to push his way inside, he paused. "Is this okay?" he asked.

"Totally," Stanley said, and pushed himself back against that enormous invader, suppressing the urge to moan loudly as he felt it enter. Oof. Relax the muscles, he chanted a silent mantra: uhh, relax the muscles, uhh, relax the muscles uhh, relax...

Tom continued to push inward, but at the same time, he reached around and took a firm hold of Stanley's cock, which quickly sprang to full erection. Stanley turned his head, meaning to say something encouraging, and Tom kissed him. Hotly, but not as brutally as he had done before.

Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all. Uhh ... relax...

* * * *

It wasn't. It wasn't exactly an unmitigated pleasure, but it was very romantic, especially the fact that Tom so obviously wanted him, and so badly. And, if this was the way Tom wanted him ... well, when you asked a favor of the Gods ...

Nevertheless, he made a mental note: have a chat with Miss Selene next moonlit night. Probably she thought this was all a big chuckle. Those old Greeks had some funny ideas. Probably they did it like this all the time on the moon.

Afterward, they showered. Not together, as Stanley would have liked. Tom went first, alone, without inviting Stanley to come along, and Stanley was shy about suggesting they might do it *a deux*, so he waited until Tom had finished, was toweling himself dry, before he took his turn. He bathed quickly, half afraid he'd come out of the bathroom to discover Tom had vanished. Tom had a habit of doing that.

He didn't on this occasion, though. He was still there when Stanley finished in the bathroom and came back to retrieve his scattered clothes. The briefs, he decided, were unsalvageable, but he found that a meager price to pay for a major matinee performance.

Tom was fully dressed by this time, standing at the window, looking out. "He's just sitting out there," he said. "On the deck."

"Who?" With what had just happened, Stanley had forgotten Carl altogether. "Oh, you mean Carl."

"Is that his name, the kid? You think he's been sitting there the whole time? I hope he wasn't, like, listening. Or peeking through the window. While we were, you know."

Stanley started to say, "While you were banging me," and thought better of it. Tom could be very funny when it came to talking about stuff like this. Probably even more so knowing someone had been just outside, listening or even watching. He had a quick, naughty image of Carl, peeking through the

curtains, hand in his jeans ... but, no, surely not, why would Carl even be interested in watching two guys go at it? Carl was straight, wasn't he? Mostly so, anyway.

Of course, if you looked at it that way, so was Tom. Mostly. So he said, repeatedly.

Stanley came to look out the window over Tom's shoulder. Carl was slumped down in the porch swing. He held something in his hand, staring at it, looking totally dejected. At the distance, looking through a somewhat dusty window, Stanley couldn't tell what Carl was looking at so stonily.

"I don't think he has anywhere else to go. Anywhere he can go, I mean. Part of his parole. He's supposed to hang around here."

Tom turned from the window to look at Stanley. "With you, you mean? You're sure you're not poking him? Or the other way around? He's kind of a cute little guy, in a wimpy way. If he cleaned himself up a little."

"You think so?" Stanley said, and then, quickly, "don't be silly, that never entered my mind." Which was almost true, and he didn't think it would do any of them good to admit that fleeting moment of interest. Besides, he hadn't *really* been interested. It was just an idea that went as quickly as it came. Carl wasn't that cute.

Tom seemed to accept the assessment. He shrugged and gave one of his grunts, which could mean just about anything. "I'm hungry. Let's go get a burger."

"I'm supposed to be babysitting. Plus he probably hasn't eaten either and there's nothing in the fridge. Can we take him with us?"

"Probably a good idea. I need to hear the story from him. This is as good a time as any."

"And I've still got details to fill you in on. Family, therapists, all kinds of stuff."

"Let me get clear first on what he has to tell me, then we'll look at the rest of it, okay?"

When they came outside, Carl gave a little start and slipped the photograph he'd been staring at into a shirt pocket. He looked puppy-dog pleased to be asked—told, really, since Tom made it more of an order than an invitation—to come with them.

At Tom's request, Carl narrated his story while they walked, not much different from the version Stanley had given. Tom listened mostly in silence, asking an occasional question, nodding his head from time to time. Carl only stuttered twice, when he was talking about the physical altercation with Donnie.

"Why are you talking funny?" Tom asked him abruptly.

Mister Sensitive, Stanley thought, and considered giving his gorgeous butt a good swift kick, just on general principles.

Carl seemed not to resent it, though. "I s-stutter when I get nervous."

"You're nervous, talking to me?"

"Y-yes, sir."

If Tom found that surprising, he let it go, only shrugged and said, "Oh," and then, as if that subject were concluded, "go on, the two of you were fighting over your pecker." He actually managed to make that sound matter-of-fact, to Stanley's surprise. "And...?"

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Carl started off stuttering badly, paused, took a deep breath, and started over, speaking normally. Tom nodded his head, apparently indicating approval, though of what, Stanley wasn't altogether sure.

Walking slightly behind them on the narrow sidewalk, Stanley had the impression they were bonding pretty well. He wondered about that. Maybe Carl saw in Tom the father he'd never really had. Stanley studied Tom while they walked.

He could see it, the father figure thing. Sometimes what he felt for Tom was much like that, with the added dimension of sexual attraction, major sexual attraction, thrown into the mix. Tom's evident masculinity, his solidity—it was easy to find yourself relying on him, leaning on him. He'd observed a long time back, Tom would be an easy man to fall in love with, a hard man to love. In his experience since then, both had proven true. He remembered something somebody else had said to him years before: one end of a dick brought pleasure, the other grief. That was certainly true, too, wasn't it?

Carl had finished his story. "You realize, both of you," Tom said, looking over his shoulder at Stanley and to his side at Carl, "that if you're right, about the way it came down, then we really are talking murder, and not just an accident. Somebody came along after you left, did this kid in, left you to take the blame. Which leaves us with the question of why. Two whys, actually. Why kill this kid, and why set you up for it? You got any enemies, Carl?"

Carl shook his head, looking bewildered. "Not really. Nobody I can think of. I mean, there's lots of people don't like

me, I guess. Hell, that's just about everybody. But I don't know who'd have that kind of major hard on for me. I don't owe anybody any money, or you know, that kind of shit."

"Haven't been porking somebody's wife?"

"N-no. I haven't been p-porking anybody. Not in a long time." Tom gave him a kind of puzzled look, and said nothing.

"Maybe," Stanley said, "it really wasn't about Carl. Maybe they just wanted to kill Donnie, and Carl was a convenient scapegoat."

"Okay, then, who hated this Donnie that badly?"

Carl thought for a moment. "Same answer. Nobody liked him, except me, I guess, but, wanting him dead? Jesus, half the guys in town have lost their fall back fuck. They didn't like him but they had no complaints about his asshole. Or his mouth. Depending on who it was. Or their mood, probably. Donnie wasn't picky."

"Maybe somebody who didn't want people to know he was the fall back?" Tom said. "Somebody poking him on the sly?"

Carl shrugged. It was, Stanley thought, almost an imitation of Tom's frequent shrugs. Had he always had that habit, or had he picked it up in the brief time he'd spent with Tom?

"Could be. There were lots of married men got a piece of the action from time to time. One or two of them, the way he told it, were pretty prominent around town. Donnie hinted at some of them, but he never told me about anybody by name. He wasn't a blabber mouth. Course, I knew about some of them because it was pretty obvious. Rack, for instance. Donnie talked about it, but, hell, that was no secret. Rack told

everybody about it himself, used to make a regular joke about Donnie having the best pussy in town."

"Best pussy, huh?" Tom had to think about that for a moment, screwing up his face. "Maybe one of the closet cases, then. Somebody didn't want anybody to know. Maybe Donnie threatened to name a name. Or, he asked for money to keep his mouth shut."

"I don't know. Doesn't sound like Donnie."

"It's happened before. Somebody gets tired of being used, mistreated, decides to stand up for himself. You want to play, you got to pay."

"Donnie? I can't see him blackmailing anybody either."

"Or, then, maybe he didn't threaten blackmail, maybe just, somebody got nervous, thought he might tell. Decided to eliminate the possibility. Say, someone saw what came down with the two of you that night, something clicked. The perfect opportunity to eliminate the danger before it became an actual threat. Whoever it was didn't have to have any real grudge against you, he just didn't much give a shit what happened to you. Look at it from the killer's point of view. You're a, well..."

"A loser," Carl supplied without embarrassment, matter-of-factly.

"Well, I guess somebody might put it like that. But, the thing is, if it was an accident, the way they staged it, they knew they weren't really putting you into a whole lot of hot water. It would just be a manslaughter rap. You'd get a token sentence at worst, maybe nothing. No major harm done."

"Except to Donnie," Stanley said.

"Yeah," Carl agreed. "Except to Donnie."

* * * *

After they had eaten, Tom wanted to see the local police chief. They strolled to the station. The same officer was on duty at the counter. He seemed less amused by Tom's presence than he had been by Stanley's. He was gone only a minute before he came back for them. They left Carl waiting on one of the wooden chairs, and went in together to see Chief Burger.

"Seems like an awful lot of interest on the part of San Francisco PD," the Chief said when the introductions were over. "In a minor case a long ways away from San Francisco."

"This isn't official SFPD business," Tom said. "It's more a personal thing. Family business."

The Chief looked from Tom to Stanley and back. "You two are related?"

"Brothers."

"Different last names?"

"Mom remarried." Tom's face was utterly expressionless. Stanley looked down at the floor. It was best he not say anything. Tom was right. He was a lousy liar.

The Chief handed Tom back his ID. "Well, I can't stop you from looking around, Detective."

"Inspector."

"Right. Inspector. Keep in mind, though, like you said, this isn't official SFPD business, or jurisdiction. And if you should happen to come across anything that looks at all relevant, I'll expect you to bring it straight to me."

"Absolutely," Tom said, and Stanley nodded enthusiastically.

"You carrying?"

Stanley shook his head no. Tom tugged his jacket open to show the Sig Sauer in its shoulder holster.

"Nice gun," the Chief said. He held out a hand. "You mind?"

Tom removed the Sig carefully from the holster, handed it butt end across the desk. The Chief looked it over carefully, nodding.

"We still use Smith and Wesson," the Chief said, handing the Sig back. "Magnum loads. Wouldn't mind one of those, though." He frowned and added, "You're just a private citizen here. I'll expect you to remember that."

"It's remembered," Tom said, slipping the Sig back into its holster. "Uh, if I could ask a favor?"

"I'll consider it." Warily.

"The crime scene?"

"Not much to see."

"Still," Tom persisted. The two of them engaged in a staring match.

Tom won. The Chief got up, stepped out of the room, was back in a minute with a uniform in tow.

"Sergeant Wooster," The Chief introduced him. "He was one of the investigating officers. He can show you where the body was found."

After a brief hesitation, he added, "And answer any questions."

* * * *

The Chief was right, there was really nothing to see. Whatever imprint the body might have left in the sand had long since been erased with wind and rain and passing feet.

Officer Wooster pointed at a large rock, maybe a foot and a half wide, jutting up some four or five inches above the surface of the sand, probably two or three times that much buried beneath the surface. Rain and lake waves had washed it clean of any residual blood stains.

"That's where he fell, hit his head on that sucker. Wouldn't have taken much of a fall to crack your skull." He took a tin of Skoal from his back pocket, deposited a sizable chaw of tobacco into his left cheek.

Carl looked around. There was a metal bench just a few feet away. He went and sat on it, got up, kind of danced around for a moment, as if he were struggling with someone.

"He fell about here," he said, pointing to a spot a couple of feet away from the rock.

Wooster looked about to argue, but Tom cut him off. "Was there an autopsy?"

That got him a blank look. "Not so far as I know."

"Law says there's got to be an autopsy in any questionable death."

"Nothing questionable about this one. What would be the point?"

"To determine the murder weapon?"

"The weapon? That there is the weapon." The officer pointed again at the rock.

"Okay, let's say it was. Did anyone take that in for analysis? Match it up to the wound. Check blood patterns, stuff like that?"

"That rock?" Disbelief made the policeman grimace. "Hell, that rock must weigh a hundred pounds. More than that. Two hundred, most likely. We'd need a backhoe to take that anywhere. What for, anyway? We know how the kid died."

"Do we?"

"Sure we do." Wooster pointed at Carl. "So does he, too. I was the one questioned him that night. He was clear enough then about what happened. Tell him, Carl. Tell him the way you told it to me."

Carl avoided his angry eyes. "I'm n-not sure anymore," he said.

"Well, I sure as hell am," Wooster said. He spat a powerful stream of tobacco juice, just missing Carl's foot with it, and turned his back on them to march away.

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Chapter Fifteen

It had begun to rain, only a light shower. For Tom and Stanley, rainless in San Francisco since the previous winter, it was pleasant to walk in the drizzle. Carl acted like he was in danger of washing away, skipping from overhang to overhang, shelter to shelter, almost surely getting as wet for his trouble as they were without it.

They stopped by Libby's shop, and Stanley introduced Tom to Libby. "Gosh," she said, "we've got two of San Francisco's elite on the case, this must be a first for Bear Mountain."

"Not exactly on the case," Tom said, "I'm just helping Stanley look around."

"Even so," she said, not at all discouraged. She looked Tom up and down avidly and gave Stanley a sly smile and a wink. Stanley maintained an expression of utter innocence. Tom blushed and pretended he hadn't seen the wink. Surprisingly, Carl blushed too.

"And, Stanley, look what I've found." Libby took a battered felt hat from a shelf behind the cash register and plopped it onto Stanley's head. It sat atop his crown, patently too small for his head. "It was a prop, from the school play," she told the others. "'The Inspector Calls.' Stanley was already playing a detective."

"Umm. Yes, playing," Stanley said, before Tom could.

Tom was regarding him solemnly, however. "You look like Stan Laurel," he said, and surprised Stanley no end by

adding, in a surprisingly good imitation of Oliver Hardy, "'This is another fine mess you've gotten us into, Stanley.'"

Will this man never cease surprising me? Stanley wondered, laughing with the others.

They were on their way out the door when Libby said, to her brother, "Oh, Carl, Mom's ring is missing. The amethyst."

"And?" His look and his voice were wary.

"I just wondered if you knew anything about it."

"You're accusing me of stealing Mom's ring? What would I do with that dumb thing?"

"I don't know. And I wasn't accusing you, just asking. She says it's missing."

"Probably she put it someplace stupid, and forgot. Remember that time she put the cast iron skillet in the freezer? Tell Hannah to look in the freezer."

"You're probably right," Libby said. "She is getting kooky."

"I didn't take it," Carl said again.

"Okay, okay, I believe you," she said, but his eyes and his mouth continued to look sulky.

* * * *

From Libby's shop, they stopped at the one motel on the main drag, The Mountain Inn. "I'm going to get a room here," Tom said when they reached it.

"Hey, you don't have to worry about me," Carl said. "About your privacy, I mean. You know, whatever you guys want to do, it won't bother me any. There's plenty of room at Libby's place. I've got my own bedroom, too. Or, if that's too close, I mean, you guys being..." He caught a frosty look from Tom

and bit back whatever he had been about to say. "Listen, I can take my sleeping bag and use the back deck, I've slept out there before, plenty of times, won't bother me. It's nice out there, tell the truth."

"No need," Tom said. "I'm not the pajama party type. I like my own space."

Which, sadly, Stanley knew to be true. In all their previous experiences, Tom had only slept over once, and on that occasion he'd been drugged, so it was more like he'd passed out. Still, it was a disappointment. After the afternoon's blazing festivities, he had been hoping there might still be some embers burning.

He and Carl waited outside the lobby, neither of them speaking, while Tom went in and registered for a room, collected a key, came back out. They walked without conversation back to the cabin, Carl still dodging raindrops.

Tom didn't even come inside with them. He stopped out front, opened the door of his pickup and paused with one foot on the running board to give Stanley a long look. Stanley hoped for a moment maybe Tom was going to kiss him.

"I'll be by in the morning," Tom said, and drove off in the Dodge Ram.

No kisses. No scorching interludes. No hand jobs. *Wait till I talk to that Moon Woman*, Stanley thought. He hated when things were done half-assed. If you couldn't rely on a Greek goddess, who could you trust?

"Nice guy," Carl said, looking longingly after the pick up.

Stanley had the impression Carl had kind of been hoping too that Tom would spend the night. What was that all about,

anyway? Hoping maybe to be invited to join in the party when Tom and Stanley got things going?

Possibly, Stanley thought, Carl was a bit gayer than he admitted, even to himself. Probably, as a matter of fact. If he'd been in a more gay-active place, like San Francisco, he most likely would have come out a long time ago, but Bear Mountain probably didn't offer a lot of inducement to a closeted, maybe semi-gay young man.

Stanley found himself wondering briefly about how Tom would feel about a threesome. That hadn't occurred to him before. But, for some guys, a group party did make things less threatening. The old circle jerk mentality familiar to many adolescent boys. Safety in numbers. Sometimes two birds in the hand were better than whatever in the bushes.

Somehow, though, now that he thought about it, he didn't see Carl as the one to make Tom feel more at ease. And Tom didn't strike him as the circle jerk type.

"I guess," Stanley said aloud, heading for the cabin.

Once inside, a slight awkwardness descended, neither of them seeming quite sure what to do with themselves or one another. Stanley had the impression that Carl was considering putting himself on offer again, but aggressively pursuing some action wasn't really Carl's style. He'd be more the type to drop hints, broad ones, and hope somebody picked up on them.

Hints like taking off his shirt and draping it over the arm of one chair. "Guess I'll crash," he said, yawning and stretching, posing just long enough to let Stanley have a good look at some bare flesh, just in case.

"Yeah, me too," Stanley said, taking no more than a brief glance. Which was enough, though, to tell him he'd been right. Carl was one of those guys who did look better with the clothes off. Chest lean but nicely sculpted, nice man-titties, belly flat, almost concave. For sure, no flesh to spare.

Stanley wondered briefly if Carl was going to take his jeans off too, as a further hint. That might be interesting. Maybe even tempting. Stanley could tell from the bulge he showed that Carl was definitely not Pencil Dick. If he was really meaning to promote something, that would be one way of upping the ante.

Disappointingly, Carl left the jeans on, headed to his own bedroom. Maybe he'd changed his mind. Or, maybe he was just too inexperienced at seduction. Most likely the latter, Stanley concluded.

"See you in the morning," Stanley called after him, mostly relieved that things hadn't gone any further. After the earlier session with Tom, he felt sure Carl could be nothing but a disappointment. Which was no discredit to him. Probably anybody would be.

When the bedroom door had closed behind Carl, Stanley went to the shirt he had left behind. One eye on the door to the bedroom, he slipped his fingers into the shirt's pocket, pulled out the photograph Carl had been staring at earlier.

It was a picture of Donnie McIntosh, well worn, the corners bent down. A sweet looking Donnie, no nudity, no spread cheeks or wagging wienie. Just an innocent looking kid, smiling shyly for a camera.

He put the snapshot carefully back in Carl's pocket.

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Chapter Sixteen

Stanley woke in the morning with a start. At first, eyes still closed, he couldn't think what had wakened him. Then it came to him: the aroma of fresh brewed coffee, wafting on the air.

He opened one eye, peeked at the window. The morning sun was just casting an apricot bloom over the distant silhouette of Sugarloaf. Early morning, then, not quite dawn. He thought about going back to sleep, but the scent of coffee was altogether too tempting.

Carl was already up, seated at the kitchen table. He smiled brightly when Stanley padded into the kitchen and, jumping up, quickly set a steaming cup in front of him. Took a carton of half and half from the refrigerator and set that on the table alongside a bowl full of sugar cubes.

Stanley added a generous splash of cream and two cubes of sugar to the cup, thought for a moment, and added a third cube, stirring wordlessly. He wondered if Carl was usually up this early, and this well organized. Somehow he rather doubted it. Plus, the morning before, he had been downright surly, hadn't he, and this morning he was positively aglow.

Stanley wasn't real big on conversation early in the morning, though. He had spent a lot of the night reliving yesterday's wrestling match with Tom. The reality was, he sort of shared Tom's feeling about sleeping over. He was never entirely comfortable himself sleeping with someone else in the bed. Probably, it was what Libby had said, about living

alone. After two years, it did eventually ruin you for living with anybody else.

Which meant he had six months to get things settled with Tom—which seemed unlikely. More likely, he would spend the rest of his lifetime alone on an increasingly vast mattress. Grumbling about its emptiness and uncomfortable when someone else filled it.

Still, last night he'd found himself wishing Tom were in the bed with him. This had resulted in lots of tossing and turning, and resorting to relieving himself twice in between tosses and turns. He'd awakened feeling drained and cranky.

"I can scramble some eggs," Carl said, pouring himself a coffee and leaning against the kitchen counter.

Like with a trick, after a first nighter, Stanley thought, but did not say. It was generally what Stanley himself did for the ones who stayed overnight. A good way to send them off after you'd gotten them off.

Only, of course, he and Carl had not tricked, and Stanley's "off" had been a do-it-yourself project.

"This is okay. Tom'll want breakfast when he gets here. We can go out then."

A bit more awake after a couple of sips of coffee, it occurred to Stanley to wonder where those eggs had come from, anyway. They hadn't been in the refrigerator the day before. Which was to say, unless Mother Hen was making deliveries, Carl must have slipped out during the night, or very early this morning, for supplies.

He gave Carl a once over. He looked different, too. He'd taken some trouble with his appearance. His hair was washed

and neatly combed, and he was wearing clean jeans, snugger than yesterday's pair, and a body shirt that showed off perky little nipples on his slender chest. He looked far better than he had the day before.

Dolling up for me, Stanley wondered.

"What time do you think he'll be by?" Carl asked, rather too innocently, and added, "Tom."

A light bulb went off in Stanley's head. Oh, boy, he'd barely gotten Tom into the man sack again and already he had competition? And the minute the thought had popped into his head, he knew it was right: Carl was on the make for Tom. Probably not consciously and maybe not sexually, although Stanley didn't doubt for a moment Carl would bend over in a heartbeat if he thought that would get the big guy's attention.

And maybe it would, Stanley thought with a sense of dismay. Especially now that heterosexual Tom had discovered the joys of butt fucking a member of his own gender. For some guys, once the joy was discovered, one butt was as good as another, and never too many. And, Stanley saw when Carl went to open the refrigerator and bent down to peer inside, Carl's wasn't without a certain muffin-ish charm.

"I can fix something," Carl said, head inside the refrigerator, like Aladdin contemplating his treasure trove.

"He'll prefer to eat out," Stanley said. "I know Tom." And added, just in case he hadn't made things clear, "Quite well."

* * * *

He did not give Tom time to consider the possibilities, though. Best not leave things to chance. He heard the big Ram drive up and by the time Tom had clambered down from the cab, Stanley was already on the deck to greet him.

"I'm starving," he said without preamble, "let's go."

"Good morning to you, too," Tom said, surprised. Carl had come out behind Stanley, hesitated in the doorway, looked about to say something. Probably, Stanley thought, about to offer to whip those eggs to a froth. Or something.

"Come on," Stanley said, "We'll walk. It'll work up an appetite." He started off briskly in the direction of The Wagon Wheel. Tom shrugged and fell into step beside him. One thing Stanley was confident of: Tom always had an appetite. Carl had no choice but to trail after them, looking somewhat disappointed. Stanley felt a pang of guilt. The poor guy needed an older man to take him in tow. It was probably the very best thing that could happen to him.

Some other older man, however. Better for everybody, surely. Later, he'd sit down and see if he could make up a list of prospects. Which, considering his acquaintances in Bear Mountain, would be a very short list. Maybe he knew some skiers back in San Francisco who might like a mountain weekend. He thought of his friends in the bar circuit. Hmm. The most he could see any of them sliding down was a barstool.

They'd gotten within a half block of the restaurant when Libby's beat up van went by in the opposite direction. She honked and hung a U-turn and pulled to the curb beside them.

"Breakfast," Stanley said. "Join us?"

"Sounds good. I was coming to suggest the very same thing."

"I could have scrambled some eggs," Carl said.

"I had my heart set on pancakes," Stanley said. "If I'd known you did pancakes..."

"I don't. Just scrambled eggs."

"Ah. I guess we did the right thing then."

As if to settle the matter, Tom said, "Pancakes sound good."

* * * *

June was there to greet them and lead them to a big corner table, set off somewhat from the other diners. They made small talk until June had taken their orders—blueberry pancakes for Stanley; the three-three-three for Tom, which was three pancakes, three eggs and three strips of bacon; a bran muffin for Libby; and scrambled eggs for Carl.

"So," Libby said when June had left, directing her question to Tom, "any progress?"

"Not much," Tom said. "There isn't a lot to work with. The police did no autopsy, made no effort to bring the rock in or do any kind of comparison to the victim's head wounds."

"Donnie," Carl said. "His name was Donnie."

"Pretty sloppy police work, wouldn't you say?" Libby asked.

Tom grunted. "California law says that so long as the Medical Examiner is convinced that death was accidental, no formal autopsy is required. They had no reason to think it was anything but what it appeared. And, these guys don't deal

with a lot of homicides. Plus, autopsies cost money. If a jurisdiction has good reason to avoid one, they generally will."

"We could probably demand an autopsy," Libby said. "It's not really too late yet, is it?"

"We couldn't. His family could." He looked around the table.

"Forget that," Stanley said. "Even if we could get the mother sobered up enough to consider it, she's convinced that the police got it right."

Tom sighed. "Probably wouldn't do much good anyway. Think about it. Suppose somebody cracked Donnie's head open with, say, just as a for instance, a cue stick."

"It would leave a different wound from a rock, wouldn't it?" Libby asked. "An autopsy ought to confirm that."

"It would. Until the killer rolled Donnie over, banged his head down on the rock, to make it look like an accident, and erased any evidence of an earlier blow. Which is what, if Carl here is right, has to be what happened. And at that point, the head wound would most likely match up to the rock. It would be impossible to say he was struck with some other weapon first. See what I'm saying?"

Libby nodded. "So there's really no way to prove how Donnie was killed."

"That's where an autopsy could have come in useful. It's hard to believe a guy could just fall, hit his head, and bash it in completely. My own thinking is, it would take more force than that."

"But the Medical Examiner must have taken that into consideration," Libby said.

"Carl says they were fighting, he could have thrown the kid down pretty hard. That's seeing it from the ME's point of view. But, there's something else to consider—two things, really. First, suppose we convinced the police to order an autopsy, and the results showed that the death couldn't have come from just falling on a rock. Meaning, someone picked the guy's head up and banged it down a time or two, hard, on that rock."

"Which would clear Carl, wouldn't it?" Stanley said.

"Or maybe get him charged with murder instead of involuntary manslaughter."

"I didn't do that," Carl said.

"They'd have to prove that you did, and without a witness to the actual murder, that would be difficult. But, here's where the lack of autopsy could work in your favor. If you did go to trial, a good lawyer could probably get some mileage out of that fact. Maybe even get the case tossed. So, all in all, we're better letting that dog sleep." He looked around the table, at the dispirited expressions of the others. "My humble opinion, anyway."

"You must have known Donnie," Stanley said to Libby.

"What did you think of him?"

Libby thought about that for a moment. "He was okay. Kind of pathetic, really. I think there was a sweet kid lost somewhere in that wilderness of the soul, like, oh, I don't know. Is there such a thing as innocent depravity? That's how I would describe him."

They were silent as June brought their orders. When she had gone again, Tom said, "This kid—"

"Donnie," Carl said again.

"Donnie. Carl says he took on guys all the time." Tom dug into his food with gusto. He really did like pancakes. Stanley made a mental note. You could buy mixes in the supermarket; how difficult could they be? If you couldn't trust a Greek goddesses or Aunt Jemima...

"Any guy, anytime, anywhere," Carl said, unenthusiastically pushing his scrambled eggs about his plate with a fork. "That was his motto. He made, you know, like a j-joke of it."

"Okay, but, here's one thing I wonder. Where? I mean, this is a little town. So, I can see some back seat action, hell, even an alley."

"Behind the restrooms, sometimes," Carl said. "Late at night."

Tom frowned through a mouthful of bacon. "Okay, wherever. But, if he was doing that many guys, that often, they couldn't all be behind the john, or parked along the local lovers' lane, or they'd need to take a number and get in line. He must have been taking some of them someplace."

"Not home," Stanley said, briefly filling them in on his visit the day before to Amanda McIntosh. He took the purloined photos from his pocket and handed them to Carl, who barely glanced at them and passed them on. Libby wiped her fingers delicately on a blue and white napkin, wincing at the first one.

"That's Rack," Carl said. "The long skinny d-dick." He looked up and met Tom's eyes, and blushed. "Not that I've s-seen it, I mean. It's just, Donnie talked about it, said it was

like a pencil. He thought it was funny. Didn't stop him t-taking the guy on whenever, though."

Libby paused at the picture of Carl. "Are there any of you," she asked him, "like the others?" She tapped a fingernail on one of the nudes.

"No. I never, we d-didn't," he stammered and then, somewhat angrily, said, "but, what if there were? What difference would that make? Hell, what if we were doing it regularly? So what?"

"Carl, darling, you must know it wouldn't make any difference to me."

"What business would it be of anyone's? Mom wouldn't—"

"No, she wouldn't. But Hannah, that's a different story. And, really, now that I think of it, I'm not so sure about Mother, either."

"They tolerate you," he said, not looking at her, his voice sullen.

"It's different with a boy, I think. Especially with you. No, don't get all huffy with me, think about it. You know how Mother is about you. The sun rises and sets in your backside so far as she's concerned. If she thought you were gay..."

"I didn't say I was."

"I know you didn't, you were just defending Donnie, and I admire you for it. But, I don't think your mother would, and I'm quite sure Hannah wouldn't. And, yes, she tolerates me, barely. But, she's a woman. Women feel differently about a gay woman and a gay man. They don't like to think that any man could really prefer a member of his own sex to one of theirs. It disturbs them on some fundamental level, I believe.

As for a woman, well," she shrugged. "It's just that much less competition, isn't it?"

Listening in silence to this exchange, Stanley thought, not for the first time in his life, how surprising it was that, in a family with one gay member, it was so often that gay one who had the most sense. He didn't know why that should be so. Maybe growing up gay, with all the heartache and the soul-searching that it entailed, forced you to see things more clearly. It was one of those things that either destroyed you, he supposed, or made you stronger. Obviously, it had made Libby stronger. Hannah was strong too, but in a different, an unbending way. The kind of strength that was really, in its own way, a weakness. Libby was life-strong, as he saw it. And Carl, well, he was like something that hadn't quite jelled yet, and it was hard to say with any certainty what shape he'd take when he did.

Libby passed the photos on to Tom. He looked at them and grimaced. Clearly, pictures of naked men were not his thing.

"Even if you're right about who this is," he said, indicating the picture of the pencil-thin dick, "that's going to be a tough ID to make in court."

"I'll bet it was Rack who killed him," Carl said with a vehemence unusual for him.

"What makes you think?" Tom asked, but Carl only gave one of his imitation-Tom shrugs.

"He's a real bastard."

"He the one at the biker bar?" Tom asked. Stanley nodded. "Yeah, he's an asshole, for sure," Tom agreed. "That doesn't make him a killer, though. If asshole was a crime, there

wouldn't be enough prisons. What?" Stanley had barely suppressed a giggle.

"Oh, I was just thinking how that would play out in court." To change the subject, he tapped a finger on the picture of Miller in his Queen Anne chair. "This one is Donnie's therapist, Mister Miller. M. H. Miller, it says on his door."

"Michael," Libby said. "Michael Howard Miller. You're sure?"

"Absolutely. He admitted it."

Carl, who had hardly glanced at the pictures before, snatched that one out of Tom's hand and glared at it. "His own fucking doctor?"

"He's not actually a doctor," Stanley said, but Carl didn't seem to hear him.

"That's sick. His doctor was getting his knob waxed, like half the sleaze bags in town?"

"Fraid so," Stanley said. He told them briefly of his visit to Miller's office, and how he had identified him.

Libby's mouth was hanging open. "But, isn't that, I don't know, illegal?"

"Probably," Stanley said. "Unethical, certainly. If Donnie's mother wanted to file a complaint with, whoever, the state bar, there must be an association that licenses these people. But, same problem as before. First, you'd have to get her dried out enough to comprehend, and then she'd have to care enough to want to do something about it, and I have my doubts on both scores."

"But Miller confessed to you, you said."

"That would never hold up in a court. I was bluffing, and sooner or later he'd realize that. He'd just deny it. His word

against mine. We'd never be able to identify his dick, same as with Pencil Dick—Rack, I mean. I can't see a judge letting us show their wienies to the jury. And the chair? All they'd have to do is bring in two or three chairs of the same style. When you get down to it, we've got no real evidence that it was Miller in those pictures."

"It was him, all right," Carl said, convinced. "Something Donnie said—he didn't actually say he was blowing his doctor, but he kind of hinted. The bastard."

"Well, saying it is," Tom said, "what about this doctor for a suspect? He looks good for it, doesn't he?"

"He certainly wouldn't want it known, what they were doing," Libby said. "He's married, has a couple of children. And he's part of the country club set. He'd have a lot to lose."

"That's plenty of motive," Tom said.

"He insists he didn't do it, though," Stanley said. "I know, I know, they always deny it. But, oddly, I believed him. I think he was deeply mortified, sick about it, about what he'd done."

"Not sick enough," Carl said vehemently. "The prick."

"Maybe not, but he sure looked unhappy. It was an ashamed kind of unhappy, though, not angry, if you know what I mean. Not the kind of angry that drives you to bash somebody's head in."

"Spur of the moment?" Libby suggested.

"Maybe," Tom said. "For sure, somebody did. Somebody bashed the kid's head in." He looked around the table, settled his gaze on Carl.

"It wasn't me." Carl repeated. "I told you how it happened."

June came then to refill coffee cups and carry away plates. Tom had cleaned his thoroughly; the others had barely touched their food. When she had gone, they sat in silence for a moment, everyone lost in his own thoughts.

"I just thought of something," Carl said to Tom. "What you said, earlier..."

"When?"

"About where they did it. Donnie had a place," he said. "A cave, up in the hills. He went there sometimes, to get away from shit."

"Would he have taken tricks there?" Tom asked.

Carl had to think about that. "Maybe. I don't know. It was more like, you know, his own private space. He might've, though. Maybe R-Rack. He had a thing for Rack. I don't know why. The dude's not all that good looking, you ask me."

"Oh, I don't know," Stanley said without thinking, "He's awfully..." Tom's face remained expressionless but Stanley saw something flicker in his eyes, there and gone in an instant, like summer lightning. "I mean, he's not exactly ugly. Not really, really ugly. I mean. I have seen some ugly guys in my day, believe me, Rack isn't even in the running. Not the really ugly running. Not even with a pencil dick."

"We need to look at this cave," Tom said curtly. "Do you know where it is?"

"I think so. He showed it to me, once. It's a pretty good hike."

Tom looked a question at Stanley. Stanley nodded. "I'm up for a nice walk in the woods." Accompanied, he thought, but did not say—thinking of the bears and the rattlers and

whatever else lurked out there, none of which worried him in Tom's company. Like, there was a bear hanging around who was a match for Tom Danzel with his dander up? Not likely. Pity the poor rattler, too. Mountain lion? Tom probably ate pussies for breakfast. And he was immediately sorry that thought had even popped into his mind.

"I'll have to pass," Libby said, "I've got the shop to think of, and I doubt that I could add much insight."

"I need to be back this afternoon," Carl said.

Something flashed in Stanley's memory. "Donnie's funeral is this afternoon."

Carl was embarrassed, focused on stirring the coffee in his cup. "Yeah," he said, defensively, and added, "Were you going to go?"

Stanley was about to decline, but Tom said, "That might be a good idea. Funerals can be very interesting."

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Chapter Seventeen

Stanley realized that his cell phone was vibrating. He took it from his pocket and found that he had missed a call.

"263-7540," he read from the screen. "Whose number is that?"

"My mom's," Carl said. "Call her back."

Stanley thought about that and decided against it. "I should take you by there anyway," he said to Tom. "To introduce you. I'll find out then what she wanted."

"I'll go with you," Carl volunteered. "I haven't seen Mom or Hannah for a few days."

"Might be better if Stanley and I went on our own," Tom said.

"Oh," Carl said.

Tom must have heard the disappointment in his tone.

"We might need to talk about you," Tom said. "That'll be easier for your family if you're not there."

Carl nodded, though he looked none too happy about it.

* * * *

They stopped at The Handle Bar, not yet open for business, to pick up Libby's car, and at the cabin for Tom to strap on his shoulder holster and slip the Sig Sauer into it.

"Did you bring your gun?" he asked Stanley.

"No, I didn't think," Stanley said, and let it go. Tom glowered at him for a moment like he was going to say something, and thought better of it.

Deadly Wrong
by Victor J. Banis

"I didn't know I was going to be looking at a murder." *Or I wouldn't have come*, he thought, but did not say aloud.

* * * *

They had just gotten out of the pick up in front of Hannah's cabin when they heard a gunshot. It was followed seconds later by another shot, from in back of the cabin, not inside it, and a yelp of pain. They ran in that direction, Tom in the lead, tugging his gun from his holster as he ran.

They found Hannah standing on the rear deck, a shotgun braced against her shoulder, the little poodle, Josephine, jumping up and down in a frantic circle at her feet and yipping shrilly. Hannah saw them round the corner of the house, and saw the gun in Tom's hand. She carefully lowered the shotgun to the deck and waved her other hand in greeting.

"Easy," she said. "I was just trying to pick off a coyote."

She nodded in the direction of the lake. They looked. There was no sign of a coyote, only a nervous looking fisherman in a boat about forty feet out in the water, staring wide-eyed in their direction.

"He's long gone now," she said, propping the gun against the back wall. "They don't usually come this far into town. Most likely he was figuring on having Josephine home for dinner. I think I winged him. Anywise, I scared him off."

"I think you scared a couple of fishermen off, too," Tom said, holstering his Sig.

She glanced at the boat in the lake, heading now at a brisk speed toward the far shore, and shrugged. "I hate varmints,"

she said, not making clear whether she meant the coyote or the fisherman. She looked Tom over. "You're the other cop." The straight one, her tone suggested, and her expression said she found him infinitely more interesting than she found Stanley. Her big dark eyes glittered.

"Tom Danzel."

She gave him a firm handshake. "Hannah Hunter. Come on in, I just made some fresh coffee. Or there's more of that wine, if you want it, Stanley. Or some cold beer. Coors. If it's not too early."

"Not for me. I'll have the wine," Stanley said, and Tom, "A Coors sounds good."

"I like a drinking man," she said, nodding her approval at Tom, and led them inside to the kitchen. Passing through the front room, Tom glanced at a bag of golf clubs, one of them leaning against the wall beside the bag. "Looks like you play a few rounds," he said.

"When I get the time. Not too often anymore. Mostly I carry that iron with me when I walk Josephine. You never know what you're going to run into."

"Bears?"

She snorted. "Coyotes. Coons. There's all kinds of varmints around here, four legged and two legged both. You play?"

"When I can," he said, nodding in agreement. Which Stanley hadn't even known about him. He added that to a long list. In many ways, Tom was still a stranger. An intimate stranger, to be sure. He was fairly well acquainted now with Tom's body, particularly his genitalia, and even had a passing acquaintance with his backside. But that left a lot of

unknowns. You couldn't marry a man knowing no more than that. Could you? Not that Tom had exactly proposed ... still, it couldn't hurt to get to know a little more about him. He put golf down on his mental list. And pancakes. Maybe Aunt Jemima packaged up some kind of golf game. You could buy anything at a supermarket these days, couldn't you?

Penelope Hunter was in the kitchen, her wheelchair pushed up to the kitchen table. She brightened as they came in. "Stanley," she said, but her eyes were on Tom. Stanley introduced them, beginning to feel like a fifth wheel. "Two policemen," she said with exaggerated enthusiasm. "We'll have this whole situation straightened out in no time now. I can't wait to hear all the news."

Hannah busied herself pouring wine, opening beers for herself and Tom. "Is there any? News, I mean," she asked, without any apparent interest.

"Not much," Stanley said.

Hannah seemed unsurprised, but Mrs. Hunter made a little moue of disappointment. "I still don't believe it. I mean, Carl killing that boy, even if it was accidental."

"I don't believe it either," Tom said. "I have my own theory..."

"Which is?" Hannah asked. She handed Tom a beer, gave Stanley a glass of wine. No ice cubes this time, not even an attempt at a smile. With Tom there, he supposed he was no longer A-list.

He remembered that Libby had more or less suggested Hannah was homophobic. Probably, he thought, she didn't see any signs of homosexuality in Tom. He considered

describing Tom's equipment to her, just to demonstrate his familiarity with it. It was kind of difficult to think how to work that into the conversation, however. Maybe a comparison to the beer bottle?

It occurred to him, a bit belatedly, that Hannah was finding Tom attractive. Well, he could hardly blame her for that; it was just that he had not before thought of Hannah in that way. Of course, she was a woman, and almost certainly a heterosexual one. Still, the discovery surprised him. He was more amused than jealous. Hannah was not, he thought, the sort of woman to catch a man's fancy.

On the other hand, there were those eyes, they could be compelling. And some men did like strong women. He frowned, and looked again from one to the other. Hannah didn't have it in her to be coy, but he could see that she showed Tom a marked deference that he'd not seen in her before.

It Tom was aware of any interest on her part, though, he gave no sign of it. He shrugged. "If Carl didn't do it, there's only one other explanation, isn't there? Someone came along after he left, and cracked the kid's skull open, maybe with a smaller rock. There's plenty of them lying about around there. Then, whoever it was, he rolled the kid over and positioned him so it would look like he was killed when he landed on the big one."

Mrs. Hunter gasped and clutched at her bosom. "How, how horrible! But why would anyone do that?"

"Did you know the kid who died?" Tom asked her.

She shook her head. "Not at all. He was local, I guess."

"He was—" Tom hesitated and looked from mother to daughter. "He was queer. Homosexual."

Mrs. Hunter looked surprised. Stanley found himself puzzling how she could possibly not know that. Everybody else in town seemed to know. Or, maybe she hadn't wanted to know. Some people preferred to remain in blissful ignorance.

"Does that explain why he was murdered?" she asked.

"There are people who hate guys like that, automatically," Tom said. "You read about stuff in the newspapers."

"But, if that's what it was about, why frame my son for it? Carl wasn't that way," Mrs. Hunter said. She looked at Stanley as if he, a certified homosexual, could confirm this fact.

He hesitated maybe a fraction of a second too long. "No, of course he isn't," he said.

"If it happened the way you say," Hannah said, "it probably didn't have much to do with Carl. And I'm not saying I agree with you. The police think—"

"Oh, who cares what they think?" Mrs. Hunter said, but it was more like a reflex action. Stanley could see that her thoughts were elsewhere, something turning around in her mind. Thinking about her son, in a new light?

"I think the prosecuting attorney will," Hannah said vehemently. "And Carl did confess."

"Just for the record," Tom said, "and for my own satisfaction—you are both convinced of Carl's innocence?"

"One hundred percent," Mrs. Hunter said emphatically. "And we want you to do everything in your power to prove it. If it's a matter of money..."

"It isn't," Tom said, and looked at Hannah. "You feel the same?"

"Absolutely," she said, but her voice sounded flat to Stanley's ears, noncommittal, and her face was as masked as one of those Balinese dancers.

Which made Stanley wonder, too, whose side Hannah was on. There were times he had the impression she would be just as happy to see her brother convicted, though he couldn't think why. Libby had commented on Carl's being the pet, the favored child. Could Hannah's resentment run deeper than she showed? Ambitious people tended to resent and fear even the least likely challenge. But what could Hannah's ambition be? To be the first in her mother's affections? An unlikely prospect, it seemed to him, regardless of what might happen to Carl. Hannah just wasn't the type that inspired affection, to his way of thinking—not, in any case, deep affection.

Tom gave the two women a brief run down on what they'd been doing, told of visiting the police, checking out the crime scene. Listening, Stanley thought that none of it sounded very impressive. The look Tom slanted at him as he talked pretty much said that he thought so too.

Apparently, Hannah agreed, or she had caught and correctly interpreted that look. "So, we're pretty much where we were to start, is what it comes down to," she said, in her more usual businesslike voice. "The cops say Carl did it, Carl

says he didn't, no way to tell who's right and who's wrong. Carl can be pretty fucked up, you know. That pot of his."

"He's been pretty clean since I've been here," Stanley said. "A joint one night, maybe, but no real binges."

"He can keep his nose clean, if he works at it," she said, her voice as harsh as a saw biting into wood. "He just doesn't work at it very hard, or very often. So, now what?" She addressed this last to Tom. Clearly, she found Stanley and his opinions of less importance.

Tom shrugged. "I'm due back in San Francisco day after tomorrow. Unless I call and ask for emergency leave. But, the way things stand now..." He shrugged again, meaning, Stanley thought, he didn't see much point in hanging around. And if he left, should Stanley leave with him? He couldn't see that he was accomplishing much of anything by being here.

"Hannah, I think," Mrs. Hunter started to say, but Hannah interrupted her.

"You look like you need a rest, dear," Hannah said. "Excuse us."

"Oh, but I..."

"Never mind, I can see you're all keyed up." Hannah took a nurse's bossy tone. "A nice nap, and you'll feel better." She wheeled her mother from the kitchen despite Mrs. Hunter's obvious reluctance to go.

Stanley and Tom exchanged glances. "Some family," Tom said in a low voice.

Returning to the kitchen, Hannah said, as if she might have heard Tom's remark, "She's having a bad patch. She gets herself all in a dither. Your coming here..." The look she

gave Stanley was almost accusing. "She got herself in a real lather. I've had to keep her on her tranquilizers to calm her down. She'll be asleep in a minute."

Stanley was disappointed. He'd thought the mother had been considering some idea, which maybe she would have shared with them after a moment or two of thought. Maybe nothing—still, they needed any hint they could glean.

He and Tom left no wiser than when they had come. Which, Stanley thought, pretty much summed up the entire case. Talk about spinning your wheels.

"So, what did you think of them?" he asked on an impulse.

"I think the mother's trolley has jumped the track."

"And the daughter? She's attractive, isn't she? In her own way."

He looked surprised by the suggestion. "Hard Hearted Hannah? I guess so, if you like the type." He thought for a moment. "I'll tell you one thing, in a wrestling match, I'd bet on her over the grizzly."

Which, Stanley thought, didn't sound much like he was contemplating any wrestling matches himself.

"And she doesn't much care for you," Tom added.

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Chapter Eighteen

Carl was waiting for them on the front deck of Libby's cabin when they got back. Stanley gave the backpack he was wearing a curious look. "Are we going that far?" he asked.

"It's water," Carl said. "It's getting hot, and where we're going, it's a pretty good climb."

"Do we drive or walk?" Tom asked.

"Drive, to start. I'll show you. Then we walk."

The Ram had two leather bucket seats in front and a narrow bench across the back. "Shotgun," Stanley said, claiming the front seat. He opened the passenger side door and stood aside. Carl climbed into the rear, looking none too pleased.

You don't think I did all this groundwork for your benefit, I hope, Stanley thought, climbing in front beside Tom. Of course, it was ridiculous to be jealous of poor Carl, who needed all the sympathy he could get. Still, he couldn't resist reaching across the seat to give Tom's muscular thigh a proprietary pat, which earned him a frosty look from Tom. He didn't look to see how Carl reacted.

He didn't want to be petty.

* * * *

Carl directed them out of town, about a mile up a dirt road, and onto another, not much more than a trail, that branched off of it. They were climbing now onto the flanks of

the mountains, the road burrowing its way through thick stands of pine and occasionally shaking itself free of them.

Carl pointed to a pull-off on the right. "Park there. We'll have to go on foot the rest of the way."

Tom parked, studied the rear view mirror for a minute before he turned off the ignition. He found his big Mag Lite flashlight under the seat and tucked it into his belt as he climbed out of the truck, and glanced skyward. The sunlight had thickened, the air grown heavy. A sword blade of lightning rent the air.

"We might get wet," he said and reached behind the seat for a windbreaker, tossing it to Stanley.

Carl in the lead, they set off up an incline leading into the woods. They met a fire road and followed that for a quarter mile or so, and then cut off it and went almost straight up a steep slope. There was no obvious trail, and Carl sometimes seemed simply to be meandering among the trees. From time to time he paused, looking around to get his bearings, and set off again.

A jay scolded them and disappeared in a flash of blue. A fat crow took his place, flapping noisily to land on a branch and eye the intruders suspiciously. His companion settled in a tree nearby, the two of them gossiping briefly, before one and then the other, with noisy cawing, took his leave.

Carl continued to lead them upward. The forest fell silent except for their breathing and the muted tramp of their feet in the carpet of pine needles. The smell of decaying vegetation mingled with the scent of resin and of new things growing. A gray squirrel scurried up a tree.

"This is national forest," Carl said after a time.

"Technically, Donnie shouldn't have been camping out up here. Not without a permit, anyway. They get touchy about stuff. People get lost, have to be rescued. Or they get careless, start fires. The Rangers like to keep track of everybody."

"Was he camping?" Tom asked.

Carl hunched his shoulders. "Maybe. I think so. I don't think he always went home. Probably he slept up here sometimes. Most likely he'd have a fire if he did. Even in summer, it can get cool out here."

"You think the Rangers didn't know?" Tom asked. "Or they were just cutting him some slack?"

"I think he was blowing one of the Rangers. Maybe more than one."

Tom left that pass unremarked. The crow began to squawk again, but further away this time.

* * * *

It took them half an hour of steady walking, mostly uphill.

"Quite a ways to bring a trick, isn't it?" Stanley commented, growing short of breath.

"It's longer because I'm not completely sure. I was only up here once with him, I have to kind of feel my way," Carl said. "Direct, it'd probably take about half the time. Anyway, guys around here, they're used to climbing around in the woods. It wouldn't seem very far to a local." He gave Stanley a look that seemed to dismiss him as a mere city boy. "Here we are."

They had come to a small clearing, a canopy of huge pines holding aloft a leaden sky. The opening was surrounded by brush on three sides with, on the fourth, a jumble of stones that looked as if some giant had tossed them in a careless heap centuries ago. Carl paused at the edge of the clearing and pointed at the stones.

"The cave is over there, beyond that big rock."

Once past the largest of the boulders, the entrance to the cave was easy to spot, a wide fissure in the face of a rocky knoll that cut into the forest like the prow of a giant ship.

"Someone's been here lately," Tom said, pointing at a little pile of ashes on the ground just outside the cave. "That's pretty recent."

"What makes you say that?" Carl asked.

"It rained yesterday. The ashes are dry."

Stanley knelt, sifted some of the ashes through his fingers. "These were photos," he said. "Somebody didn't want their face in circulation."

"Or their dick," Tom said.

"Good point. Are we going in?"

Tom looked at the opening to the cave, and at Stanley. "I'll check it out first." He pulled his gun from his holster. "Here, you keep this."

"I don't know..."

"Somebody was following us out of town. At least, I thought so."

Which Stanley hadn't even noticed. "What happened to them?"

"They disappeared. Either we lost them, or they lost interest. Or, maybe I was mistaken." His tone said he didn't think so.

Stanley took the gun reluctantly. "What are you going to carry?"

"This." Tom made a fist. "And the Mag."

"What if...?" Stanley started to say, but Tom cut him off.

"Look, we may be dealing with a cold blooded killer here. Probably are," he said. "I can't leave you out here unarmed."

"I'll go with you," Carl said quickly.

"You'll stay here. You'll be safe with Stan."

"Stanley. You'll give a yell if—"

"If there's anybody in there, you'll hear yelling," Tom said. He pulled the Mag Lite from his belt, holding it in the usual cop-grip, just above the lens end. The Mag was heavy. In a pinch, it would double nicely as a club. He switched it on and, with a final glance and a nod at Stanley, disappeared inside the cave.

There was a moment of stillness and then, suddenly, a wisp of smoke appeared at the opening of the cave, quickly grew into a thick black plume that shot upward into the air.

Not smoke, Stanley realized—a cloud of bats, disturbed by Tom's entrance. In a moment they had vanished. Stanley shuddered.

Despite the fact that the road was no more than a mile or so away, the woods were surprisingly quiet. Stanley and Carl waited in silence. Carl's eyes remained glued to the cave's entrance, but Stanley looked back and forth, from the cave to the woods surrounding them. Though it was only late

morning, it might have been twilight, the sky overhead slate colored and simmering with darker clouds. The indigo rim of one enormous cloud seemed to suck the sun from the sky.

The silence grew weighty. How long had Tom been gone? It felt like forever.

A jade green lizard basked on a rock as if waiting for the sunlight's return, motionless but for the rapid vibrations of its throat. A coyote appeared in the clearing and loped across it, low to the ground, eyeing them warily over his shoulder. The lizard vanished.

"Do you think he's all right?" Carl asked finally.

"Tom? Yes. He's pretty handy."

"Maybe we should..."

"Maybe we should do what he told us."

"What if there's somebody in there?"

"Their tough luck."

Stanley wished he felt as confident as he sounded, though. He began to wonder too if they should follow Tom. He wasn't at all comfortable with the idea of Tom alone in that cave, notwithstanding Tom's competence to take care of himself. Even Tom could be ambushed, or outnumbered.

But, what if there were someone out here, in the woods, maybe even watching them at this very moment? If they all went inside, they could easily be trapped. One man with a gun could keep them inside that cave indefinitely, or pick them off one by one as they tried to come out.

As if his fears had materialized, there was a sudden thrashing of bushes just behind them. They both turned,

alarmed, Stanley automatically raising the gun in both hands the way they'd taught them at the Academy.

A brownish muzzle appeared through some branches. Large, liquid eyes weighed them and apparently found them unthreatening. A burro pushed his way through the brush to cross the clearing a few feet in front of them. The rest of the pack followed, the Jakes leading, the Jennies forming a protective circle about a trio of colts. They paused in a pack to nibble at some leaves, keeping a watchful eye on the human intruders.

"Burros?" Stanley asked, astonished. The only time he had ever seen a live burro had been in Tijuana. It had worn a straw hat, and its body was painted in green stripes. Grinning tourists after too many margaritas had their pictures taken standing beside it, or little children sitting astride.

"They're wild," Carl explained. "They live in packs here."

"Not likely to stampede and trample us, I hope?"

"They're harmless. Sometimes they'll even let you get close enough to pet them, but not when they have colts. It's a good idea to keep a distance then. They can get skittish."

"Don't the coyotes give them trouble? Or dogs?"

"The dogs mostly have sense enough to stay away from those hooves, and the burros are too big for a coyote to pick off, even a pack of coyotes. But if one of the burros gets hurt, the dogs and the coyotes are quick to pick up on that. Then the pack leader drives the wounded one away for everyone's safety."

"Everyone's except the wounded fellow, wouldn't you say?"

Carl seemed to think about that for a moment. "Nature's a bitch."

"You got that right," Tom said behind them, making them both jump. "Nobody's home. Come on in."

Stanley handed Tom his gun back and they followed him inside. Stanley thought of the bats and hoped they didn't decide to come back at just this moment. The cave was not particularly deep or overly large. A narrow opening that necessitated going single file, and low enough that they had to duck their heads; around a bend, and they were in a small room, dusty, higher ceilinged. Tom flashed the light around.

There was evidence of its occupancy: a sleeping bag, a cardboard box that apparently served as a table, another probably meant for storage, a candle in a wooden holder.

Things had been tossed every which way, though, the sleeping bag torn and its stuffing scattered, the boxes overturned, the candle broken on the floor as if someone had stepped on it.

"Donnie didn't leave it like this," Carl said.

"I agree," Stanley said, thinking of Donnie's neat little room at home.

"Someone's been here, that's for sure," Tom said. "Did that guy, Rack, know about this place?"

Carl sighed. "He might have. Donnie had some special kind of case on the dude. If he brought anybody here, it was probably Rack."

"He brought you," Stanley said.

"Not for sex." Carl gave him an offended look. "Anyway, I didn't do this. You've been babysitting me since you got here."

Stanley thought, but did not say, there's no telling when this was done. Anytime, possibly, since Donnie died.

The dim sunlight outside seemed brighter after the gloom of the cave. Carl, in the lead as they came out, had taken a couple of bottles of water from his backpack by the time Stanley and then Tom emerged.

"Drink?" he said, offering Tom a bottle with all the rapt solemnity of Paris presenting a prize apple.

Tom took it with hardly a glance and passed it automatically to Stanley. Less solemnly, Carl handed Tom another. Stanley unscrewed the cap of his bottle and drank. The water was warm, but welcome anyway.

* * * *

They started back to the truck, not talking. Pine boughs trembled in the blustery wind that had come up while they were in the cave. The clouds overhead had grown menacingly darker still, and thunder occasionally grumbled in the distance. A suspicious crow had come back to assure himself they were truly on their way.

When the first shot came, Stanley mistook it for a crack of thunder, or even a tree branch breaking in a suddenly powerful gust of wind—until Tom shoved him to the ground, falling atop him and covering Stanley's body with his own.

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Chapter Nineteen

The second bullet hit the trunk of a tree well over their heads. The crow screamed in alarm and flapped skyward. Carl was still standing where he was, staring dumbly in the direction of the shots. *A little slow.* Stanley yanked at his pants leg.

"Get down, for crap's sake," he hissed. "Someone's shooting at us."

"Oh." The truth registered belatedly. Carl dropped to the ground beside Stanley. "Are you sure?" Which Stanley did not dignify with an answer.

No more shots. Tom, his gun drawn, rose to a crouch. For a moment, there was nothing to be heard, even the birds startled into silence. After a moment the silence was broken by the sound of someone crashing through brush, more concerned, apparently, with getting away than with stealth.

"Stay here," Tom said, running in that direction. After a moment, they heard the distant sound of an engine turning over, then a roar and a rattle of stones as a car took off fast.

Stanley jumped up and ran after Tom. He found him standing on a rocky embankment that looked down at the road where the Ram was parked. They could just hear the car a long way off, trailing dust that dissipated quickly in the wind huffing angrily about them. The clouds above, as if to express their indignation, chose that moment to burst open and began to pelt them with raindrops the size of marbles.

"Did you see him?" Stanley asked, panting. He had forgotten about the altitude and the thin air.

"Dark car was all, and just a glimpse of that. Not enough to ID."

"Dark gray?"

"Or blue. You've seen it before?"

"Maybe. I thought someone was tailing me, my first night in town. But I couldn't say for sure. I couldn't think of any reason for anyone to be following me then."

"Somebody was following us today. At least I thought so. Someone else was in the woods with us, that's for sure."

"Maybe it was a hunter," Carl said, joining them.

"Out of season, isn't it?"

"Some of these guys, they don't pay much attention to the rules. These are mountain boys, you know." He looked in the direction the car had vanished. "Could have been anybody. You're sure they were shooting at us?"

Tom did one of his shrugs.

"Your sister has a gun," Stanley said. "A shot gun."

Carl gave him a scornful look. "Everybody up here has a gun. There's two rifles in Libby's closet. Anyway, why would my sister want to shoot you? Libby and Hannah, and Mom, are probably the only ones in Bear Mountain who want you here."

Which, Stanley had to admit, was pretty much the truth. Bear Mountain hadn't exactly arranged a welcome festival for them.

"Anyway," Tom said, "That wasn't a shotgun."

Carl looked back thoughtfully at the woods from which they had just emerged. "There's lots of pot growing up in these hills. The growers guard their little farms very forcefully. We might just have gotten too close to someone's crop."

"Whoever he was, he wasn't much of a shot," Tom said. "First one missed us by a mile, second one was a good twenty feet high. I hope the poor bastard doesn't depend on hunting to feed his family."

He slipped his Sig back into its holster, hitched up his pants for all the world like John Wayne in one of those old westerns, and said, with an exaggerated drawl, "Let's go to a funeral."

It occurred to Stanley that Tom actually enjoyed this kind of thing. *People shooting at us, and he's having fun? I'm in love with a nutcase?*

* * * *

Donnie McIntosh's funeral was obviously not one of the town's more celebrated events. Amanda McIntosh sat alone in the first pew of the church, directly in front of the closed casket. Two middle aged women sat in the row behind her and off to one side. Observing them, Stanley marked them for curiosity seekers, the kind of ghouls who thought they might pick up an amusing bit of chatter to share with their friends over coffee later.

Stanley, Tom and Carl were the only others at the church, apart from a minister who gave a brisk eulogy in such vague and generalized terms that Stanley suspected he had never

met the deceased, and wondered if he even knew of Donnie's reputation. There were those who preferred to remain ignorant on that score, he thought, remembering Penelope Hunter.

Halfway through the eulogy, a funeral director came in from an archway to the side, carrying a single arrangement of flowers, a small cluster of pink and lavender gladiolas in a white maché, looking smaller for their lack of company. He placed it by the head of the casket. The minister paused to glance down at the flowers, momentarily distracted.

Stanley wished now he had thought to order flowers, and wondered who had sent these. Certainly not the two townswomen, whispering together the whole time. The mother? She held a single red rose in her hands, but the curious look she gave the late arriving gladiolas inclined him to think she knew nothing about them either. And, lavender? Was that some sort of comment?

"Yours?" Stanley whispered at Carl, who shook his head.

The ceremony ended, Amanda McIntosh paused by the casket to look at the card on the gladiolas. When she had gone out, escorted through a side door by the black suited funeral director, Stanley detoured past the casket to look at the flowers. The florist's card attached to them had Donnie's name and the name of the church written on it, but no mention of a sender.

* * * *

The heavy downpour had settled into a chilly drizzle—enough, however, to discourage the curiosity of the two

townswomen, who apparently had amassed sufficient gossip, and passed on attending the gravesite ceremony.

The same funeral director stood to the left and slightly behind Amanda McIntosh, holding a large black umbrella over her head. She still held her single rose in both hands and stared without word or movement at the waiting casket, appearing altogether unaware of the man with the umbrella.

Tom led Stanley and Carl up the little knoll to the graveside, taking a position some ten or fifteen feet behind the mother. For the moment, except for the funeral director and the same minister from the church, they were the entire assemblage, but they had no more than taken their places there than they heard the muted roar of an approaching motorcycle, and looked back down the hill to see a lone biker pull up. He parked his bike, and dismounted.

Stanley looked hard at him as he strolled up the hill with the longtime biker's bow-legged swagger, like a cowboy's—pleasure bent, Chris would say—but with less roll. He was in black, full leather regalia—boots, gloves, leather pants and vest, with nothing but skin under the vest. He took a position by himself in the shelter of a wide-spreading pine, several yards distant from the rest of them, and took off his cap, cradling it under one arm, and leaned against the trunk of the tree.

With the hat gone, Stanley recognized him at once from Donnie's pictures: the bearded, laughing man who had allowed Donnie to photograph his face as well as his body. Stanley nudged Tom and leaned over to whisper to him.

The service was brief. The same impersonal remarks from the minister, finishing with, as Stanley could have predicted, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

For a silly moment, Stanley was tempted to sing out a line from a bawdy song he remembered: "Two twin beds and only one of them was mussed." Anything to bring a less impersonal note to the ceremony. Maybe Donnie would have found it funny.

Surely someone who, if everyone were to be believed, had provided comfort and pleasure to so many, deserved something more in the way of a send off than this perfunctory exercise.

At the end of the ceremony, Amanda McIntosh took a faltering step toward the casket, the funeral director shuffling to keep the umbrella over her head, although it was hardly raining at all by now.

She laid the red rose atop the casket and stood for an indecisive moment, swaying slightly, until the funeral director stepped to her, taking her elbow to lead her away. It occurred to Stanley that she was drunk, or something close to it.

Not so drunk, however, that she did not recognize him. She started past him, paused, and squinted, a resentful mask slipping over her face when she finally puzzled out who he was.

"You didn't have to leave his room such a damned mess," she said, and went past without waiting for a reply.

Tom and Stanley exchanged looks. "It was fine when I left," Stanley said. "Neat as a pin."

"Wouldn't she have known if someone else had been there?"

"She drinks," Stanley said. "A lot. I suspect the guys from The Handle Bar could do a bike run through her house and it might not register, depending upon how far down she was in the bottle."

"Speaking of bikers..."

The biker in black had stayed where he was leaning against the tree, staring at the casket, not even noticing Amanda McIntosh's departure, his face revealing nothing. He turned now to amble down the hill toward his bike.

They beat him to it, Tom leading the charge, taking a direct angle that brought him there first. He was standing in front of the motorcycle, feet planted wide, by the time its owner strolled up, watching him warily.

"Nice bike," Tom said.

The biker looked at it like he'd never noticed it before. "I guess." He put on his hat and stared back at Tom.

"Norton, Manx," Stanley said. They both looked surprised at him. "I had a one time—" He started to say "boyfriend" and checked himself. "An acquaintance who collected them. '54, right?"

"Right." The biker looked him up and down, barely acknowledged Carl. He switched his attention back to Tom. Alpha male to alpha male "You ride?"

"Some. Not enough."

"What's your mount?"

"Hog." Another thing Stanley hadn't known about the man. How could he hope to get past the frenzied action stage if all

he knew was the man's genital dimensions? Maybe he should start keeping a journal. *Dear Diary, today I learned...*

"I'm Tom Danzel."

"They call me Lobo." They shook hands, sizing one another up, like a pair of wary dogs. Testosterone sniffing. In that regard, Stanley thought they were probably pretty evenly matched. Sometimes that made things easier, sort of like, *my kind of pal*, and sometimes it made for trouble. *I can piss further than you*. In that contest Stanley would bet on Tom, if only because he had an inch or two advantage over most of the competition.

"You got a couple of minutes?" Tom asked. "To talk?"

"You're cop, right?"

"In San Francisco, yes. Here, it's unofficial. Just a friendly chat."

Lobo looked around. The black limousine from the funeral home was just pulling away, Amanda McIntosh invisible beyond tinted windows. There was nobody else around.

Still, they were only a few yards off the road. Anybody could drive past, and it probably wasn't the best idea for a biker to be seen chatting with a couple of cops, officially or not. Bikers didn't generally like cops. Most of them didn't like bikers who were friendly with cops, either.

"There's a bar just down the road," Lobo said.

"The Handle Bar?" Stanley asked. He wasn't particular eager to pay another visit there. Even in a crowd, and who knew which side of the fence Lobo would be on if there were any trouble.

Deadly Wrong
by Victor J. Banis

Lobo shook his head. "No, it's called Joe's Joint," and added, significantly, "Nobody goes there."

They let him pull out first, and followed him. The rain, satisfied that the mourning was over, had petered out altogether. Joe's Joint turned out to be a small building about a mile away, set back from the road, with no sign.

Lobo dismounted and waited for them, and led the way inside. They all paused just inside for their eyes to adjust to the gloom. A lone bartender sat behind the bar reading a girlie magazine. Brashly painted cars chased one another round and round the screen of a silent television. In the background, Willie Nelson sang from an old fashioned juke box: *Blue Eyes Cryin' in the Rain*.

The place was empty except for the bartender, who looked up as they came in. He recognized Lobo, and nodded. "Long time no see," he said, curiosity showing as he looked the others over. His eyes paused ever so slightly on Carl, probably guessing his age, and decided not to make an issue of it. "What's up, bro?"

"Not much, just hanging. Corona."

"Four of them," Tom said. He looked around, picked the table farthest from the bar, and nodded toward it. Stanley led the way, Carl and Lobo trailing after him. Tom waited for the beers, carried them to the table and passed them around. He took a chair, turning it backwards to the table, and straddled it.

Everyone took a sip of beer. Lobo's eyes moved around the table. "Carl," he said in a nod of recognition, with no hint of friendliness. Carl only nodded back and took another nervous

swallow. Stanley was dismissed with no more than a fleeting glance. Again, Lobo settled on Tom as the leader of the pack.

"It's your party," he said.

Tom drank, seemed in no hurry to begin. Finally, he said, "You were friendly with the kid who was killed, right? McIntosh?"

"Little Donnie?" Lobo laughed without humor. "I wouldn't say friendly, exactly. Donnie didn't have any friends that I know of. Not real friends, no buds, if you know what I mean."

"You were at his funeral."

Lobo shrugged, avoided Tom's eyes. "I was passing by. Just curious, that's all. It don't mean anything."

"You had sex with him," Stanley said. "Some kind of sex. I'd call that friendly. Kind of friendly."

Lobo looked at him as if seeing him for the first time, considered Stanley's remarks. "You saw the pictures, right?" Stanley nodded. "I thought there'd be at least one of me back at his house, but I couldn't find it when I looked."

Stanley remembered then. "I left the bedroom window open."

Lobo nodded. "Old Lady McIntosh, she was passed out, I could hear her snoring in the next room. She didn't even know I was there. But I didn't find any pictures. Not of myself. I guess you beat me to it."

Stanley took the pictures out of his jacket pocket, found the one of Lobo, and reached it across the table. Lobo looked at it without taking it. "It isn't like it looks, you know," he said.

"A naked guy, his dick at attention? It looks to me like someone was getting serviced."

"Or, maybe there's some other explanation," Tom said. "I'd be interested to hear it."

Lobo sighed, shook his head, looked into the distance as if remembering. "You got to understand," he said, "the way Donnie was. When he got something on his mind—shit, dick, I mean, no use beating around the bush, when he got dick on his mind—he could be real determined. The little fucker wouldn't take no for an answer. That's how's come he got himself into so much trouble. Guys'd turn him down, it wasn't like everybody was sniffing after him all the time, looking for a piece."

"Some were," Carl said.

Lobo gave him another disinterested look. "Well, some were, sure. That's probably true."

"Rack, for instance," Stanley said.

Lobo slanted a wary glance at him. "You'd have to ask Rack about that, I keep my nose out of other people's business."

"Go on," Tom said. "So, there were guys looking for action. You were talking about the ones who turned him down, though."

"Right." Lobo thought for a moment. "Only, if they did, if they turned him down, it was like I said, he wouldn't take no for an answer. He'd bug the piss out of them, rag at them, on and on, till they'd finally give in and let him have some dick, and then, when they'd shot their load, they'd be sore for letting him talk them into it. You know how it is, once you get

your nuts off, things look different. They say when it's stiff a dick doesn't have any conscience, but once it's gone soft, it can be pretty mean, too. That's when they'd kick his ass."

Tom nodded, thinking about that. "So he came on to you, is what you're telling me? Ragged you into it? Against your will, sort of."

"Sort of, yeah. I mean, I know what you're thinking, but not like that either, not exactly. With Donnie, it wasn't like, say, the way you'd come on to a guy," he said to Stanley.

"Which is? In your opinion?" Stanley's voice was frosty. It didn't help that he'd seen Tom's quickly suppressed grin of amusement.

"What I mean is, he didn't just come right out and say he wanted to suck your dick."

"Neither do I, as a matter of fact. I like to think I'm a bit more subtle than that, thank you. I generally start by sending flowers. White camellias, as a rule."

Lobo tried sorting that out, decided it was beyond his grasp, and let it go. "Or, well, sometimes he did, come right out and say it. He could be pretty up front. He wasn't what you'd call shy about stuff. But, like, say he did, came right out with it, and you told him no. Which is what I did, the first time he asked. Actually, tell you the honest truth, he asked me a lot, kept trying to talk me into it. I work at the Chevron, late nights. He'd come by, hang around when there was nobody there, follow me inside when I was working on a car. Going on and on, could he suck me, could he rim my ass? If I went to the head, he'd ask if I wanted to piss on him." He

shook his head. "Can you believe that? Got to where I'd lock the door after myself, just to be safe."

"I expect he was a real threat," Stanley said, but Lobo didn't seem to catch the irony.

"And it ain't like I'm some kind of virgin, I'm not saying that, I just didn't ... hell, I don't know, I guess I just wasn't in the right space. Or maybe it was just him. Pussy's my thing. You know what I mean?" This last to Tom.

"Totally," Tom said. Stanley bit off the sarcastic remark that rose to his lips. Probably this was not the appropriate time to bring up their relationship. Whatever that was, he added mentally.

"So then, Donnie, he changes his tune, he just wants to see me naked, wants to take a picture of me, he swears that's all. Like, he thinks you're the best looking dude he's ever seen. 'Come on,' he says," Lobo said in a mincing falsetto, "'come on, just strip for me, that's all I'm asking, just let me see you with your clothes off, I'll bet you are really hot.'"

"This was at the station?"

"No, we were back at my place. This was later." He paused for a swig of beer. "Well, fuck, I'm not the bashful kind, and he keeps whining and begging, 'come on, please, man, please,' so, yeah, I get naked for him, and he takes a couple of snaps and then he's like, you know, would I work it up, he'd love to get a shot of it stiff, see how big it is. And, hell, it ain't so shabby, you know what I'm saying? You've seen the pictures, right?" He gave Stanley another look. Stanley

resolutely ignored it. The man was getting no compliments from him.

"Only, once you got it standing for him, he's all happy and grinning and thanking you. Except, if he's going to take a picture of it, it would look a lot better, wouldn't it, if it was wet and shiny, you know, like if it was slick with spit, like somebody'd been sucking on it. He'd love to have just one picture of it all slicked up, he's just gonna wet it down, is all. Well, fuck, there you are, your dick is hard as a rock, and he's got his mouth on it, and next thing you know, you're getting a blow job, whether you'd wanted one or not to start out with."

He gave them a kind of shame-faced grin. "A pretty good one, if you want to know the truth. I got to give him that, he knew his business. He might have had to talk you into it, but once he started swinging, you forgot all that. Least, till you cracked your nut."

Carl sniffed noisily. Lobo flicked a glance at him, but Carl was looking away, at a Budweiser sign on the wall over the bar, Clydesdales pulling a beer wagon around and around in an endless cycle. He might not have been listening.

Stanley was thinking about the photo of Lobo, grinning ear to ear, not appearing in the least like a man who'd had to be convinced to shed his clothes, get his dick up, a load off. Appearing like a man having a grand old time. And if he was so uninterested, what were they doing back at his place anyway? This from a man who locked himself into the john for safety's sake?

"So, then," Tom said, his face and voice noncommittal, "after this kid—how old was this guy, anyway?"

"Eighteen," Carl said, still watching the Clydesdales."

"Eighteen." Tom seemed to contemplate that fact for a moment. He sighed wearily and shook his head. "So, after this kid molests you, takes advantage of you, then what?"

"What do you mean, then what?"

"Did you shove him around a little bit? Rough him up? I hear that was the usual drill."

Lobo had the grace at least to look a bit embarrassed. "Some," he said. "Not seriously, just a little." He looked from Tom to Stanley, got defensive. "He expected it, you know. He liked it, if a guy gave him some shit. Hey, I didn't really whale into him, nothing like that. A couple of punches, light ones, didn't even bruise him. Actually, I slapped him." He pantomimed a gentle slap. "More like a love tap, if you want to know. It was just kind of like, the cherry on the sundae, you know what I mean. For little Donnie. Everybody kicked his ass."

"After they fucked it," Stanley said

Lobo's look was not friendly. "Sometimes before, too." He finished his beer. "We done?"

Tom looked at Stanley, who nodded. Lobo pushed his chair back, got up.

"Did he ever take you up to his cave?" Tom thought to ask.

Lobo hesitated, seemed to consider what he wanted to say, finally shrugged again. "Once."

"Was that you, burned the photos?"

"Fuck." Lobo shook his head, sighed noisily. "I didn't want 'em getting around, okay? Anybody could understand that, couldn't they? The town pussy, he's got naked pictures of me. I didn't want anybody thinking I was his steady, or anything."

"That was Rack, wasn't it?" Stanley asked. "His steady."

The look Lobo gave him was even cooler than before. "Like I said already, that's none of my affair, you'd have to talk to Rack about stuff like that." He paused for a moment. "I wouldn't advise it, though. Rack's a tough guy."

"So am I," Tom said, not sounding like he was bragging, just making a statement of fact.

Lobo looked at him, seemed about to argue, and thought better of it. "Thanks for the beer," he said. "See you around." He moved to go.

"Were you up there this morning," Tom asked. "To that cave?"

"Me? No, yesterday. I just wanted to find the pictures, get rid of them. Why?"

"Somebody shot at us," Tom said.

Lobo looked surprised. "Wasn't me. Hell, I just got up out of bed twenty, thirty minutes before the funeral."

Something popped into Stanley's head. "The flowers," he said on an impulse. "At the funeral. You sent them, didn't you?"

Lobo looked embarrassed. "What makes you think that?" he asked. "Why would I send flowers to some little punk, sucked me off a few times?"

"How many times, anyway?" Tom asked.

Lobo left that unanswered, turned his back on them. Sunlight brightened the bar briefly as he disappeared out the door. They heard the Norton roar to life a minute later, the sound fading very gradually as he made a slow exit.

The three of them sat in silence, finishing their beers. "That solves the mystery of the burned pictures, at least," Tom said. "But it doesn't tell us much else. It doesn't tell us who shot at us."

"If you believe him," Stanley said. "He didn't want people knowing about him and Donnie. Maybe..."

"Maybe, but I doubt it. I believed him when he said he wasn't up there today. He looked genuinely surprised when I mentioned the shooting."

"You're probably right," Stanley agreed. "Anyway, the flowers kind of eliminate him as a suspect, don't they?"

"I'm glad he didn't really kick the shit out of Donnie," Carl said.

"Yeah, me too," Stanley said after a minute.

"Maybe he actually liked him."

"Maybe," Stanley agreed. "A little, anyway."

They got up. "'Nother round?" the bartender asked, but Tom shook his head.

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Chapter Twenty

"Drop me at the Safeway," Carl said as they drove the main street of the village. "There're a few things I need to pick up for the house."

Stanley knew perfectly well he should decline the suggestion. Carl was intended to be more or less in his family's care, and not running around town on his own. Stanley was sort of the substitute babysitter.

And he would have vetoed Carl's suggestion had he not been in something of a pique regarding the young man. Not so much jealousy, not full blown jealousy, certainly, and how could it be? Really, he felt sorry for the boy. But he had problems enough of his own when it came to Tom Danzel, without some starry-eyed kid poaching on his turf.

For an assortment of reasons, then, he was indeed not particularly enamored of Carl's company, not at the moment. They dropped him at the edge of the mall's parking lot, and drove on.

"I was thinking of something," Stanley started to say, when his cell phone rang. Again, there was no one there when he answered. He checked the number. "His mother. She sure acts like she's got something she wants to tell us."

"Maybe we should stop by and see what that's all about."

"I guess," Stanley said, with no real enthusiasm. He'd been thinking of an hour or so available to them, Carl out of their hair, the cabin to themselves. Visiting Penelope Hunter

wasn't exactly what he'd had on his mind. "But just for a couple of minutes, okay?"

Tom gave him a quizzical look, but Stanley only flashed him an innocent smile.

"Sure," Tom agreed.

* * * *

There was no answer to their knock at the door. They circled about the cabin and found Hannah just returning from a walk with Josephine. For the moment, she hadn't seen them. She paused near the lakeshore to take a swing at a pebble with the golf club she carried. The pebble hit the water some forty feet from the shore, making a considerable splash.

"Strong swing," Tom said.

He had spoken quietly, but Hannah must have heard him anyway. She turned in their direction and, seeing them, slung the club over her shoulder like a flintlock rifle and ambled to the deck where they waited, looking not particularly pleased to see them.

"Shot anybody lately?" she asked Stanley, her tone catty.

He ignored the sarcasm. "No gun," he said with an over bright smile, flipping his jacket open to demonstrate the fact.

Tom must have noted the sarcasm too. "Stanley's not that kind of detective," he said quickly.

"I didn't know there was more than one kind."

"We're partners. Stanley's the brains. I'm the shooter half."

Which rather caught Stanley by surprise, but he was not about to show it.

"I see," Hannah said and, in a quick change of subject, "am I to suppose you've come with news?"

"Actually," Stanley said, "It's your mother. She keeps calling, leaving her number on my phone."

"Ignore her, is my advice," Hannah said. Stanley looked surprise at her. "She's just bugging you, believe me, wanting to hear everything you've done, the littlest detail. You'll find yourself telling her about your potty breaks, if she can't pry anything else out of you. When you're chair bound, as she is, the most astonishing bits of trivia suddenly seem to be important."

"Maybe she's thought of something she wanted to tell us," Tom said. "Something about our case."

"I don't know what that could be." Whatever deference Hannah had shown Tom in the past had vanished. She was as cool with him now as she was with Stanley. Unlike before, she did not invite them inside this time, but remained on the deck with them. Josephine went to the door, looked over her shoulder at Hannah, and danced around a bit, trying to get her attention, obviously intent on going inside. Hannah rather pointedly ignored her.

"And, believe me," Hannah added for emphasis, "if she had thought of anything even vaguely important, I'd have heard about it. Ad nauseum. Mother's not real big on keeping her thoughts to herself."

Which Stanley thought was almost certainly true: if he was any judge, Penelope Hunter was probably the patron saint of The Big Mouth. Still ... "Maybe I should talk to her anyway," he insisted.

Hannah's dark eyes were stony, unreadable. "She's sleeping." She saw his quick glance in the direction of the bedroom window. "I gave her one of her pills before I went out. She's been keyed up something awful the last few days, all at sixes and sevens. If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not have her disturbed any more today. Her health is not good, you know."

Which was something of a reversal, wasn't it? Hadn't she just a day or two earlier pooh-poohed all questions regarding her mother's illness? Or had that been Libby?

What could he do, though? "Well, when she wakes up, if there's anything she wants to tell me..."

"There isn't," Hannah said firmly, the subject obviously closed. "Nothing of any consequence. Unless you'd like to hear about *her* potty breaks." She cocked a sardonic eye.

"I'll pass," Stanley said.

After which, there wasn't much for them to do but leave. Glancing back, Stanley saw that she waited on the deck, Josephine growing ever more impatient, until they had vanished around the corner of the house.

Clearly, Hannah hadn't wanted their company. He was surprised, though, to realize how little he cared for hers. The relief he felt when they were out of her sight was intense. What was it about Hannah that made him so uncomfortable with her? Not, surely, her fleeting interest in Tom; that, Tom had clearly not returned. And not altogether homophobia, either, though he thought there might be more of that under the surface than even Libby realized.

Or was it just her strained relationship with her mother? Because it was strained, wasn't it? He could see that it was very generous of Hannah to take care of her mother as she did. That was never less than a burdensome role to play, a difficult gift for any child to give. But, was anything really a gift when it was given with such obvious displeasure?

And the way she regarded him with those large, dark eyes invariably made him feel that he had been tested and found wanting. Certainly, her behavior just now had fallen far short of hospitable.

As if reading Stanley's thoughts, Tom said, "You wouldn't exactly say she welcomed us with open arms."

"Hannah's not the welcoming sort." And did not add, although he thought it and was sure of it, 'She'd have welcomed you plenty warmly, if you'd played the right cards.'

No sense in giving Tom ideas he didn't have on his own.

* * * *

Still, thinking about Hannah's frustrations reminded him. "So, I was thinking," Stanley said, and paused to clear his throat. They were on the two lane road that skirted the lake, halfway to Libby's cabin. "Like, maybe when we get back..."

Tom suddenly veered his truck to the right, onto the shoulder of the road, so suddenly that Stanley was thrown sideways and would have ended up on Tom's lap if his seat belt hadn't held him firmly in place.

As suddenly as he swerved right, Tom threw the truck violently to the left, across the road, and stopped, blocking their lane. The car behind them came to a halt with a screech

of tires on pavement, skidding to a stop just inches away from the Ram's fender.

"Stay," Tom barked, pointing a finger in Stanley's direction, and before the Ram had quite stopped swaying from the daredevil driving, Tom was out the door and on the run, drawing his gun as he went. By the time the car behind them had come to a full stop, Tom had reached it and flung the driver's door open. He grabbed at the man behind the wheel to drag him out—and froze.

Stanley, meanwhile, had managed to free himself from seatbelts and leaned across to the driver side, sticking his head out the open window to see what was going on. What he saw was Sergeant Wooster of the Bear Mountain police force struggling to get out of the car and to get free of Tom's grip.

"Take your goddamn hands off me," Stanley heard Wooster say, "and put that gun back in its holster."

Tom did both, taking a step back from the car. "Okay," he said, "but suppose you tell me what you're doing tailing us. And while you're at it, maybe you could explain shooting at us in the woods."

The traffic in their lane, blocked by the stopped car and the pickup across the road, was prevented from passing by the oncoming traffic, and a line of cars quickly formed behind them. Someone honked a horn impatiently and someone shouted, "Hey, how about taking it off the road?" Cars still passed in the other direction, crawling by, occupants gawking in undisguised curiosity.

"Pull that truck over to the side of the road," Wooster said, in an obvious attempt to reestablish his authority. "And don't be driving off, either."

"Believe me, I wouldn't think of it," Tom said. He strode back to his truck, straightened it around, and pulled up thirty yards or so onto the shoulder. Wooster pulled in behind him and got out of his dark blue Chevy, strolling up with an exaggerated swagger. Tom got out again. This time Stanley jumped out too.

"Now then," Wooster said, addressing Tom and ignoring Stanley, "as for my tailing you, that's police privilege. You boys have been up to some suspicious activity. I've been keeping an eye on you. Maybe things are different in the big city, but that's what we do here in Bear Mountain."

"Suspicious activity? What kind of suspicious activity?" Tom demanded.

"Questioning people, like they was some kind of suspects. Your boyfriend here, he worried Amanda McIntosh half to death, so she tells me, said she felt like she was wrestling with the devil himself, the way he cross examined her."

"The only devil Amanda McIntosh has to wrestle with is her gin bottle," Stanley said.

Wooster seemed not to have heard him. "To say nothing of illegal search on government property. That was a national forest you were traipsing around in. Destruction of evidence. I reckon I could come up with a few more if I thought about it. If I wanted to press some charges."

"And you think that gives you an excuse to shoot at us? If I wanted to press some charges myself."

Wooster looked a little flustered by that, but he was quick to recover. "That's bull. I never shot at no one. Fired off my gun, is all. Thought I saw a puma up in the woods there, wanted to scare him off." He looked hard at Tom, and then, finally, at Stanley. "Nobody hit, was they? Not even close to it, wouldn't seem to me. Believe me, Mister Big Shot San Francisco Inspector, if I was shooting at someone, they'd be walking in a sling—or not at all. Up here, we know how to use our guns."

"Where we come from, we know how to use our brains," Stanley said. He and Wooster glowered at one another. Probably, Stanley thought, he was trying to think of a good reply—and coming up empty handed.

"Well, you ain't where you come from, are you?" was the best he could do.

"Maybe I ought to talk to your chief," Tom said.

Wooster smirked. "Maybe you ought."

It seemed they were at an impasse. It was obvious that Wooster hadn't meant to hit anyone when he'd fired his gun in the woods; even Tom, at the time, had noted how off his aim was. No doubt it had only been intended to give them a scare, and probably to discourage them from continuing with an investigation that clearly wasn't approved by the local authorities. An investigation which, if anything came of it, could only make them look bad. They had staked their reputations on their version of Donnie McIntosh's death; they wouldn't like being proved wrong.

But, who were Tom and Stanley going to complain to? Wooster's smug expression said clearly that, if he hadn't been

acting on his Chief's instructions when he fired his gun in the woods, it would certainly prove to be with his approval.

As for Wooster's tailing them, he was right, that was well within his authority. It was his town, so to speak. They were the outsiders. They hadn't a shred of authority here, beyond what any ordinary citizen of Bear Mountain possessed. Maybe, truth be told, even less. And not a shred of evidence either.

Wooster read their silence as defeat. "Welcome to Bear Mountain," he said, giving them a toothy grin. He spat a stream of tobacco juice onto the roadside.

"You've got a funny kind of way of welcoming people," Stanley said.

"We don't like flatlanders messing in our business." He nodded in the direction of Tom's truck. "That's not supposed to be parked there, either. Maybe you better be on your way."

Tom bit back a reply and, turning on his heels, stormed back to the truck. Stanley ran to the passenger side.

"And watch your step," Wooster called after them, plainly feeling that he had come out on top in their little encounter.

"Fuck you," Tom called back. He slammed his door, shoved the truck into gear, and drove off, showering gravel in his wake. Glancing back, Stanley was glad to see Wooster dodging a few pebbles.

"Asshole," Tom muttered, not condescending to look back.

"What are we going to do?" Stanley asked.

"We're going to find out who murdered Donnie McIntosh. And I am personally going to shove his head up that fucker's ass."

"Personally, I'd like to see that."

* * * *

They rode in silence for a few minutes. Finally, Stanley said, "Can I ask a question?"

"If it's about that asshole policeman..."

"It isn't, not at all. I promise."

"Okay. Shoot."

Stanley cleared his throat again, loudly. "I was thinking about, well, you know, the other day, when you got here, you were, uh, you know, you and I, we, like..."

"We fucked? Is that what you're trying to say?"

"Yes. Yes, that's it exactly, we, uh, we had sexual relations, and, see, I was wondering ... I mean, maybe that was just a one time thing, or did you think ... would you want...?"

"To go again? Is that what you're hemming and hawing about?"

"Sort of," Stanley said, and then, more decisively, "Yes. Exactly."

"Jesus, Stanley, I was planning on waiting till we got back to the cabin. You know, a bed and a shower and stuff. But, fuck, if you're in a really big hurry, you can blow me here, I can drive while I get my knob oiled."

"Well, that's certainly romantic," Stanley said in an icy voice.

"Romantic? Shit, Stanley, I'm still trying to get my head around the idea of you and me fucking, and you want

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romantic? I can't do romantic, I'm not a hearts and flowers kind of guy. You know what I am."

"Yes. I certainly do," Stanley agreed, and thought it safer not to embellish that statement. Not if he planned to get anything going when they got back to the cabin.

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Chapter Twenty-one

Except, when they got back to the cabin, it did not look as if they were going to get anything going.

It was dark by then, no lights showing anywhere. Stanley had been thinking about what was coming, excitement overruling his irritation, and thinking how they were tactfully going to get Carl, who was almost certain to be back by now, out of the way. They couldn't keep shooing him out to the front porch.

Now, though, seeing the cabin's dark windows, he felt a twinge of misgiving. Carl wasn't here for them to get rid of. And he should have been, should have been back by now. It was no more than a fifteen minute walk, probably less, from Safeway to here. Allow another fifteen minutes for shopping. But, it was an hour now, more like an hour and a half, since they had dropped him off. The misgiving mushroomed to a certainty: something was wrong.

"I wonder where," he started to say, when his phone did its Can-Can thing.

"Carl's been arrested again," Libby said without preamble, sounding frantic.

"What? What'd he do?" Stanley asked, cursing himself silently for not keeping closer tabs on her brother.

"He attacked that therapist, that Miller. In his office. He barged in there, stormed past the receptionist, and started whaling on him. The receptionist called the cops, and they picked him up."

Stanley groaned aloud. "Where are you?"

"I'm just on my way to the station now, to see if I can get him out."

"We'll meet you there," Stanley said. Tom was already unbuttoning his shirt. He paused, looking a question in Stanley's direction.

"We have to go," Stanley said with a disappointed sigh. "I'll explain on the way."

* * * *

Only, when they arrived at the station, pulling into the parking lot just a minute or two behind Libby, they found that Carl was not under arrest. He was sitting in one of the wooden chairs in the waiting area. The Chief was there too, obviously awaiting their arrival.

"You okay?" Libby asked Carl. He only made a face and looked at the Chief, and down at the floor. "Is he under arrest?" she asked the Chief.

"No charges," Chief Burger said, sounding altogether disappointed. "Miller says it was all a mistake. Said his receptionist had misinterpreted what she saw." His expression said he didn't believe it. "No explanation for how Miller got his split lip, or the bruises. Still, if the man doesn't want to press charges..."

He shrugged his disapproval, and turned to Carl. "'Course, I could hold you for breaking the conditions of your bond. You were supposed to be in the custody of a family member."

"Except," Libby said quickly, "when he is at his therapist's. That was a condition of his bond, too."

"You're saying this was just a regular visit?"

She gave the Chief an innocent smile. "I dropped him there an hour or so ago for a session." Stanley smiled too. He admired a good liar.

The Chief did not smile. "Must have been a pretty physical session."

"Maybe they were acting out," Stanley said. "That's very much in fashion these days. In therapy. In the big city. Probably, things just got a little rougher than they had intended."

The Chief looked unconvinced. "Get him out of here," he said in a frustrated voice, and turned to go back into his office. "Before I change my mind and think of something to hold him on."

* * * *

Outside, in the parking lot, Tom turned on a still silent Carl. "That wasn't a smart thing to do, Junior," he said.

"The man's a prick." Sullen, Carl refused to meet anyone's eyes.

"Maybe so. But attacking your therapist shows a violent temper and a destructive streak. Think how that looks, especially if you go to trial. What's a jury going to think? You settle things with your fists? They'll wonder what kind of quarrel you had with Donnie."

"That's different. Miller had it coming. Besides, you heard the chief. The dickhead isn't going to press charges."

They waited, but that seemed to be all the explanation they were going to get out of him. "Go wait in the truck," Tom

told him. Carl gave him a sheepish look. "Go on, the truck," Tom said in the Big Daddy tone of voice that even Stanley was reluctant to challenge when it was directed at him.

Carl didn't challenge it either. He walked obediently over to the Ram, climbed in, slammed the door rather noisily. He sat in the front passenger's seat, staking his claim to it, and looked stonily out through the windshield, ignoring them.

"So, what do you think that was all about?" Tom asked. "About this doctor, I mean. A guy comes in, punches him out, and the doc doesn't want to press charges? Doesn't make any sense to me. Why wouldn't he want to?"

"Dinner with the Borgias, I think," Stanley said. "And he's not a doctor."

"What's that mean? Dinner with who? Is that somebody local?"

But Libby had laughed when Stanley said it. "I remember that," she said. "High school lit. Wodehouse, wasn't it?"

"Close. Beerbohm."

"Let me think what he said." She rolled her eyes skyward. "This isn't exact, but, something like, 'an aristocratic Roman might say, 'I'm dining tonight with the Borgias.' But none of them ever said, 'I dined last night with the Borgias.'" Wasn't that it?"

Stanley nodded his approval. "Close enough. Let's just say Mister Miller dined with the Borgias, so to speak. Carl was simply administering some much needed medicine."

Tom looked from one to the other, and shook his head. "Great," he said, starting for the truck. "I've got two of them

quoting poetry now." He glanced toward the truck. "I guess we'd better get him home."

"I'm headed back to the shop," Libby said. "Try to keep him out of any more trouble, okay?"

"I'll think of something to settle him down," Tom said. Stanley hoped he wasn't getting ideas.

* * * *

"So," Carl said when they were back at the cabin, sounding all too eager, Stanley thought, and not at all remorseful over what he'd done, "what are we going to do now?"

Tom looked at Stanley. The gleam in Tom's eyes told Stanley he hadn't forgotten their unfinished business, which Carl's non-arrest had interrupted. Stanley might have had to prompt him, but Tom's fires never needed a lot of stoking.

"Uh," Tom said hesitantly, scratching absentmindedly at his crotch, "what I was thinking is, you know, Stanley and me, we were kind of thinking ... uh, we sort of thought we might ... you know. We have some stuff to, uh, talk over." He looked for help to Stanley, who decided he'd let Tom deal with this.

Carl's hopeful smile faded. He glowered at Tom and then Stanley, who only smiled and shrugged, and back to Tom. "Meaning, you guys are going to get it on," Carl said in a resentful voice. "And I'm in the way?"

"I didn't exactly say we were..." Tom said, embarrassed.

"Two's company, three's a crowd, right? Fuck it. I can take a hint." Carl disappeared into his bedroom, and reappeared a minute later, quickly and clumsily folding a sleeping bag all

which ways. "I'll sleep out on the back deck," he said, and added, loudly, "where I won't be in anybody's damned way." He stomped outside, sliding the door closed with a bang.

"What was that all about?" Tom asked, staring after him.

"He's got a crush on you."

"Junior? The kid?" Tom looked surprised. Probably, Stanley thought, he really had not noticed. Tom was truly not the most sensitive when it came to someone else's feelings.

"He's not exactly a kid, you know."

"So," Tom said, frowning in the direction of the deck, "what does that mean? He's got a crush on me? You mean, like, romantic? Or, what, a case of the hots? And what am I supposed to do about that, start fucking him too?"

"No," Stanley said, maybe a shade too firmly. He put his hands on his hips. "You are most certainly not supposed to start fucking Carl Hunter. You're my..." He caught himself before he said too much—and saw, too, the quick, disapproving look Tom gave him.

"Your what?"

"My, oh, I don't know what I was going to say," Stanley laughed lightly and waved a dismissive hand in the air, "my partner, I guess I was going to say. In crime investigation, I mean."

"You were going to say I'm your lover, weren't you?" Tom accused him, and when Stanley did not reply, he said, emphatically, "Stanley, we are not lovers. Or partners or, well, whatever you were about to say."

Hands went back to hips. "Oh, is that so? Would you mind telling me just exactly what are we then, because I'd like to

know? You come flying up here from San Francisco to rip my clothes off me and fuck me in the ass—and you know perfectly well I'm not into getting fucked—"

"You said you liked it."

"I did like it. Well, no, I didn't, exactly. I mean, I hated it, to be honest, but I liked it because it was you, because it's the sort of thing lovers do. When your lover fucks you, you love it whether you hate it or not."

"Stanley, that doesn't make any sense. And you never say fuck."

"I do when I'm pissed."

"You never say pissed, either."

"I do when I'm..." and thought how silly this was sounding. "Besides, yes it does too make sense, if you weren't so damned stubborn stupid. Most cops don't fuck one another in the butt, you know, unless there's something going on between them, something more than, 'hey, let's go out tonight and handcuff a couple of perps together.' So, the big question is, what exactly is going on between us, Mister Danzel? If we're not lovers."

"I don't know."

They glared at one another for a long moment. Finally, Stanley said, in an ominously quiet voice, "Let me ask you this one, then. Let's keep it simple. Do you love me?"

It took Tom an agonizingly long time to answer. "Honestly? Maybe. I don't—I don't know that either."

Stanley heaved a great sigh. "Okay. That just tears it. It's a good thing you got yourself a room down at that motel." He

picked up Tom's windbreaker from the chair and flung it at him.

Tom caught it one handed and stared wide-eyed. "I thought we were going to, you know. I thought you were all hot to boogie. Are you throwing me out?"

"Bingo. And the next time you show up, leave your hard on at home."

For a moment, Tom stared at him disbelievingly. Finally, he gave a grunt and a fierce scowl, and balling the windbreaker in his fist, strode for the front door. "Fine," he said. "If that's how you want it."

"You know," Stanley called after him, "you are nothing but coffee soup. Just coffee soup and an old dish of snow ice cream."

"You drive me crazy. Half the time I don't even know what the fuck you're talking about, Stan."

"Stanley!" he shouted, but he shouted it to an empty room. He stared morosely at the door Tom had slammed behind him, his angry words echoing, wondering if he should maybe go after him. While he was wondering, he heard the Ram's engine fire up and a second later, the truck pulled away with a squeal of tires. So much for that idea.

Behind him, the deck door slid open. "Did Tom leave?" Carl asked. "What happened? I heard shouting."

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing happened. And yes, His Majesty is gone."

"For the night?"

"At least. Maybe the next century or two. You might as well bring your sleeping bag in and go back to your room."

"No thanks, I know when I'm not welcome," Carl said, and went back outside, closing the sliding door with a bang.

"Another happy night at the Bickerson's," Stanley said to the once again empty room.

The sudden ring of his cell phone was like the peal of bells, making him start. He was almost certain of what he would find when he answered it, and he was right on the money: another missed call message and Penelope Hunter's phone number yet again.

He called it back, heard the phone ring again and again, but no answer. Maybe she had turned the ringer off. But why on earth did she keep calling and then not stay on the line to talk to him, or even answering when he called her back?

Maybe Hannah was right, maybe she was getting addled. For sure, something was rotten in the Alpines, apart from the bears pooping in the woods. He glanced at the windows, but the night beyond and the lights within made them oblong mirrors. He saw nothing but his own unhappy expression.

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Chapter Twenty-two

"Oh, no, what are you doing here?"

Sergeant Nathan Wooster was in the act of adding a dollop of ketchup to the plate with his fries. Crazy Mary's sudden appearance next to his table startled him so that the dollop became instead a lake, half the bottle at least, all but obliterating the food on the plate and leaving only here and there the end of a French fry sticking up.

"Now, Mary, goldarnit, look what you made me do. What do you mean, what am I doing? I was about to eat this here Wagon Wheeler with fries, till you caused me to mess it up beyond redemption."

"But that young man, the one from San Francisco—"

"Don't you be worrying none about those two, one's tucked in at Libby Hunter's cabin for the night, and the other's settled in just down the street at the Mountain Inn. And this is the first chance I've had all day to eat a decent meal, till you come along and—"

"No, no, he's not. And he's in danger, grave danger, and—"

"Mary, for Pete's sake." It was June, bustling up with a coffee pot in her hand. "You know what Joe said. Now you just git on out of here, you hear me, before we both get in hot water. Git!"

Mary seemed not to have heard her. She was staring at Wooster's plate—which he did admit, looked pretty awful now that she'd messed it up like that. He started to say something

sharp to her, but her expression was so horrified, it gave him pause. Plus, she was speechless, and that in itself was a startling thing. In his experience, once Mary got her mouth to running, it was like Bantas Creek, you couldn't stop it with a beaver dam.

"Mary," he started to say, but she suddenly gasped and said, in a croak of a whisper, "Death." She clapped both scrawny hands over her mouth, her eyes so wide they looked like hubcaps.

Before she could say anything more, June was shepherding her toward the door, saying "Go on now," with one hand on Mary's arm, the other still holding the coffee pot like a weapon. Mary went without any resistance, not even looking back at Wooster, seemingly all too eager to go. He watched her disappear out the door, practically running.

June hurried back with the pot to refill Wooster's coffee cup. "That Mary," she said, shaking her head, "she just gets crazier by the day. You want me to get you another Wagon Wheeler?"

"Nah, don't bother, this is fine, I'm not as hungry as I thought I was," he said.

"Well, if you're sure."

He nodded and added sugar and cream to the coffee and stirred it absentmindedly, looking with distaste at the mess on his plate. At the sea of red, covering everything: fries, burger, even the pickle.

Death?

* * * *

"Stanley, you can be such a bitch sometimes," he told himself aloud.

He was on his way to Hannah's, walking along the edge of the street. And beating himself up as he went. Over Carl, actually, more than over Tom. Sparks flying between him and Tom were nothing new, they had been breaking up since before they ever got together, if you wanted to look at it like that.

He had been pretty petty with Carl, though. Who, after all, was not much more than a kid, and was doing what young men often did, forming a crush on an older man. It wasn't his fault that the older man happened to be one Stanley Korski was all hung up on. Rather foolishly hung up on, he told himself, and not for the first time.

Still, foolishness notwithstanding, wasn't love supposed to ennoble, and here he was instead turning into one of those catty queens that he despised—and over a man who couldn't even bring himself to say, "I love you."

The sad reality was, he had been an absolute bitch with Carl, and he knew it. Worse, to someone whose life was obviously not a happy one, and who now was in a particularly ugly spot, from which he was counting on Stanley and Tom to extricate him. It was true, what he'd told Tom at the very beginning, Carl was a victim too of whoever had murdered Donnie. A victim who had, not at all surprisingly, attached himself to the strong, older man who had suddenly appeared in his life. To Carl, Tom must look like the cliché knight in shining armor, never mind that the armor had a few rust spots on it.

And why wouldn't he develop a crush on the big ape, he asked himself. I did, and I'm nowhere near as pathetic as he is. Which, all in all, just at the moment, he was not entirely sure of either.

While he was castigating himself, it occurred to him as well that Carl Hunter was not nearly the loser that others considered him or that he seemed to consider himself. He'd shown a touching sensitivity to little Donnie, hadn't he? And he'd punched out Donnie's therapist for molesting him. The guy had more balls than he gave himself credit for.

He decided he'd make it up to Carl when he got back, be particularly nice. It was the least he could do, and it was the right thing to do. Goodbye bitch, hello sweetheart, that was his plan of action.

First thing, he'd insist Carl move back into the house. It was ridiculous for him to be sleeping on the back deck, like some kind of leper. Besides, Tom wasn't there anyway, so it wasn't like he'd be in the way.

Maybe he'd even suggest they go out for a drink. Or, go for a walk. Hold hands and skip up and down the street. Or, well, what? He thought of what he might do to make things up to him.

No, not that, certainly. Anyway, it wasn't him Carl wanted, not since he'd laid eyes on Tom. Who wants a tofu burger when there's a T-bone on the grill? A good meaty one, and sizzling hot.

Maybe, he thought, he should go ahead and fix the two of them up. Whether he was conscious of it or not, Carl was certainly primed for it. And Tom might be, too. He had hot

nuts, and Stanley had the impression that he had never been particularly concerned with where he exercised them. With women, anyway, in the past, but surely he was beyond that particular barrier now.

Or maybe he should suggest that Carl take a stroll down to that motel. Tom might actually welcome him. Which didn't exactly raise Stanley's spirits, but maybe if Stanley encouraged them to do the deed, it would do everybody some good.

Well, the two of them, anyway. He couldn't quite see himself turning cartwheels over it.

But, really, what right did he have to decide whether they should get it on or not? What claim did he honestly have on Tom Danzel? A few episodes of white hot sex, yes, but what else? His friends had scoffed. Even Chris, his best friend, had been no more approving in his sympathetic silence. Stanley knew, against his every inclination, that they were right, too. What greater cliché than the gay man in love with the straight one? Men like Tom had enough of the voodoo in them to do the act. Stanley had plenty of experience with men like him. Every gay male did. And most of them had enough sense to know it could never go any further than that.

He heard a car behind him, traveling slowly. Surely not that moron cop, keeping tabs on him? He started to look back, but the sound disappeared. Apparently the car had turned off. *I'm getting wiggy*, he told himself.

He paused as he approached Hannah's house. The front was dark, and he wondered if she and her mother had gone out. He glanced at his watch. It was eleven. Maybe they'd

gone to bed already. He walked around the corner of the house, saw lights spilling from the windows in the rear, and went in that direction.

The lights were on in the kitchen, and in Mrs. Hunter's bedroom at the opposite end of the house, the long front room in between dark.

The kitchen curtains were open and he could see Hannah inside, framed in the window. If she looked out, she would see him as well. He watched, meaning to wave for her attention, and realized belatedly what she was doing. Hannah was preparing a syringe, obviously intending to give her mother a shot. He paused, one foot on the step up to the deck, watching as she lifted syringe and vial up to the ceiling light, filled the syringe, removed it from the vial. She held the syringe up again, checking the dosage level.

Poop. He hated needles. Even when he had blood drawn, he could not watch while the nurse stuck the needle into his arm. He had to look away when they gave him flu shots, and you could barely feel those.

He mounted the steps to the rear deck quietly, sat on one of the hard plastic chairs there. He'd just wait for the medication ritual to be finished before he knocked. Then he wouldn't have to watch it.

A raccoon shuffled out of the darkness, on a route that would take it to the garbage cans at the corner of the house. They eyed one another with mutual suspicion. Were raccoons dangerous? This one, however, apparently thought better of his supper plans and veered off again into the darkness.

When Stanley looked again, Hannah had disappeared from the kitchen. The curtains were drawn at the window to Mrs. Hunter's bedroom, but the window was open, so that the voices within carried out to him easily.

"What's this," he heard the older woman say, and Hannah replied, "Your insulin, dear."

"Insulin? But I don't take insulin, I have my pills." In a voice peeved as much as puzzled.

"Doctor Gooden said we need to switch. He said it was time."

"But, why so much—oh, what are you doing it this way for? I didn't know people take it intravenously."

"Doctor Gooden said just for the first time or two, to give the body a wake up call, so to speak. We'll cut back in a day or so. Hold still, now."

"But I don't see why this is necessary at all. My sugar's been fine. I tested it just a little while ago and it was perfectly normal. Why does he want to change things?" Impatience made her voice rise.

"Mother, I'm not a doctor. I'm not even a nurse. I'm just following his instructions. Now, make a fist for me. There, that's better."

"Ouch."

"Sorry. This is new for me, too, you know."

A moment of silence, and then, "Well, I'm going to talk to Gooden. I don't like shots. It's bad enough, taking those pills, they upset my stomach. But needles, you know I hate needles."

"Yes, dear. Now, you lie back and relax."

"I want some orange juice."

"In a bit. Give the insulin a few minutes."

"Oh, this is so..." in a voice of exasperation.

"I'll be back in a few minutes. I'll bring your orange juice then."

A shadow moved across the curtains, and a moment later, Hannah appeared once again in the kitchen. She looked upset. Probably, Stanley thought, she didn't like giving shots anymore than her mother liked getting them. He himself would hate to have to give anyone a shot. And the business about the insulin—he wondered why the doctor had prescribed it if Penelope's glucose levels were near normal. And hadn't Hannah herself pooh-poohed her mother's diabetes? But, that was between her and the doctor, of course. Or, between Hannah and the doctor, it seemed.

He gave Hannah a few minutes to compose herself before he got up from the chair and went to knock softly at the living room's sliding door.

The outside light flicked on a moment later, over bright in the darkness, blinding him temporarily and making him blink. The living room curtains whisked aside and Hannah stared out, frowning, her eyes wide. Stanley smiled apologetically and waved his fingers in greeting.

She peered at him through the glass for a long moment, looking uncertain and none too happy to see him, and glanced over her shoulder toward the bedroom before she unlatched the door and slid it open.

"What do you want?" she asked, blocking the entrance. Her eyes, black as obsidian in this gloom, regarded him with undisguised hostility.

So much for mountain hospitality. "Your mom phoned me again. She left a message she wanted to see me."

"I'm sure it was nothing. Anyway, she's resting." She continued to stand blocking the doorway. "She's asleep, as a matter of fact."

Stanley lifted an eyebrow. "Is she, already. That's funny. I would have sworn I heard her voice a minute ago. When you were giving her her shot."

Something flashed in those dark eyes, like a glint of light on a knife blade. Her mouth tightened. Finally, she took a reluctant step back.

"Come in," she said. "I'll have to see—she's been feeling very depressed lately, I told you that. I doubt she'll want to see anyone."

Stanley had to edge a little sideways to get past her. She slid the door closed after him, and he heard the latch snap into place with an odd sound of finality. After the glare of the outside light, the living room was pitch dark. Faint light bled through the gloom from the kitchen at one end and the bedroom at the other.

"Well, she did say she wanted to see me," he said. "That's why I'm here." He started in the direction of the bedroom.

"Wait," Hannah said behind him. "I'm sure she's asleep. How long were you out there anyway? What did you hear?"

"Not more than a minute," he said without slowing his steps. Something about Hannah's behavior rang alarm bells in

his mind. Why shouldn't she want him to see her mother? And if Penelope Hunter were asleep, she must have nodded off instantly. She had certainly been awake, and unhappy about that shot, not more than two minutes before. "It's okay, if she's asleep, I'll tiptoe right back out again."

She wasn't asleep, though, she was sitting up bleary eyed in her bed, leaning against a pair of blue satin pillows. She turned her head as he came in. It took her a moment to recognize him. "Stanley," she said, pleased. "I'm so glad you came. I need to talk ... oh, Hannah, did you bring my orange juice?"

"I—I forgot," Hannah said from the doorway behind Stanley.

Mrs. Hunter rolled her eyes, and managed an expression of long-suffering. "Please, darling," she said in a wheedling tone, "I'm really thirsty. My throat is as dry as dust."

Although he didn't hear her, Hannah apparently left the room. Mrs. Hunter had been looking over Stanley's shoulder, but now she looked at him directly, her expression nervous, even fearful.

"Stanley," she said in a stage whisper, "I've got to talk to you, but alone. Later. Hannah will take Josephine out for her walk in a little while, and we can talk freely. Don't go before then, please. I've been, well, I've not been—oh, thank you, dear."

Hannah came in with the orange juice. Mrs. Hunter took it with a grateful smile and, when Hannah remained by the bedside, watching with a resentful expression, Mrs. Hunter lifted the glass and took the merest sip.

"Oh, that is so delicious," she said, smacking her lips with exaggerated pleasure and setting the glass on the table by the bed. Stanley saw that her hand was unsteady, and the orange juice sloshed onto the tabletop, but she seemed not to notice. "Thank you, dear."

"I think you'd better go," Hannah told Stanley. "Mother looks tired."

"No, no, I want Stanley to stay. I haven't heard a single thing about what he's been doing to clear up this business with Carl. Why don't you take Josephine out for her walk, darling, and Stanley and I will catch up on the news?"

Now that he was here, though, it seemed to him also that Mrs. Hunter did not look well. A damp sweat had broken out on her brow and her hands were definitely shaking.

"Actually," Stanley started to say, "Maybe I should..."

"There isn't any news," Hannah said shortly, as if Stanley weren't there. "And you look very tired to me, Mother."

"But, I'm not ... oh, is that my...?" She hesitated, tossing her head, looking puzzled. "You know, now that you mention it, I do feel..."

Her face went white, not gradually but suddenly, and her eyes widened. "Hannah," she croaked in alarm, barely able to get the single word out. She lifted her hands to her throat, as if trying to get some obstruction out of it, and her breath became a gasp.

Hannah had stepped away from the bed, behind Stanley. Mrs. Hunter's eyes rolled back in her head and she began to thrash about on the bed, obviously going into some kind of convulsion.

"Call 911," Stanley said. He ran to the bed, kneeling over the stricken woman, attempting to administer CPR.

"Hannah—" He looked, but she had left the room. "Hannah," he shouted, "Call 911."

His eyes fell on the nightstand, and saw the syringe, and the vial of insulin there. In a flash, he knew what must have happened. Insulin shock. An unaccustomed dose ... wasn't that what the Klaus von Bulow thing had been about in that movie? Except this had been an accident. Or...

Hannah said, from the doorway, her voice calm, disinterested, almost, "It's okay. Everything's under control."

"Hannah, your mother is—"

"Dying." Only that one word.

Stanley turned his head to stare at her. She sounded so matter-of-fact about it. Shouldn't she be in a panic, or some distress, at least? She raised a hand to the collar of her shirt, and as she did so, something glittered in the lamplight. A ring, an enormous purple stone. In an instant, he knew it was her mother's missing amethyst. But what did that mean, if Hannah were wearing it on her finger now, so openly, when supposedly it had gone missing? She didn't care if her mother saw it?

Behind him, Mrs. Hunter continued to thrash about wildly for a moment. The bed creaked as she gave a particularly violent spasm, and a sound came from her that needed no expert to identify as a death rattle.

Unless Stanley was very much mistaken, Penelope Hunter was no longer dying. She was dead. No, of course it didn't

matter if Penelope Hunter saw her missing ring on her daughter's finger. Not now.

"She must have taken too much of her insulin," Hannah said.

"But I saw you," Stanley started to say, and caught himself.

Not quick enough, though. She made a hissing sound, like a goose that's been startled. "How long were you outside before you knocked?"

"No more than a minute, a few seconds, actually," he said quickly, feigning what he hoped looked like innocence. "Did you call 911?"

Her eyes were hooded over, like a vulture's eyeing a piece of carrion. "I will," she said. She turned and left the room.

A little late, Stanley thought, but did not say. He looked past the bed and saw the syringe and the vial of insulin on the nightstand.

Like a pool of water when a stone is thrown into it, the pattern of his thoughts broke apart and then settled back, but not as it had been before, the very addition of the rock changing the pattern.

On an impulse, he reached across the bed and snatched up the syringe and the insulin bottle, intending to drop them into his pocket.

"Leave them where they are," Hannah said from behind him.

Stanley looked in her direction. She stood just inside the doorway, holding her shotgun—aimed directly at him.

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Chapter Twenty-three

And there it was, the deadly wrong. If ever he had seen murder staring out from someone's eyes, he saw it now in hers. Around them, the bedroom seemed to shrink and darken.

"Get up from the bed," she said.

"But..."

"Now. Do as I say. Or I'll shoot you and say I saw you assaulting my mother."

"That is so ridiculous," Stanley said, but he did get up from the bed. "Everyone knows I'm as queer as a three dollar bill. Why on earth would I be assaulting your mother?"

Hannah shrugged. "Who knows? People go crazy. Maybe she called you queer, and you snapped. Your fingerprints are on the syringe now. Yours and hers. Mine aren't. I wiped them off. So it might have been an accidental overdose, or even suicide. Or you might have killed her."

"What possible motive could I have?"

Another shrug. "She does hate queers, you know. Maybe she found out you were fooling around with Carl. Which, by the way, are you?"

"Carl? Good Heavens, no, Carl isn't even gay, he—"

"He was gay enough to fool around with that other faggot. I saw them, they were—" she struggled for words, a bead of spittle forming at the corner of her mouth. "It was disgusting. You're disgusting. All of you people."

"You know, Hannah, I don't think it's your mother who hates queers, I think it's you."

Her smile was icy cold. "Yes. It's true. I always have."

"But, still—you'd murder your mother because I'm queer? That doesn't make any sense."

"Step away from the bed." She moved aside, gestured toward the door with the gun. "Out there."

"What are you going to do? You can't just shoot me in cold blood." He wasn't quite convinced, though.

She didn't answer. "The kitchen," she said.

She switched off the bedroom light as they left. The front room was still dark, but there was light enough from the kitchen to see his way. Hannah followed him. When he stepped into the kitchen, Stanley saw what had been concealed from him earlier when he'd watched through the window. The poodle, Josephine, lay in a lifeless heap on the floor by the back door, a puddle of blood drying about her head. A blood spattered golf club leaned against the wall nearby.

"The dog too?" he said, giving Hannah an angry look. "What could the dog possibly have done to you?"

"She was a pain in the ass. Stand there. Don't move." She reached a jacket down from a peg by the door. Stanley watched for some opportunity to run at her while she shrugged it on, but she was too far away from him, and she managed to keep the gun trained more or less in his direction. No doubt she could shoot him before he got even half way across the room. Guns were faster than feet. It didn't take much time to shoot somebody.

She picked up a ring of keys and a flashlight from the kitchen counter. "Outside," she said, turning off the lights as they went out, plunging the house into darkness.

A frightened moon had hidden behind some clouds. "That way," Hannah said, indicating the water. After the bright lights of the kitchen, Stanley could barely see and he stumbled once. He thought briefly about falling to the ground, trying to get out of firing range, but there was little cover between here and the lake, just the little metal shed, and that didn't look very promising.

"Stop here," she said when they reached the shed. She tossed Stanley the keys. "Open it. The brass key."

Stanley hefted the keys in his hand, wondering if he should throw them at her. But they weren't that heavy, and his pitching arm wasn't that good. He found the brass key instead, fumbled with the padlock on the shed's door, and got it open.

She shined the flashlight past him, looked around with it for a minute. "There," she said, pointing with the light, "That length of chain. Pick that up and bring it with you." Stanley bent to retrieve the chain. "Let's go," Hannah said.

"Where now?" The chain was heavy. Stanley hoisted it over his shoulder. In the distant, he heard a faint scraping of stone. That raccoon coming back, he guessed, but Hannah seemed not to hear it. Maybe shotguns caused a hearing loss. Something Freudian.

"The boat."

The boat, a fourteen footer, he guessed, floated in the shallows by the edge of the water, tethered by a knotted rope

to a wooden post on the shore. She directed him into the front of the boat, waited until he was seated, dropping the chain into the bottom of the boat with a grateful woof of breath, before she carefully slipped rope from pole to set the boat adrift. She gave it a shove, sending it into slightly deeper water, and climbed in herself.

She sat in the rear facing him, the shotgun resting on her knees, and reached behind her to start the outboard motor. It coughed a time or two and Stanley had a fleeting hope that it wouldn't start, but then it kicked in with a loud roar. She throttled it back to a muted putter, and guided the boat slowly away from the shore.

"Where are we going?"

"Out there."

Not very informative. Stanley took a chance and looked over his shoulder. Distant lights showed a couple of other boats out, but he couldn't gauge how far away they were. He rather thought Hannah would shoot him if he started yelling.

Libby had said something about voices carrying over water, though. What if he engaged Hannah in conversation? Were the other boaters close enough to hear? It was all he could think of at the moment.

"Hannah, what's this all about, anyway?" He started out talking normally, raising his voice very gradually. "You didn't murder your mother because I'm queer. I know you didn't like taking care of her, but surely you weren't that unhappy."

"My mother?" It was almost a curse. "I loathed her. She was never a mother to me. Not a real mother. Do you have any idea what kind of life I've had? Or, not had, would be

more like it. All I've ever done is take care of them, all of them, my father, her, Carl. Helpless, the whole bunch. Libby's disgusting, that lesbian business, but at least she had the gumption to get out from underfoot, I'll give her that."

She looked around to get her bearings, and edged the boat slightly to the right. Even at their reined-in speed they were already far from the shore, the lights of houses and passing cars increasingly distant, the blackness growing deeper and more ominous. The muted grumble of the outboard beat at the darkness.

"I've wanted her dead for years," Hannah said with sudden vehemence, turning back to look at him. Her face was twisted, her words dripped acid. "You think I ought to be sorry, don't you? But I tell you, I'm not, not for a minute. I wish I'd done it long ago." She was silent for a moment before she spat out, "The bitch!"

"But, then, why now...?"

"It was that sick little pervert, that queer friend of Carl's..."

As if a sheet of lightning had suddenly illuminated the water's surface, he saw with startling clarity exactly where this was leading. *Talk about slow, Stanley.* "It was you," he blurted out. "You killed him."

Her laugh was like an arctic chill. "I was walking that damned dog, along the lake, and I saw them, Carl and that McIntosh boy, sitting on a bench. They were ... they didn't see me at all, they were so wrapped up in one another. It was disgusting, it made my blood boil. I wanted to kill them both, Carl, too. And then, they quarreled about something, and Carl stumbled off, I suppose he had finished with what they—had

finished, and he threw that boy down on the ground and ran away. And that boy, that horrible little creature, he was just lying there, crying like a baby. At first, he didn't even hear when I came up to him. And then, I must have made a sound. He said, without looking around, he said, 'Carl?'"

Stanley had an image in his mind, of Donnie lying in the sand, crying—crying his heart out because he had just driven away the only friend he had, the only one in the world who cared for him. "And you killed him. Just like that?"

"No, not just like that. I didn't walk up to him with the idea of killing him. At first, that didn't even cross my mind. I meant just to tell him what I thought of him, to tell him to keep his filthy hands off my brother. But, there he was, blubbering and moaning, and when he spoke Carl's name, like he wanted to go right back to what they had been doing, it made me furious. I was blind, I was so angry."

She paused for so long, Stanley was about to prompt her, when she said, "All of a sudden, he was silent. He wasn't crying anymore. I didn't realize for the longest time why, that I had hit him with the golf club, the back of his head. I didn't even remember swinging it. But I must have, because when I looked, his head was all caved in and the club was covered with blood. And Josephine was fit to be tied, she was so frazzled she couldn't even bark, she just kept making these little wheezing noises and bouncing up and down like some kind of spring toy. And he was just lying there. I was half afraid he wasn't dead yet, that he would rise up and accuse me of trying to kill him."

Stanley couldn't think what to say, he could only stare in horror at her through the darkness. But, now that she had started, she needed no prompting to continue her bloody story.

"I turned him over and dragged him to that big rock nearby, and I lifted his head and brought it down again and again on the rock, as hard as I could, till I was sure he was really and truly dead, and they would never be able to say what he was killed with." She was so worked up she was all but panting. She struggled to get her breathing under control, and after a long moment, she said, "Then I took Josephine and went home."

She said the last so calmly, in such an emotionless voice, she might have been discussing the weather. Staring through the darkness of the boat at her, Stanley thought that she was probably mad as a hatter, maybe had been for years. That realization, however, did nothing to raise his spirits.

"But, Carl, when they arrested him, weren't you concerned? Your own brother. Didn't you worry about what would happen to him?"

She gave a derisive snort. "It was an accident. That's how they saw it. That's how he saw it himself. He'd never even have gone to prison if you'd stayed out of it. If he'd stuck with his original story, admitted that he'd done it, they'd have given him a smack on the hand, and no one the worse."

"Except Donnie McIntosh," Stanley couldn't resist adding, unable to hide his anger.

She smirked. "You think I regret killing him? No more than I'll regret killing you, and for the same reasons. A pair of

queers. Why should anyone care if the world has two less queers in it?"

"And you don't regret killing your mother either? She wasn't queer."

"She was a burden I'd had to carry for years. But that wasn't why I killed her. I had to. She knew what I had done. Not then, she didn't put it all together at the time. But she saw me, that night. I came in with the golf club. I was washing the blood off of it when she came into the kitchen, demanding to know why Josephine was so upset. I told her a coyote had tried to grab Josephine and I'd killed him with the golf club. She was all right with that, she believed me. But, later, when you and your friend started talking about someone clubbing Donnie to death, I could see she remembered the golf club, that she was thinking about it. I realized that's why she wanted to talk to you. I've been keeping her doped up, but I couldn't do that forever. Sooner or later, you two were going to link up."

"So you murdered her. In cold blood."

"You could say it was you two who killed her, as far as that goes. And Libby. If you'd all stayed out of it, kept your mouths shut ... but, really, it's better this way, believe me," she said hotly. "For everyone. She was a pitiful unhappy woman, and she couldn't be satisfied without keeping everyone else unhappy too. Have you ever looked at Carl, really looked at him? That was what she did to him. Her favorite, her pet, all his life, and she made a vegetable of him, a spineless, sniveling baby who'd let another man do things like that to him. And what did she do to me? She

robbed me of any chance of happiness. I'm the one who always had to take care of everything, of everyone, I've never had a life of my own. Can you even imagine—?"

"Libby's okay. She's not particularly unhappy."

"Libby?" Her voice dripped with scorn. "Of course she's happy. She's gay, isn't she?" She gave a humorless bark of a laugh. "She's never had to deal with any of it, not with Father, not with Mother, not with Carl. All she's ever done is pursue her own ugly life—just like Mother."

Stanley chanced another look over his shoulder, but he really had no idea where they were. Somewhere near the middle of the lake, presumably. The lights looked far distant. On the other shore, a car played peek-a-boo in and out of the trees. He wondered if he could dive into the water before she shot him, and decided probably not. Even if he managed to get out of the boat unscathed, into the water, and that was unlikely, she'd still have a good shot at him.

"You can't just kill me, Hannah," and added, on a burst of inspiration, "for one thing, my car is parked out front of your house. They'll know I was there."

She chuckled, sounding not at all rational. In the dark of the night, far out on the vast plain of the lake, it sent a chill up and down his spine. "No it's not. I looked. You must have walked over from Libby's."

"Okay, I lied." He had continued raising his voice throughout their conversation, and the power of suggestion was having its effect. Hannah was gradually raising her voice as well. "But, the insulin. The doctor knows she wasn't on insulin. They'll guess right away—"

"The doctor prescribed the insulin. After I showed him the chart I keep of her sugar levels. They've been through the ceiling. Obviously the pills weren't working. He wrote the insulin prescription just this morning. But he's down below, in San Bernardino. And there's no reason for anyone to check with him. Everyone knows she's diabetic. She told everyone who would listen. Who would know she hasn't been on insulin for months, years?"

"Libby? Or Carl?"

She scoffed. "Do you think either of them ever helped take care of her? No, I did it all."

"I'm quite sure the doctor didn't prescribe that big a dose."

"Who will know that? When that boy died, they said in the paper that they didn't do autopsies anymore unless the death is suspicious. Who will suspect anything, no reason even to question the doctor, or do any tests to see how much she took? Even if they did, Mother prepared the shot herself. I told her to wait for me to do it, but she's always been bullheaded. And, of course, her eyesight isn't good. She must have misread the markings on the syringe."

Meaning, he thought, this wasn't some spur of the moment thing, like killing Donnie McIntosh. She had planned this well ahead. Cold blooded murder indeed, and well planned.

A wind had come up, snatching at his shirt. Waves roiled the surface of the water and made the boat rock. A surge of anger, frustration, and fear that fell just short of panic swept through him. It was cool out here on the water, almost cold, and he found that he was shivering, but not from the cold alone. He moved his feet and touched the length of chain with

them. His discovered his hands were shaking. Unless he did something, and soon, he was going to die out here, on this godforsaken patch of water, at the hands of this crazy woman. But what could he do?

He became aware that at some time it had begun to rain. Did that deaden the sound of their voices? Raindrops glittered on her coat like a scattering of diamonds. It reminded him suddenly of the ring, and when she reached a hand to throttle up the outboard slightly, the enormous amethyst on her finger glinted briefly.

Oddly, the movement helped to settle his nerves. His reasoning mind took over again from the one threatening panic. Maybe she wasn't quite so crazy, either. Probably, he thought, she would inherit—house, bank account, whatever her mother had besides the amethyst ring. That was the usual arrangement when one person took on the role of caregiver.

So, for all Hannah's griping, at bottom this could be just another case of old-fashioned greed, dressed up with accumulated grievances to make it look better. What did she care if the things she acquired were sticky with blood? Other people lived lives of sacrifice, of harsh duty, far harsher in some cases than what she had borne, and not all of their souls were curdled, remade into rank evil.

Somehow, that gave him hope. A madwoman, you were totally at the mercy of her whims. But a calculating murderess, there was always the chance you could outwit her. And he didn't think Hannah was the brightest star on the

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by Victor J. Banis

tree. The tumult inside him began to subside. There had to be something he could do.

Think, Stanley, think, he told himself, or very soon there's going to be one less fairy at the bottom of the garden. Or one more at the bottom of the lake.

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Chapter Twenty-four

He chanced another glance around. He could see one or two other boats in the distance, a far off chug of outboards. Night time fishermen, he supposed. Probably heading in, with the increasingly inclement weather. Maybe one of them would hear them, as loudly as they had been talking. Or maybe someone passing by on the shore.

But how far did the voices carry, and how clearly? Even if there were someone on the shore, and they could hear the voices, would they make out the words, actually hear what was being said? For all he knew maybe all they would hear was a murmur of quarreling voices. They'd be more likely to think it was a pair of lovers having a spat wouldn't they, than a woman with a gun getting ready to shoot a visiting San Franciscan?

The wind came in gusts now and the rain began gradually to increase in intensity. Stanley shivered. As if the night could be any more dismal. Compared to his present situation, Lady Macbeth had been on a picnic.

Over Hannah's shoulder, in the far distance he saw the lights of a boat, brighter than the others, like searchlights. They raked the water's surface, sweeping to and fro, coming closer. Stanley's spirits lifted momentarily. Maybe someone *had* heard the voices and was coming to investigate; but the next moment, the searchlights veered away from them, at an angle to the left, and began to grow more distant again.

"So," he said, sounding to his own ears by this time as if he were fairly shouting, "What exactly do you plan to do with me?"

"That's easy. You're going for a late night swim."

He looked over the side of the boat, at the restless black water, and back to her. "I'm not going in that damned water, I don't care what you say. It's ice cold. Besides, I heard there are piranhas in there."

She laughed. "Vegetarian piranhas, didn't they tell you?"

"Yeah, well maybe one of them will decide I look tasty enough to change his diet. Anyway, how long do you think it will take my body to wash ashore? Even if the piranhas strip it clean. I've had a lot of dental work over the years. There'll be no problem identifying me. And they'll know who killed me, too."

"Why should anyone suspect me? I never saw you tonight. Who even knew you were coming to my cabin?"

"Everybody," he started to say, and stopped.

She laughed again. "No one, right? If your boyfriend knew, he'd be with you. Anyway, it will be years before they find your body. You're going to be at the bottom of the lake. That's what the chain is for. You're going to wrap it around yourself before you dive in."

"Are you crazy? I'm never going to do that. You'd have to shoot me first, if..." He stopped in mid-sentence. Even in the dark, he could see the malicious grin she gave him.

"Well, if you think," he said, ratcheting the volume up another notch. Pretty soon he'd sound like Johnny Weismuller

in those old Tarzan movies, summoning the elephants. *Um-gawa, Cheetah!*

She suddenly said, "Ssh." Maybe he had gotten too loud, or maybe she had belatedly realized what he was trying to do. She motioned with the shotgun, cocking her head to listen.

Stanley listened too, and heard the sound of a powerful engine, another boat, this one an inboard, closer than the others and coming rapidly nearer, growing louder as it approached. He glanced off to the left and saw running lights now, sparkling the tops of the waves. And the searchlights, the same boat as before, the lights still swinging back and forth, but narrowing in on them, like a cat following a scent.

They sat, frozen, both of them watching the bright searchlights arcing back and forth over the surface of the water off to their left, until suddenly one beam rose, shone over their heads for a second, dipped again—and zeroed in on them. Hannah shielded her eyes against the unexpected glare and with the other hand, lowered the shotgun slightly, out of sight.

Thunder exploded suddenly off to their right, making them both jump and turn their heads in that direction. Stanley stared into the darkness. Thor's hammer, the ancients called it. What was that old saw? When it came from the left, it was an evil omen—but when it came from the right...

"Ahoy there," a voice called across to them. "Lake Patrol. Identify yourself."

In the moment that they had been distracted by the boom of thunder, the approaching boat had sidled up nearly

alongside them. Hannah looked in the direction of the voice, and back at Stanley. The gun was low enough to be out of the light, but it was still trained on him.

"It's Hannah, Hannah Hunter. Is that you, Merle?" she called back.

"Merle's sick. It's Jerry."

"What's the problem?"

"You've got no running lights. Law says you've got to have running lights at night. Especially when you're out in the rain. Somebody could run right into you in the dark, never even see you."

Stanley suppressed a smile. He couldn't see anything past those powerful beams, but he recognized that voice. He'd know it anywhere. Especially in the dark, which was when he liked most to hear it. The cavalry to the rescue.

"I've got 'em."

"You need to turn them on, then."

"Sure." She reached a hand around behind her, pantomimed throwing a switch. "Damn," she said. "They're not working. Must be some kind of short, I guess. Tell you what, I'll head straight in now. Won't take me but five minutes, ten if I go nice and slow. I'll be real careful, keep an eye out for any other boats."

"That's fine. We'll escort you." The newcomer's engine revved. The boat began to slide slowly closer, turning sideways to them, became a large, sleek silhouette, low to the water. Obviously a fast boat, its engine's sound, though muted, smooth and powerful, like the purr of a mountain cat.

"I can see well enough to make it back to the shore," Hannah said, frowning. "No need for you to trouble yourself."

"No trouble." The speedboat was only a few feet away now, riding roughly parallel to them and bobbing closer. Someone stood up in the stern, a shadow against the dark sky.

For a long moment, frozen as she was in that merciless light, Hannah looked as if some malignant deity had turned her to wood, the dark gargoyle of a face immobile and deeply etched, her whole body rigid.

The spell broke, the wood melted, the gargoyle came to decisive life. She cursed sharply under her breath and the shotgun swung away from Stanley. She raised it slightly as the patrol boat moved alongside theirs.

As she lifted the gun, Stanley lunged, shoving the barrel of the gun up at almost the same moment Tom jumped. The gun went off, pointed skyward, and the boat rocked and tipped and, as Tom landed heavily in it, pitched over. In a minute, they were all in the water.

Stanley went down, weighted by his clothes. He managed to slip his shoes off. That helped. He was struggling with his belt when strong hands grabbed him, pulled him up to the surface, and he found himself in Tom's arms—and a kiss that tasted of lake water, but was one of the sweetest he'd ever known regardless.

They treaded water for a moment, smiling at one another. "Zowie, if you'd been a minute or two later..." Stanley said.

"Nah. You knew your old man would get here in time to save your sweet little ass," Tom said, grinning.

"Hmm. I think I know what for, too."

"Christ, this water's like ice," Tom swore. "Do you swim?"

"Like Esther Williams. How about you?"

"Haven't in years. We could wait here, hang on to the boat."

"And freeze to death. Where's Hannah?"

Tom looked over his shoulder. "She's making for shore like a shark."

"Don't let her get away."

"Relax, the locals are there. The patrol boat's tracking her, and Wooster and gang are on shore. They're a little slow on the uptake, but once they get their asses in gear ... they'll pick her up."

"Good. Talk about a bitch. Come on, let's swim."

They started for the shore. "Jesus, that's miles away," Tom said.

"We can make it." The cold water had shocked Stanley into full consciousness, and he'd been in the mountains long enough for his lungs to adjust to the thin air. He struck out with long strokes, kicking his feet hard, glad he'd taken time to shed his shoes.

It was quickly obvious that Tom, though, not yet acclimated to the altitude, was running out of breath.

"You okay?" Stanley asked.

"I'll make it," Tom said, puffing and stroking frantically. "I don't know why I'm so out of breath."

"It's the altitude."

Tom was struggling now, losing his rhythm. "Give me your hand," Stanley said, reaching for him.

"No," Tom said in a stubborn voice. "I'll make it."

"Uh, Tom..."

"But, just in case I don't make it, though," Tom said, gasping, "there's something I have to say to you, Stanley. I have to tell you..."

"You can wade."

"Yes. If I don't make it, I want you to know ... I can ... what?"

"It's shallower here. We can wade the rest of the way." Stanley stood to demonstrate.

"Oh." Tom stood too. The bottom was mucky and weedy, but solid enough to support them. They sloshed through the thigh deep water without swimming, Stanley in the lead. He waded slowly for a minute, getting his breath back. Then he thought of those piranhas. For sure, that was a joke they liked to pull on the tourists. Nevertheless, he waded faster.

He reached the shore first, here a cluster of enormous rocks, and scrambled up onto the nearest of them. Someone pulled his hair and for a horrible minute he thought Hannah had somehow gotten there before him, but it was only a bush he'd gotten tangled in. He freed his hair, pushed his way through branches and leaves, and reached a hand back for Tom, already climbing out of the water.

Tom took Stanley's hand, pulling himself up the rest of the way, and grabbed Stanley in a fierce bear hug. "Baby, you had me scared there for a while."

"I had me scared there for a while." *Baby?*

And Tom, standing in the gloom, dripping water and smiling down at Stanley, felt something kick and start in his

chest. He felt as if he had somehow been adrift in some distant, alien land, and had just this moment come home—to a home that he seemed to have forgotten, but that in an instant, and utterly, he recognized as his own and rightful place. How could he have been such a fool, not to have known it at once?

Nearby, a masculine voice coughed discreetly and a familiar voice said, "Officer Danzel?"

"And Officer Korski," Stanley called back, "All present and accounted for."

Tom looked at him and laughed.

"What? I must look a sight, I know, but you look a bit bedraggled yourself..."

"You've got leaves in your hair, looks like you're all made up for a toga party, or something." He reached and plucked a twig, no bigger than piece of wire, with a pair of leaves still attached to it. "Must have come from those bushes." He went to toss it, but, impetuously, Stanley grabbed his hand.

"No, I want to keep it."

"A twig and some leaves? What for?"

"For, oh, I don't know, a souvenir, I guess."

They looked at one another for a long moment. Stanley wanted to kiss him, but he thought probably Tom wouldn't appreciate that—not with an audience, a trio of Bear Mountain's finest clambering now over the rocks towards them.

"Everybody okay?" Sergeant Wooster asked, jumping the final boulder to where they stood.

"We're fine," Tom said. "The woman?"

"Lake Patrol lost her, but my boys are waiting for her." He looked out over the surface of the lake. "Guess we'll get her boat in the morning."

"But, how did you find me out there?" Stanley asked.

"Just another night's work for the Bear Mountain P. D.," Wooster said, grinning and looking altogether pleased with himself. He took the Skoal tin from his pocket and stuffed a plug of tobacco in his left cheek—a man preparing to tell a story. "See, this is how it was. There's this woman here in town, folks call her Crazy Mary..."

"Crazy Mary. I know her," Stanley said. "I owe her a big favor, actually."

"Well, you owe her two now," Wooster said.

* * * *

"So," Wooster wound up his tale, "just on a notion, I swings back this way, and I sees you walking alongside the road, and I wonders, where's he goin', anyhow? So I kind of followed, and waited outside when you went into Miss Hannah's."

"I thought I heard a car," Stanley said.

"Yeah? Guess I need to brush up on my surveillance techniques. Anyway, after a bit, her lights went out. Which struck me as funny. I mean, the two of you, and all. Not likely, I says to myself."

"What makes you so sure it's not possible?" Stanley asked dryly.

Wooster chuckled at that. "Oh, I know Hannah Hunter, all right," he said. "I didn't figure there was much chance of the two of you shacking up."

Something in the tone of his voice made Stanley take a quick sideways glance at him. In his own weather-beaten way, Wooster wasn't a bad looking man—lean, and rangy, and brimming with mountain machismo. And just now, he had one of those "man looks" on his face that told a whole story in a single unconscious lift of one corner of his mouth.

Well, some men did like strong women.

"So, then," Wooster went on with hardly a pause, as if he'd revealed nothing about himself, "I sort of snuck around the house to see what was what, and there you were with a shotgun in your back and her escorting you down to the boat."

"Why didn't you shoot her then and get it over with?" Stanley asked. "You'd have saved me a nervous half an hour or so."

"Not much inclined to shoot women in the back," Wooster said. "That's not the way we do things here. 'Sides, she had a shotgun on you. Mostly likely if I'd shot her, she'd've shot you."

"Good point," Stanley conceded.

"Anyway, thinking about what Mary had said, I slipped inside. First thing I saw was the dog with its head bashed in, and then the old lady in the bedroom. Wasn't hard to piece things together, didn't reckon it to be a natural death, not with Hannah shipping you out at the end of a shotgun. So, I called the chief, who called Officer Danzel here at the motel,

and meanwhile I roused the Lake Patrol, and by the time they were ready to head out, Officer Danzel was already there, in record time."

"I probably broke some speed limits," Tom said.

"I expect so. Since I wasn't there to clock you, however, I'll let them go," Wooster said good naturedly. "Mountain men kind of drive fast anyways, least when they've got somewhere important to go."

"I did," Tom said, and beamed at Stanley.

Wooster, seeing the look, only said, his face carefully blank, "I reckon," and spit tobacco juice into the lake.

Now that they had wrapped up their case, and caught their murderer, Wooster seemed to have forgotten all his earlier resentment. Probably, Stanley thought, he'd be the hero of the hour, not because of Donnie McIntosh's murder, which would require that the locals admit they had screwed up on, but Penelope Hunter's murder, which obviously Wooster felt he had solved, with full bragging rights, and which was sure to eclipse the other.

Just at the moment, though, Stanley was too grateful that they had prevented his murder to object to Wooster's preening. If he hadn't been spying, things would have worked out far differently.

"Well, looky there," Wooster said, glancing skyward. "Appears it's clearing up after all."

Stanley looked too. The storm had blown itself out, the rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun, starlight and shadow breaking after one another like waves. The solid mass of clouds above had reshaped themselves into celestial

Deadly Wrong
by Victor J. Banis

tumbleweeds, scudding rather swiftly past an alabaster moon that had in an instant turned everything as bright as day.

"Yes," Stanley said, "it's a beautiful night, isn't it?"

The beam of a flashlight splashed across them. Pebbles scattered as someone scrambled down the rocks and a uniformed officer appeared just above their heads.

"We lost her," he said. "She got away."

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Chapter Twenty-five

Libby was at the stove, just stirring eggs in a big skillet. The door from the deck crashed open, and Hannah was there—only, a Hannah such as her sister had never seen, water dripping from her clothes and her hair, a shotgun in her hand.

"I need your car," Hannah said without greeting. She was breathing hard, her eyes flashing like onyx.

"Hannah, what on earth is going on?" Libby demanded. "The police called me. They said Mom was dead. They said you..."

"The car." Hannah's voice was an insistent snarl, like an angry mountain cat. "Where are the keys? Quick."

"Stanley has them. Where is Stanley?"

"He's at the bottom of the lake. You have another set. Where is it?"

Her glance darted around the room, at the keys hanging on a nail by the door. She moved toward them, just as the bathroom door opened, and Carl said, "What the hell...?"

Hannah whirled, raised the shotgun, and pulled the trigger. There was a dull click, and nothing else. She swore and flung the gun aside, and took two giant steps in the direction of the keys.

Libby hit her a powerful blow with the skillet, scattering bits of scrambled eggs and peppers across the floor. For a second or two, Hannah swayed, her eyes wide, surprised. Then her knees buckled, and she sank to the floor.

Libby was standing astride her when Sergeant Wooster burst through the front door, Tom and Stanley close at his heels.

"Well, now," Wooster said, holstering his gun and staring down at the unconscious Hannah, a puddle of lake water quickly forming around her.

Stanley looked at Hannah, and at Libby, and at the skillet still in her hand. "Diamond cuts diamond," he said, grinning.

The skillet slipped from Libby's fingers and clattered to the floor.

"She tried to shoot Carl," was all she said.

* * * *

"Hannah," Libby said, shaking her head wearily. "I guess I ought to have known. Her bitterness, her obvious resentment. Building up in her, all those years. But it's hard to think of your own sister that way, isn't it? Who suspects someone you know, your flesh and blood, of murder?" She sighed, and said, in a voice still filled with disbelief, "But, her own mother." In the light from the fire they'd lit in the fireplace, she looked years older than she had days before. "Poor Hannah."

"It's kind of hard for me to feel sorry for her," Carl said. "If the shotgun hadn't been wet..."

"I think that was just a panic reflex," Libby said. "She didn't really hate you. She just..." But her voice lacked conviction. She rubbed a hand over her eyes. "It was all just too much for her, I think."

Sitting with Hannah in the boat, in the darkness of the lake, knowing that he was facing death, Stanley had formed a different opinion about her wickedness. It wasn't the weight of her family that had turned Hannah to murder, it was the barrenness of her own soul; but he thought it best if he kept that to himself. Her sister and brother had enough to cope with as it was. Better to leave them to find whatever solace they could in their own memories.

At the moment, however, Carl was finding anger rather than solace. "And before that, she was going to let me fry, wasn't she?" he insisted.

"Not exactly," Stanley said. "She'd worked that out. In her mind at least the worst that could happen to you was a brief prison sentence. She knew you wouldn't be executed, or get life, anything like that."

Carl fixed a cold eye on him. "A couple of years in prison? What kind of picnic do you think that would have been for me? I might have been better off dead."

To which Stanley could only nod. If Carl wasn't the stuff of a gay man's dreams, he was cute enough. He would certainly have looked like fresh—and appealingly young—meat in a prison milieu.

It was not far from dawn. Hannah had been taken away and, interviews over for the moment, the police had gone. Tom and Stanley had wrapped themselves in blankets, their clothes drying on kitchen chairs before the fire, a draft making the flames tilt sideways and casting dancing shadows on the still dark windows. Tom sipped at a beer and Stanley was just finishing a second cup of coffee. He was finally

feeling warm again after the dip in the icy water. "The last time," he promised everybody, "I go swimming in a mountain lake."

"I'm going to have to get some shut-eye," Tom said, yawning. "We've got to drive back to San Francisco tomorrow." He directed this last at Stanley. This was the first time Stanley had heard that he'd be riding back in the truck with him. Their first trip together. Almost like a honeymoon. He wondered if they could take a detour by Niagara Falls. How far could it be: two, three thousand miles? The way he felt at the moment, he could probably jump that far.

"I guess we ought to all of us turn in," Libby said, collecting her keys. "I'll see you before you go?"

"I'm going back to my own place," Carl announced.

"I don't see why you shouldn't," Libby said. "We'll straighten out the bond thing tomorrow, but I'd guess they'll be dropping all charges against you." She gave her brother a look of affectionate concern. "Are you okay?"

He had to think for a minute. "Yeah, I guess," he said, and added after a moment, "But, you know, I was really hoping it was that Rack. He's a real bastard."

"There's lots of them around," Stanley said.

"Unfortunately, that doesn't make them murderers."

"To be honest, I'd have liked it better if it was him, too," Libby said dispiritedly. She gave Stanley a rueful smile, and looked at Tom.

At the moment, however, Tom was staring fixedly at Stanley, almost as if he had never seen him before. It seemed to Libby, watching him briefly, that, from who knew

what depths, some fierce yearning was struggling to reach the surface of Tom's emotions. He was still, but the way a clearing in the woods can be still even while the tops of the pines shake in the wind and the tree feels the storm clear down into its roots. She had a feeling that Stanley's "aloneness" was close to an end, but what would that mean for his future? For a man of Stanley's nature, to tether himself to one of Tom's—this would not be an easy mating, surely. There would be storms, of that she was certain, more than a few, and some of them would indeed invade the peaceful clearing.

The pop of a log in the fireplace brought her back to the moment. "Good night," she said, and let herself out.

"Poor Lib," Carl said. He looked after her, and at Tom and Stanley. "I always knew Hannah hated me," he said. "I wasn't surprised at all when she tried to shoot me. If I'd had any clue she was on the beach that night, I think I'd have known right off the bat it was her who killed Donnie."

He went into his room to collect his things. For the first time since they'd climbed out of the lake, Tom and Stanley were left alone.

"Tough on them," Stanley said.

"Totally."

"Their own sister."

After a minute, Tom asked, "Do you ever go fishing?"

Which was surely, wasn't it, a non sequitur, but Stanley made another mental note in that diary he was assembling: Fishing. But, hip high wading boots? Not even Rock Hudson

had looked good in those, in that old movie with Paula Prentiss.

On the other hand, there were those impressionist paintings, picnics by the river, the women naked in the grass, readying their special goodies for the hungry looking men. Now, he could see himself in that role. He had this wonderful faux fur blanket ... and pancakes, he could fix pancakes.

"I never have, but I would love to," he said aloud.

"Stanley, you are the world's worst liar."

"No, it sounds great. You're thinking trout, right, those sparkling mountain streams. I'll bet there's one around here somewhere. We could do a picnic. I can see it in my mind's eye..."

"Actually, I was thinking salmon, and a trip I took to Nova Scotia a couple of years ago. I hooked this eel, enormous bastard, looked like a barracuda. He swallowed my best hand tied fly. No way to get it back unless you dragged him into the boat and slit his belly open, and I'd have needed somebody else to hold him down, stand on the sucker while I did that. I was all alone, though."

"So what did you do?"

"I cut the line and let him go. All I could do. He's shredding salmon in his belly to this day with my best fly. The only good thing is, he's got to be cutting himself with it too, every time he eats."

Stanley thought about that. "Hannah, you mean. Do you think it would it have been better if she got away? Like your eel?"

He had to consider that. "No. Not for justice. You start murdering people, you've got to be stopped. You've got to pay. It wasn't only the murders, though. She betrayed her own family. That might be worse for them than the actual murders, if you think about it. Like a big old fly in your belly, cutting at you all the time."

Which Stanley thought was unusually perceptive of him. Sensitivity to the feelings of others wasn't necessarily one of Tom's strong suits. Still, he'd always said Tom had possibilities.

"At least she'll go to prison," he pointed out. "She'll pay."

"So will they, unfortunately. Every day she's behind bars. That was my point. If she dies, a part of them'll die with her. When you betray people, you don't just pay for the crime yourself. Lot of other people pay with you."

Stanley thought about that for a moment. "There's a, well, a kind of a poem, in Italian. *The Inferno* by Dante," he said, "it's all about this journey the writer takes, all the way down into hell. There's all these different levels in this hell, the further down you go, the worse things get. And, Dante put traitors in the ninth level, the very lowest level. Froze them in ice, as cold as their hearts had been in life." He paused. "That's Hannah, isn't it? Whatever had been decent in her had long ago frozen solid."

Tom grinned at him. "Stanley, when did you learn all this shit, anyway? You must have been born with a book up your ass."

Stanley smiled back at him. "Something like that." They surveyed one another across the room.

"Are you still sore at me?" Stanley asked.

"Nah, you're right, I was being an asshole," Tom said. He grinned again, wider, flashing white teeth. "Actually, it was kind of cute, you standing up to me like that."

"Don't be patronizing. I wasn't trying to be cute." He waited briefly. There was something Tom had not yet said, that Stanley thought he ought to say. And surely there would never be a better moment to say it.

It seemed however, that Tom was not yet ready to cross that particular bridge. Stanley sighed, thinking aloud: "It's probably a good thing for you I'm not into the discipline scene."

"What? Whips and chains, you mean, that kind of stuff?"

"Discipline? Oh, it's, uh, all different kinds of stuff. People tie one another up. And spanking—that's what I was thinking of. I swear, there are times I would like nothing better than to tie you up and spank your behind really good for you."

Tom gave him a funny kind of look. "Guys do that? Spank one another? I didn't know that. How's that work?"

"Well, it's not something I'm familiar with. I suppose one of them is the spanker and the other the spankee. Or, maybe they take turns, and ... why are looking at me like that?"

"Nothing. Just curious. There's a lot I don't know about this shit, that's for sure."

Stanley studied him for a long moment. Tom had taken an intense interest in his beer, carefully peeling a corner of the label loose from the bottle. He wondered ... There were certainly times, a lot of times, when Tom Danzel surprised the hell out of him.

Spanking?

Carl emerged from his bedroom, carrying a bulky duffle. "Thanks," he said, shaking Stanley's hand briefly, and Tom's a bit longer. "You're heading out early?"

Tom nodded. "Pretty early. It's a long drive. We'll have to make time."

"I'm not much of an early morning person," Carl said.

Stanley thought of the previous morning, Carl up before he was, eager to make breakfast. He decided to keep that to himself, though. He had taken a vow to be nicer to this unhappy young man. All in all, he thought there was more to Carl than he'd first imagined. He was beginning to see what Donnie had seen in him. He couldn't help wondering what the future might have held for the two of them, if murder hadn't intruded.

"It's okay," Tom said. "You can sleep in. You're entitled."

"No, I'll be here," Carl said. He obviously had something on his mind. He had the look of someone trying to screw up his courage.

"So, I was kind of wondering," he said, speaking mostly to Tom but glancing uneasily at Stanley every minute or so, "say, if I finished up my schooling, got my GED, I—well, this town, you know, it sucks. And I was thinking, maybe San Francisco. Look for a job there." He paused, waiting for some response. Tom's face was blank.

"You mean, a place to stay, maybe some help finding a job?" Stanley volunteered.

"Yeah. That kind of thing." He looked an appeal at Tom.

"Talk to him," Tom said, jerking a thumb in Stanley's direction. "He's the boss." He went into the bathroom, both of them looking after him, surprised. They heard a toilet lid bang, and a noisy pee.

Carl turned his surprise on Stanley, who only shrugged. "We're still trying to work out the ground rules," Stanley said, recovering. "But, sure, Carl. We'll help you make the move. Give me a call when you get things straightened out here. You can bunk down at my place. No drugs though."

"No problem. I haven't done anything since Donnie died. Except smoke a roach the one night."

Stanley nodded approvingly. "I know some people who can help you find a job, too."

He looked Carl up and down, and thought of his friend, Chris. Chris liked younger guys ... and Carl could be cute, cleaned up, smiling. He remembered what Libby had said, about Carl's carrying a black cloud over his head wherever he went. But maybe that was the lack of love in his life, the right kind of love. Libby's, he suspected, had been distant, real but timorous, the mother's smothering, Hannah's entirely false.

Anyway, that had all been from women, and maybe what Carl needed wasn't a woman's love. Maybe his crush on Tom was more symbolic than serious. He had offered himself to Stanley first, hadn't he? So, he was reaching out. Maybe on some unconscious level, he already knew what he needed. And he was far more likely to find it in San Francisco than he was in Bear Mountain.

"As a matter of fact," Stanley said, "I know somebody I think would like to meet you."

"A g-gay guy?" Stanley nodded.

Carl burst into one of those grins that instantly transformed him from a sad sack into a nice looking young man, and the stuttering vanished as suddenly as it had begun. "That's cool. What's he like?"

"Oh," Stanley waved a hand, all at once convinced that Chris would find Carl attractive; convinced, too, that the attraction would prove to be mutual. "You'll see. Call me, okay?"

"You got it." Carl started toward the door, paused again with his hand on the knob. "Uh, would it be okay ... like, would you mind if I, you know, like if I gave you a hug?"

"I was hoping you'd ask," Stanley said.

They hugged, and Stanley gave him a quick peck on the lips, and an even quicker pat on his fanny.

"Tell Tom I'll see him in the morning," Carl said, and left, looking happier than he had since Stanley had arrived.

Stanley turned, to discover that Tom had come out of the bathroom. The log in the fireplace cracked again, like an exclamation point. In its wake, an oddly charged silence descended between them, a sense of aloneness different from anything they had experienced before. Suddenly they both felt tongue-tied.

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Chapter Twenty-six

"So, what was that business about me being the boss?" Stanley asked.

"You are, aren't you?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Stanley, since this whole business started between the two of us, when have you ever not gotten your way about anything?"

"Well, I..." Stanley started to say, and stopped. Really, he couldn't think of an instance. Tom had been reluctant, often, sometimes downright hostile—but, in the end, he had invariably done whatever it was that Stanley had wanted from him. Or, almost always.

"You walked out on me," he said.

"I came back, too. Fuck, Stanley, you got my dick, you got my cherry, you've got everything you want out of me. It seems to me like you've got me twisted around your little finger. If that's not the boss, I don't know what is."

Stanley had to think about that. Maybe he had been unaware of his own power. "Well, so, if I'm the boss," he said, "how about if I say we go to bed?"

"Not to sleep?"

"Not right away."

Tom grinned and reached inside Stanley's blanket to give his crotch a squeeze. "Now you're talking, boss."

"Should we shower first? You know, wash off that lake water?"

"How long do you figure that would take?"

"I don't know. Five minutes, maybe."

Tom considered that. "Nah, a little lake water never hurt anybody, did it? Anyway, I'm too horny."

Which he was. He dropped the blanket and Old Faithful was already at full attention. At the sight of it, Stanley's was only a couple of seconds behind. Blankets were convenient, he decided. Maybe they should make this their usual around the house attire.

Tom half walked, half danced Stanley into the bedroom, kissing him long and hard as they went. Even Tom's day old stubble felt sexy to Stanley, who could go days without really needing a shave. He rubbed his own nearly smooth cheek against Tom's beard.

Tom ran his fingers down Stanley's back, and kneaded Stanley's cheeks with his giant hands. He lowered Stanley gently to the bed, still kissing. To Stanley's surprise, he reached down between them and took Stanley's erection in his hand, gave it a squeeze.

"You know, that's a pretty big dick."

Stanley looked down at it. "I guess. It's not as big as yours."

"The difference is, I haven't had mine shoved up my ass." He let go of Stanley's dick, reached down between Stanley's thighs.

Uh oh. "Are you going to fuck me again?" Stanley asked from beneath him.

Tom raised up a bit, looked down into his face, seemed to consider the possibilities. "That is one sweet little ass you've got on you, baby."

Again with the baby? "Oh, well, if you're going to go all hearts-and-flowers on me," Stanley said, spreading his legs.

Tom laughed and rose off of him, and rolled over onto his belly. "How about it's your turn," he said.

"My turn?" It took a few seconds for that to register. "You mean, like, fucking you? In the butt?"

"Unless you don't want to."

"Well, sure, only, I thought you didn't like it either."

"I didn't say I do. If we're going to do this shit, though, we're going to have to get some things worked out, aren't we? I can't just jerk you off every time. How much fun could that be for you?"

"It's okay."

"Right. Okay. Just not like the real stuff. And there's things I can't do. This, I can get used to it. I don't mind doing it, for you. Things have to be fair. I can't have all the fun. So, I figure, we'll take turns. You fuck me and then you can blow me, and the next time, I'll fuck you and..." the pause was only for a fraction of a second, "I'll jerk you off."

Stanley considered that. "Hmm," was all he said. Everything in its own season, right?

"Look, if you're not interested..." Tom moved as if he were going to turn over again.

"Oh, I am, absolutely," Stanley said, putting a hand on one marble cheek to hold him in place. "It's just, you kind of surprised me." *Again.* "Give me a minute."

Tom seemed okay with that. He relaxed, resting his head on his arms, spread his legs wide, his butt inviting. "Are you going to do that other thing?" he asked, not looking. "You know, with your tongue?"

"Rimming?" Stanley felt his tongue get hard in his mouth. "You like it when I rim you?"

"Sort of." Tom's voice was carefully non-committal. "You know, I think maybe, not tonight, but sometime, maybe I could do that for you. Before I fuck you, I mean."

"You'd rim me?"

"I tried it, a couple of weeks ago."

Stanley sat back on his knees. "You're telling me you rimmed some guy—?"

"Not a guy. A chick. Just to see what it was like. But, to tell you the truth, her butt wasn't half as cute as yours. So, yeah, maybe. I'll try it, next time around. It makes it easier, doesn't it? To get fucked, I mean. Kind of relaxes you."

"Yes. It does. Sure."

Tom rose up on his knees, his face buried in the pillow, his butt in the air, cheeks spread wide. "So? What do you think?"

"I think you could use some relaxing." Stanley scooted happily down between Tom's legs. Tom spread them wider to give him more room.

Stanley found himself thinking about the questions Tom had asked earlier, about spanking. He wondered ... but, no, one thing at a time, he decided.

Still ... he gave one upraised cheek a tentative slap, not too hard, but not altogether gentle, either. Tom said nothing,

didn't move. His cheek turned red with the imprint of Stanley's hand.

* * * *

As spankings went, it was brief and none too violent. Stanley wasn't sure what he thought of the experience, except that his hand was quickly sore. Tom made no comment on what he thought of it either, but he didn't pull away, or complain, or suggest that Stanley stop.

It did, however, seem to turn him on. Maybe, Stanley thought, all that blood rushing to the surface of his gluteal skin. Whatever it was, Tom was certainly hot. Stanley donned one of Tom's condoms—lavender, who picked these colors, anyway?

"Go slow," Tom said, and then immediately shoved back hard against it, so that the entire lavender clad length slid into him. Which, Stanley thought, bode well for the future.

* * * *

He was glad, though, that when it was his turn, Tom wanted head. Not that Stanley wasn't willing to accommodate him the other way, too. Tom was right. If they were ever going to work this out between them, they'd have to get the mechanics settled. If Tom was willing, he'd have to be also. And, there was something to be said for giving your man pleasure, painful or not.

He really was not, however, a bottom by nature, hadn't done it that way in a great many years, and then no more than two or three experimental times. And Tom was big. Very

big. He had found it hard to sit down for a while after the last time.

* * * *

Later, fireworks over, Tom gathered Stanley into his arms, pulled him close, and stretched out on his back. They lay like that for a long time. Too long, it seemed to Stanley. This wasn't the way it usually played out between them, him and Mister Come and Go.

"You get things worked out with the kid?" Tom asked.

"Junior? Yeah. He's going to stay with me for a while when he comes to town. Unless," tempting fate, "you'd like him to stay at your place instead. I expect he'd like that."

"Probably he would, those looks he was giving me." Tom ruffled Stanley's hair. "To be honest, I think I'm going to be more a one man kind of guy." He lifted his head. "And don't you be poking him, either, while he's at your place. You got yourself one butt. That's enough."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

"Yeah, I saw you feeling his backside when he was leaving."

"I didn't exactly feel it. I just gave it a little pat."

"Butt pats can lead to butt fucks." He was silent for a moment. "He does have a nice little set of buns on him, though, doesn't he?"

"Now, wait just a sec..."

"Teasing, Stanley. Just teasing." He ruffled Stanley's hair again.

They lay together without talking for a long while, breath slowing, deepening. Tom found himself savoring the moment in a way like nothing he had experienced before in his life: Stanley in his arms, lying quietly together. He didn't know exactly what it was he felt just now; or, he knew, but didn't know quite the words for it. Words were Stanley's thing, and something that he especially admired Stanley for, but he himself had always shied away from words, suspicious of the telling. He had a vague sense that some things were too big for words, that putting them into words changed them, made them everyday, robbed them of their magic.

But, here in the moment was the magic, pure, undiluted: drifting into sleep, holding this man, of all men, close against him. What words would have been enough to explain that, what he felt now?

"Uh, Tom," Stanley said after a bit, intruding on the near sleep, "what are we doing?"

"What do you mean?" Tom's voice thick.

"I mean, you and me, lying here in bed like this, all curled up together."

"I was planning on going to sleep. Why? Weren't you?"

"Oh, sure. Only, you don't usually stay and sleep with me afterward, is what I meant. Usually, you get up and go home."

"Did you want me to? Go home? Well, back to my motel?"

"No. Not actually. I just..."

"It's pretty late. We'll have to get up in a couple of hours. Anyway, I thought you'd like it, sleeping together for a

change. Like we were, you know ... like we were sort of getting attached. I can go, though, if you'd rather."

"No, don't." Stanley sighed. He would never, never understand this man.

On the other hand, it was undeniably nice, lying with his head resting on Tom's broad, hairy chest, Tom's arm pinning Stanley tight against him, one of Stanley's legs tossed across Tom's.

A thought occurred to Stanley. "Will you be able to sleep like this?"

"I can sleep anytime," Tom said, and after a long moment. "How about you? Can you sleep like this?"

Not a wink, Stanley thought, and said aloud, "Like a log."

Tom grunted and gave him a little squeeze. "That's cool, then," he said.

So, there Stanley was, happy in the warmth of Tom's body, the rise and fall of his chest, that arm holding him close. And, after a long silence, Tom said, very, very softly, "Don't ever leave me again, Stanley."

Stanley tried to think of something to say to that, but it had so completely caught him off guard that his brain was spinning in circles.

But it was soon evident that Tom wasn't waiting for an answer. Tom had that tendency, to speak his piece, usually in only a few words, and afterward to assume that was the end of it, nothing more to be said. So Stanley just lay, listening to Tom's breathing slow and deepen, until Tom began to snore softly, still holding Stanley in his arms.

Don't ever leave me...

He didn't mean it, of course, probably hadn't even realized quite what it was he was saying. Tomorrow, he could very well be back to, 'You're a fag, and I'm straight, and this has to end, period, flat out, now, Goodbye Joe.' "Colours seen by candlelight, will not look the same by day."

Don't ever leave me...

As if. Of course, it wasn't exactly the same as saying, "I love you." Still, maybe he was expecting too much of the man, too soon.

His friend Chris ribbed him for looking at every date, every trick, as potential marriage material. But it wasn't marriage, exactly, that Stanley wanted. It was that thing that happened with two people when they were together for a while, when they began to form something like a third personality between them: me, you, us. It had always seemed to him that until you did that, you weren't really complete.

Or, maybe he should just be grateful for what he had. Maybe it was enough just to lie like this in Tom's arms—warm and safe and comfortable, for this one night, this one moment, at least. And, for the moment, he did indeed feel complete.

The window was just turning opalescent with the approach of dawn, the tops of the trees swimming up out of the gray. Stanley's slowing thoughts drifted back to the leaves Tom had plucked from his hair earlier, by the lake. They were in his bag, carefully folded up in plastic wrap. When he got back to San Francisco, he'd have them embedded in Lucite. Use it, maybe, for a paperweight. Or just keep it as a souvenir of Bear Mountain.

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A sprig of bay leaves. He hadn't even known it grew here. By all rights, it shouldn't. What he had seen elsewhere while he had been here was the Mountain Laurel, a different plant altogether, nothing in common except the name.

His leaves were from a Bay Laurel. A Mediterranean tree. Roman, or Greek. And Chinese, too. The Chinese called it "Moon Laurel."

But to the Greeks, it was Bay Laurel.

The sacred herb of Selene, the Moon Goddess.

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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 *Longhorns* (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 www.vjbanis.com.

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The Trevor Project

The Trevor Project operates the only nationwide, around-the-clock crisis and suicide prevention helpline for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. Every day, The Trevor Project saves lives through its free and confidential helpline, its website and its educational services. If you or a friend are feeling lost or alone call The Trevor Helpline. If you or a friend are feeling lost, alone, confused or in crisis, please call The Trevor Helpline. You'll be able to speak confidentially with a trained counselor 24/7.

The Trevor Helpline: 866-488-7386

On the Web: www.thetrevorproject.org/
the gay men's domestic violence project

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: 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: www.glaad.org/

glaad en español: 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.

sldn Call: (202) 328-3244

PO Box 65301 or (202) 328-FAIR

Washington DC 20035-5301 e-mail: sldn@sldn.org

On the Web: sldn.org/

the glbt national help center

The glbt National Help Center is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization that is dedicated to meeting the needs of the

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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: www.glnh.org/

e-mail: 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

dv-8.com/resources/us/local/campus.html

GLBT Scholarship Resources tinyurl.com/6fx9v6

Syracuse University lgbt.syr.edu/

Texas A&M glbt.tamu.edu/

Tulane University www.oma.tulane.edu/LGBT/Default.htm

University of Alaska www.uaf.edu/agla/

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University of California, Davis lgbtrc.ucdavis.edu/

University of California, San Francisco lgbt.ucsf.edu/

University of Colorado www.colorado.edu/glbtrc/

University of Florida www.dso.ufl.edu/multicultural/lgbt/

University of Hawai'i, Manoa

manoa.hawaii.edu/lgbt/

University of Utah www.sa.utah.edu/lgbt/

University of Virginia

www.virginia.edu/deanofstudents/lgbt/

Vanderbilt University www.vanderbilt.edu/lgbtqi/