

DEADLY DREAMS



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DEADLY DREAMS

VICTOR J. BANIS

mlrpress

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PROLOGUE

“Gone?” Her voice went up on an ascending scale, like an opera diva’s in full song. “What do you mean, gone? They took him?”

He shook his head, trying to get his mind clear. Too much pot, and he was pretty sure the last joint had been laced with something, PCP maybe. His thoughts refused to settle, drifting like the acrid clouds of smoke that swirled in the room’s cold drafts.

“It must have been them. The baby was right there when I went into the john.” He pointed at the crib. You could see, or certainly imagine, the indentation where the baby had been. “And when I came back, they were gone, and the baby too. I ran outside but their taillights were clear down to the crossing, and then they disappeared. Just...” he shrugged, and finished lamely, “gone.”

She stared at the crib, empty now of even the blankets the child had been wrapped in, and lifted a hand to the bottom of her throat, as if choking off the anguish rising up in her. “The woman,” she said. “Delia, her name was. She said what a sweet baby he was.”



“Such a sweet baby,” Delia said, while they were in the kitchen, getting beers. While the men talked man-business. Drug business.

“Yes. He’s very quiet.” Preoccupied. Wishing she were in the other room, wanting to be sure things were handled rightly. She couldn’t completely trust him, not when he was smoking.

“I lost mine.” Delia said it flatly. “No more than two weeks old.”

“Oh, I’m so very sorry. That must have been horrible.”

“Yes.” Her voice, her look, was vague, distant.



"Delia, her name was. She just lost a baby. A month ago. She told me that in the kitchen, when we were getting the beers."

He moved toward the telephone, lifted the receiver from the cradle. She crossed to him in three long strides, snatched the phone from his hand and slammed it back on the base.

"What on earth are you doing?" Her eyes wide.

"Calling the police. We've got to..."

"The police? Are you crazy? Do you know how much pot you've got there?" She jerked her head in the direction of the black plastic bags sitting on the floor. "You want the police to see that?"

"We'll... well, we'll hide it. We'll put it in the trunk of the car, and..."

"And tell the police what? Tell them we had a trio of Cubans, probably illegals, over for the evening? Big time drug suppliers, from Miami? How do we explain who they were, or what they were, or what they were doing here?"

His face screwed up with the effort of thinking. "We could tell them, we could say, they were friends. Or, like, friends of friends, just passing through. We don't have to mention drugs."

"Great. And if the police find them, find them with our baby? What do you suppose was in that car of theirs, that big shiny Caddy they were so proud of? You think they came all this way to deliver dope to you and nobody else. I'm betting the trunk was full of goodies. A lot more than grass, I'd guess. Anyway, what kind of people do you think those men are? Use your head. Those were some bad honchos. You send the police after them, you think they're not going to come back at us? Them, or their friends?"

He sagged—face, shoulders, everything drooping, like wet laundry. "Don't you care, they've stolen our baby?"

"Care? Don't talk crazy. Of course I care. I care a lot." She paused, swallowed hard, looked again at the crib where her baby should have been sleeping, and back at him. "But I care about

staying alive, too. And we won't, if you call the police." She went to one of the chairs, sank heavily into it, taking tight hold of the arms as if it might try to shake her loose, like a bucking horse, like her thoughts were bucking. "We've got to think this out carefully."

"And, do what? We just let them do it, get away with it? With stealing our baby?"

She thought for a long moment. "Christ. I don't see what else we can do. Even for the baby." Thought for a moment more, looked again, hard, at the crib. "Besides, think about it, they took the blankets. They must mean to take care of him, they wouldn't have taken the blankets if they didn't. That woman, that Delia, who's to say she wouldn't take good care of him? Better than we could, anyway, if we were dead."

He went and sat on the stool next to the coal stove, fighting back the tears that threatened, and shivered despite his proximity to the heat. The glow from the stove gave his tortured face a hellish look. "People will know. People will ask, where's the baby?"

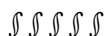
"Who? Your mother? She hasn't set foot in this house since the baby was born. You know how she feels about the drugs. I'm surprised she hasn't turned us in before now. Probably for the baby's sake. If she knew he was gone, you can bet she wouldn't hesitate for a minute."

"What about, well... your Mom?"

She gave him a look of withering scorn. Her mother had never been here, inside this house. Only once since her marriage had she been to her mother's home, and that only to confirm what she already knew in her heart—she was glad to have escaped. It was not just the poverty. Her mother lived no leaner than they did, probably she was better off, if only marginally; the difference was, her mother could never deal with the reality of her life, never would. She was the sort of woman who lived her life through the men in it. Now she was widowed, her beloved son dead in an incomprehensible Mid-East skirmish; what could her daughter be but a disappointment to her?

Which, she was painfully aware, was all she had been, while her mother wrapped herself in homilies, carefully stored up like the jars of green beans in the dusty cellar: “Darkest before the dawn.” “God never goes out but what he comes back in.” “His eye is on the sparrow.”

Drowning in artificial sweetness. It had driven her away. Better present misery than a pretense of happiness. Her mom had been just as happy to see her go away. And stay. She didn’t need a daughter to remind her of the lack of male presence in her life.



She stood up as abruptly as she had sat down, began to pace the small, smoke filled room, in and out of the pale light from the bare bulb overhead. He watched her face darken, glow, darken. With each pass, she looked at the empty crib. A freight train mourned in the distance, where the tracks cleaved the town, the “haves” on one side, with their grassy lawns and tree lined streets; “have-nots” on the other, with... she looked around the room. With... she glowered at the table, at the boxes shoved against the wall, at the uncovered pine floor... with *this*.

They were like a cancer, those tracks, they ate at her, weighted her soul, always had. If she didn’t have them to remind her who they were, what they were... life might be something different, then, mightn’t it? If she were only shed of those damned tracks. Of living a life on this side, and not the other.

A chunk of coal popped in the stove, an exclamation mark to her thoughts. Like a snap of fingers, it brought her to a sudden standstill.

“We’ll leave,” she said, decision made in the instant, no doubts or confusion. “We’ll just disappear. Go somewhere. Florida, maybe. Or California, that’s further still. Not one of the big cities, some place smaller. Your mom’ll never find us. She’s not that sharp. And it takes money to look for people, especially if they’re a long ways away, if they don’t want to be found.

What's she going to do, come looking for us? California's a big state."

"California?" Something that might have been excitement penetrated the fog in his brain, made the incipient tears in his eyes glitter. "I always wanted to go to California."

"We'll leave tonight." Talking quickly now, determined, everything settled. "Just take what we can carry in the car. Who cares about any of this junk?" A sweep of her hand took in all the shabby drug-man's furnishings—wooden crates for tables, beat up unmatched chairs, wooden boards on bricks to make a bookcase, bed sheets for curtains. "We'll write her a note, leave it in her mailbox, say you got a job offer somewhere. Not California, we'll throw her off. New York City, say, or Detroit. Yes, Detroit, that sounds right. Tell her we'll be in touch. By the time she gets suspicious, starts wondering, the trail will be stone cold."

"I guess," he said, torn. "It's just... my baby. My son. Don't you care?" he asked again, his tone plaintive.

"Don't say that," she snapped. She came to stand over him. For a moment, he thought she meant to hit him and he shrank away from her. "It pisses me off, when you say it like that. I'm trying to think for both of us, damn it."

She took a deep breath and turned away, pacing again. "Listen to me. The baby is safe with them. They won't kill him. They wouldn't have taken him to kill him. Why would they? It's the woman. She wanted a replacement for the baby she lost. Probably, he'll be just fine with her, maybe better than he'd have been with us. They've got money, plenty of it. The Caddy, and the clothes they were wearing. And that what's-his-name, Julio, did you see that ring of his? Biggest diamond I ever saw." She came back to kneel on the floor in front of him, put her arms around him.

She'd always been the stronger one. He'd always deferred to her. He moved into her embrace, lowered his head to her shoulders. "You're right, I know it. But, fuck, my son, though."

"We'll have others." She paused, thoughtfully, and added, "Maybe sooner than you think."

It took a moment for her meaning to sink in. He pulled back, looking into her face. "You saying...?"

She gave him a sly smile. "I think so. I'm pretty sure, actually. Which means we have to think about him, too, don't we? We need to keep him alive. He's got to come first now. This is best, you'll see."

He sighed, managed to give her a watery smile. "You're right," he said with more conviction.

"Course I am. Come on, let's get packed up, get out of here, tonight."

"What about the pot?"

She glowered at the plastic bags. "We can't leave it here. And we can't take it with us. Too risky. If we got stopped for something... that taillight's still not working. If they pulled us over, searched the car..."

"We have to dump it?"

She thought about that, shook her head reluctantly. It would have been nice to have it for a nest egg, wherever they were going; but, no, it was just too dangerous. If they were going to do this, they had to disappear, completely. Getting stopped by some fool highway patrolman in Nebraska, or wherever you went through to get to California. And them without the baby. They'd call his mom, most likely. She'd say something about the baby. The fool woman never could keep her mouth shut. Then there'd be an investigation. No, it was too dangerous.

"Yes. We'll have to dump it. We'll go along the ridge road on our way out of town, toss it in the gully. There's lots of dopers out that way. One of them will find it, probably, think he's died and gone to dooper heaven. Come on now, help me get our shit in the car. We've got to be out of here by morning."

He grinned, happy to let her take charge, excited despite himself by the prospect of hitting the road. He loved going, going anywhere, just for the sake of movement. Itchy feet. She'd always said he had itchy feet. And California—he'd dreamed all his life of California.

"And goodbye Iowa," he said, smiling at her, tears gone, the crib with its silent accusation all but vanished from his mind.

"Forever." She smiled back at him with a kind of tender scorn. He was such a baby. Men were. Thank God she'd gotten him settled down before he did something really tragic. The police? *We'd be dead before Christmas.*

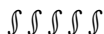
Despite everything she'd said, she hadn't quite forgotten the empty crib herself. She glanced at it past his shoulder. She'd thought, in their brief conversation, that Delia was a little round the bend, but that could have been just the loss of her baby. It occurred to her that Delia had not said how she lost the baby. She frowned, and quickly pushed that thought aside. Women did lose their babies. It didn't say anything about them. It didn't mean she couldn't be a good mother.

Anyway, what could she do about that, about any of it? Nothing was what. She had them to think about now. Them, and the baby they'd have in time. It hadn't been quite a lie she had told him. Anyways, it was easy enough to make it true. Maybe even by the time they got to California. It would be another boy. To make up for the son he'd lost. In time, he'd forget all about the other one. It would be as if that child had never been, just one of his pot dreams.

She wouldn't forget, she couldn't, but she could live with it. Women were stronger that way. You did what you had to do. That's what life was. Life had to be lived. The only question was how.

Later, there'd be time enough to cry. She could feel the tears inside her, wanting to come out, but she took them in a fierce grip and put them away, for a time when they could be wept in private. It was better that way. Someone had to be strong.

"Come on," she said, "get those boxes off the back porch, start putting stuff in them."



"For Christ's sake," Julio said, taking a curve at high speed, the tires squealing. Putting distance behind them as fast as he could. What if that fool came after them, looking for his baby?

Julio hadn't seen a car parked by the house, but that didn't mean there wasn't one, in back maybe. "Why'd you have to take their...?"

"My baby." She hugged the little blanket wrapped bundle to her bosom, patting him tenderly. "He's my baby."

"He's not—"

"He's my son." She said it ferociously, her eyes flashing dementedly in the silver blue glare of the dashboard lights. "My son."

He bit back a retort, glanced in the mirror at the still unpenetrated darkness behind them.

He thought, not for the first time, that she was probably crazy.

Women. Christ. And now a baby, to get in the way. To hold him back.

It wasn't good for a man to be burdened.

CHAPTER ONE

“Which of us do you think should be on top?”

Stanley Korski eyed his partner speculatively. “Well, you’re the butch, aren’t you?”

Tom Danzel sighed. “Which makes you, what? The femme. You know I don’t like those terms, Stanley. Butch, femme, top, bottom. Your friend Chris called me your husband last night. I’m not your husband, for Christ sake. And you’re not my wife.”

“I don’t think we’ve ever exactly settled what we are.”

“We’re two guys. Two men. Partners. Buddies, if you’re more comfortable with that.”

“Fuck buddies? Hmm.” Stanley thought about that for a moment. “I always thought that sounded so hot.”

“Fine. Let’s leave it at that, okay? We’re fuck buddies. I’m going to put you on top.”

“I don’t know. It just seems more appropriate having you on top. More, symbolic, I guess is what I’m trying to say.”

“Symbolic of what? Our fucking? You get plenty of time in the saddle. Just last night, as I recall. In case you’ve forgotten.”

“Mmm. I haven’t forgotten.” Stanley smiled with remembered pleasure. “And a nice ride it was, too.”

Tom grunted. “Maybe for you it was. I’m the one who can’t sit down today, though.”

“Methinks you protest too much, Partner.” Stanley gave Tom’s rear—Tom’s very shapely rear, he couldn’t help noting—a playful swat. “And I still think Danzel and Korski. That’s alphabetical order, too.”

They both looked at the office door’s frosted glass, trying to envision how it would look with their names on it.

“And, what?” Tom asked. “Just ‘Detectives?’ Or, ‘Private Detectives?’ Or, what about, ‘Detective Agency?’”

“No, ‘Private Investigators,’ I think. That’s sounds more, I don’t know, Sherlockian.”

“Sounds pissy to me.”

“Actually, I like it. I’ll have the sign painter do it that way. Danzel and Korski, Private Investigators.”

Stanley went back into the suite of offices, three of them, beyond the door. The front room was the larger. A single window, its glass stained with the fly-victims of some previous tenant, was open now, letting in plenty of sunlight as well as plenty of noise from Seventeenth Street, just outside. There was a big, scarred wooden desk, a chair on wheels, and a wooden fan in the ceiling that clicked loudly with each cycle. Katonk, whir, katonk, whir, katonk...

Beyond this room were two smaller ones, neither of them much bigger than a broom closet, with their own battered desks. The larger of the two, if only by a centimeter or so, had been designated Stanley’s office. It had a small window that looked out onto a brick wall maybe six feet opposite and that so far resisted any and all attempts to open it. The third room, Tom’s office, had no window at all.

“Receptionist here.”

“Can’t afford one.”

“Well, I meant later, of course, when we’ve got a little money coming in. Boy or girl, do you think?”

“Girl.” Tom grinned lewdly. “Nice and chesty.” He cupped his hands in front of his chest. “Long legs, small waist... Straight black hair, like, what was Mike Hammer’s chick, Velda? Zelda?”

“Boy, I think. Tall, broad shouldered, big basket.” He turned and gave Tom a quick smile, to show that he was only joking, but he as quickly grew serious. “Tom, are you totally sure? About the department, I mean. You could stay on there. Just because I left...”

"No. I'd have to pretend. About us. Everybody knows, knows we're living together now. Hell, I'm not going to make a secret of it. It's done. But the other inspectors would make cracks, to see how I reacted. They'd say things about..." He hesitated.

"About me?" Stanley said. Tom nodded. "Well, so what? Let them."

"About both of us. And I'd end up busting somebody's chops, is what. Besides, we've got this place now, rent's paid for six months, so we're stuck. Do you really think you could run a detective agency by yourself?"

"No. I wouldn't have to, though. I was a decorator, remember. Before I joined SFPD. I could go back to doing that. I made good money, too. And you could continue as a Homicide Inspector. We could still live together."

Tom came to where Stanley was standing, took him in his arms, kissed him—long, sweetly. "Partners," he said in a husky voice when the kiss ended. "If we're going to be partners, baby, we'll be partners. And you don't need to do any fag decorating..."

"Excuse me?" Stanley lifted his eyebrows.

Tom ignored Stanley's response. "Like, that would make it better? Instead of making cracks about Danzel's fag boyfriend, it would be Danzel's fag decorator boyfriend."

"I wish you wouldn't use that word."

Tom planted a peck on the tip of Stanley's nose. "We'll be just fine. Anyway, I can't see my partner in that prissy shop where you used to work."

"Wayne Cotter is the most sought after decorator in San Francisco. And he has always said I was his most talented protégé."

"He wanted to get into your pants, is all. Did he, by the way?"

"No." Stanley thought it best not to mention the number of times Wayne had made the suggestion. Or that once or twice, he'd come close to agreeing.

“Huh. The guy’s old, must be fifty. Probably can’t get it up. Anyway, what if I wanted a matinee some day? We couldn’t do it there.”

“Frankly, I don’t think Wayne would care at all, as long as we didn’t frighten the customers or break any china.”

“Probably he’d want to watch, though.”

Stanley smiled, thinking of Wayne, who he had once described as elegantly lascivious. “Probably.”

“No public performances. I like my whoopee private. This is better all around, our own little detective agency. Now, you gotta understand, baby, it’s not going to be like it is in those movies of yours and the books. In real life, it’s mostly pretty boring stuff. Tailing people, running background checks, sometimes we have to track down a runaway kid, or a runaway husband.”

“Meaning, I don’t get to shoot anybody.”

Tom grinned. “Stanley, you couldn’t shoot anybody if you had to.”

“Why do I have this, then, if I’m never going to use it?” He lifted the top on the gift box Tom had just given him. Inside, a small black handgun, gleaming ominously, nested in red velvet.

“Think of it as a prop. It’s not like the cop shows, where you start swapping bullets with the bad guys right out of the door. Most of the time, just holding a gun in your hand does the trick. No one wants to get shot. That’s the general idea, anyway.” Tom lifted the gun from the box, turned it around in his hand. “And this one is a real gem, Stanley, it’s the kind of gun lovers drool over.”

“I can’t imagine anyone drooling over a gun.”

“They do this one, believe me. Beretta Tomcat .32 semi. Same kind that James Bond dude carries. It’s like the, I don’t know, the Rolls Royce of handguns. I know how you like things first class. I figured if I was going to buy one for you, it had to be the best.”

Stanley took the gun from him, weighed it in his hand. It was no more than five or six inches long overall, and couldn’t

have weighed even a pound. He had to admit, if he could describe a gun as beautiful, this one was. He liked it, certainly, at least as much as he could like a gun—better at least than he had liked the Sig Sauer he'd carried when he was with the San Francisco Police Department, homicide detail; the same gun Tom had tucked now into his shoulder holster.

Still... he laid the Beretta back in its red velvet nest, replaced the lid. "I'll just leave it here, in the desk," he said. "Until I need it."

"That's fine. Hopefully you'll never have to shoot it." He chuckled. "Just as well, considering your history with them."

"I could, you know. Shoot somebody with it. Maybe. If I had to." Which he knew perfectly well was a falsehood. It was one of the reasons—a big reason—why he had decided to quit San Francisco homicide. What kind of a cop could you be, if you couldn't shoot anybody?

Tom kissed him again. "No way. I'll do the shooting stuff, if there is any. You're a pussy."

"I just don't like guns, is all, and I don't like hurting people. Is that so funny?"

"No. It's part of why I, you know, why I care so much about you."

He did not, Stanley made note, say, "Why I love you." That declaration was still unmade. Stanley sighed. Patience, Stanley, patience. This was the first time the big oaf had ever been involved with a member of his own sex. One of those things that took major getting used to. And Tom had surprised him with how totally he had gotten into the idea of "partners." Like, moving in together. Which had been his suggestion.

"If we're going to do this, Stanley, I can't keep getting up and going home every night," he had put it. "What kind of a relationship is that?"

"Just as a matter of curiosity, what kind of relationship are we going to have if you stay? As you see it, I mean."

"I don't know. But something. We'll have something. We'll be something."

A friend of Stanley's had told him not so long ago that when you lived alone for two years, you were spoiled for living with someone else. It had only been a few months shy of two years in Stanley's case, and he had a notion that, if not spoiled, he was close to his pull-by date. So he wanted the arrangement, and he had lingering doubts about it as well.

"There's all kinds of pros and cons," he said aloud.

"Can you cook?" Tom asked, which Stanley thought was a bit of a non-sequiter.

"Breakfast. You've already had it. Bacon and eggs."

Tom frowned. "That's it?"

"Most people think I do bacon and eggs very nicely." In a frosty voice.

"Well, sure, but what I meant was, that's all you cook?"

"Pretty much. I do frozen biscuits sometimes. The Pillsbury ones. Or just toast and jelly. I like raspberry jam. The imported kind, with the liquor in it. What's wrong with a slice of toast and raspberry jam? And coffee, of course. I can make coffee."

"Didn't your mother ever tell you, the way to a man's heart is through his stomach?"

"I didn't get my romantic advice from my mother, it was Chris. And he said it was an around-the-world."

"Jesus. Women are always dying to cook for me, you know, real food, meatloaf and pot roast and stuff. And pork chops. Do you know how many women love cooking pork chops for me?"

"That's great. Maybe we could hire one of them. She can bring her own pig, even. Or," he brightened, "do you like Chinese? There's a great take out place about two blocks away. The Peking Palace. Their hot and sour soup is to die for. And the egg rolls, and..."

"We can't eat Chinese every night."

"Why not? The Chinese do. What about you, anyway? There's two of us going to be living here, right? You don't cook? At all?"

Tom grunted and shrugged. "I grill a mean steak."

"Well, there you have it. Problem solved. I'll do breakfast and you do dinner."

Tom looked doubtful. "We're going to have bacon and eggs every morning and steak every night?"

"Well, it's not that limited, for Pete's sake. We can have biscuits alternate mornings, the frozen ones. And Chinese in the evenings sometimes, don't forget the Peking Palace. Every other evening, even. Or, maybe sometimes for breakfast. Egg rolls. That's kind of breakfast sounding, isn't it? Besides, I have some great ideas for dessert." He walked over to the window. "You know, I really need to wash this."

"I've got a better idea," Tom said.

"No, it's really disgusting, all those dead flies..." He paused in mid-sentence and looked back at Tom. Who was wearing what could only be described as a lewd expression. "Such as?"

"I'm thinking about one of those desserts of yours," Tom said. He came to where Stanley was standing, turned him around by the waist. "Besides, we haven't christened our new office yet, have we?"

"Now that you mention it..."

Tom guided Stanley backward, to the surface of the future receptionist's desk, unbuttoned Stanley's jeans and tugged them down. Paused to fumble a condom out of his pocket.

"Always prepared," Stanley said.

"Like the boy scouts. Or is that the Marines?"

"I've had plenty of Marines, but I never did it with a boy scout," Stanley said. "Oh, wait, I forgot, there was this kid..."

"Stanley, will you shut up?"

"Oh, sure," Stanley said, but after a moment, he added, "Uh, is the door locked? What if someone should come in...?"

"You're a suspect," Tom said, lifting Stanley's legs into the air. "I'm doing a search."

"What would I be hiding there?"

“You’d be surprised. You never did any arrests, did you? Ask the uniforms about that some time.”

“I’m not likely to see the uniforms these days. Oh, wait, now that I think of it, there was one, kind of hot, really, he looks perfectly straight, but I heard he likes to play. I could call him up and...”

“I don’t think so.” Tom pushed in. Stanley grunted.

“I meant...”

“Stanley, you know I don’t like to talk and fuck at the same time.”

“Oh.” Stanley was quiet for a few seconds, only grunting again faintly as Tom went deeper. “So, then,” he said, “how are you at whacking and fucking at the same time?”

Tom reached down between them, took hold of Stanley’s erection, gave it a tentative caress. “You can wait and take your turn, after I’m finished,” he said. “If you want.”

It was tempting offer. Stanley did like fucking his partner. And he knew that Tom was always willing, or mostly always willing, to accommodate him that way.

He knew, too, though, that while Tom was willing, and no longer found it quite the endurance test that it had been initially for him, it was also not really something that he enjoyed, but rather, something that he did to give Stanley pleasure. It did, too, but...

“No, do it this way,” he said, putting his hand on Tom’s and guiding it briefly up and down.

Tom smiled down at him, said, “You got it, boss,” and proceeded to jerk Stanley’s dick in time to his own increasingly forceful thrusts. Which, unconsciously, he timed to the comments from the fan whirring above them: katonk, shove, katonk, shove, katonk, shove...

Stanley came first, his dick erupting in a fountain of jism that splashed on Tom’s chest, and cascaded down over his still moving hand. The sight of it set Tom off as well. He began to pound furiously and, mere seconds later, buried himself to the hilt and let it fly.

He lay sprawled atop Stanley for a long minute, both of them getting their breath back.

“Crapola,” Stanley said all of a sudden.

Tom lifted his head. “What?”

Stanley raised up, frowning, and ran a hand gingerly over his butt. “I think I got a splinter.”

CHAPTER TWO

For Stanley, this partnership with Tom was a two edged sword. He wanted the relationship, by whatever name they called it. He wanted, in fact, to be married, if that were possible; but the impossibility for them was not a matter of California law, it was Tom's refusal even to use the word.

"We are not married," he said obdurately, "and we are not getting married, period."

Stanley sometimes thought the perfect arrangement would be a long distance one. Not a long, long distance, but enough space where the two participants had the title and the privileges, and needless to say, regular whoopee, and plenty of room to exercise their personal freedom in between times.

"If you loved him the way you always insist," his friend Chris said, "this wouldn't be a problem for you, Stanley. The real problem is, you love the idea of him, just as you love the idea of marriage. You want to be in love."

"Stendhal," Stanley said. "Longing for the bliss, as he put it."

"That's you, exactly. It's the reality of things that gets in the way for you."

This was an argument they'd had more than a time or two. "That's ridiculous. I do love him, totally."

They were having coffee at The Cove in the Castro, their favorite coffee and dish spot. Chris waved at the proprietress, Solange, for a refill, and regarded Stanley coolly across the table until it had been poured.

"Okay, 'splain to me, Lucy, if you can. What exactly is it that you love about this man?"

Stanley gave him a big grin. "He's got nine inches. Big fat ones. Who wouldn't love that?"

Chris sighed. "There, see, that's what I mean. The guy is a hunk, there's no denying that. He's drop-dead good looking, so macho he makes Rambo look like a sissy, he's hung. In short, all the trappings of a gay porn fantasy. Take away those things, though, and your so-called love would go with them."

"Pish posh. I'd love him just the same if he looked like Quasimodo."

Chris snorted his disbelief. "Right. Let me ask you something, suppose he were ill, really ill. Suppose that big dick of which you're so fond didn't work anymore. Imagine that he's dirty and he stinks, and he's impotent and he has endless diarrhea. Are you still going to love him when you're cleaning his backside every day?"

"That's a nurse's question, you know." Chris was a nurse in the burn ward at St. Alonzo's. "You always see things in the worst possible light. And the answer is, of course I would."

"So you say." Chris looked unconvinced. "Okay, let's suppose something really, really dire, then," he said. "Suppose he falls in love with you."

"Don't you think I'm loveable?"

"Don't play footsies with me, luv. That's not the point. The point is, whether this man might decide to love you."

"I'm hoping he does. I think he might have already, if you really want to know. He just hasn't gotten around to putting it into words. He's not an impulsive sort of man. He has to think things through. I'm just betting that the day will come when the pain of becoming a blossom will be less than the pain of remaining a bud. That's kind of the whole idea, you know. That when that happens, he'll fall in love with me. Totally."

"Is it, the whole idea?" Chris gave him a shrewd look. "Dear Little Buttercup, wasn't a part of his appeal for you from the very beginning his unavailability? The fact that he was straight?"

"But he wasn't, as it turns out. Unavailable, I mean. And, a man who can get it on with another man the way he does with me, and enjoy it—and, believe me, he does enjoy it, I know that

much for sure—well, he can be mostly straight, but he's not completely, is he?"

"Not completely, no, but a part of him still is. A part of him is still unavailable, too. The 'I love you' part. But what happens if you've no longer got that to tease you, to stoke your desire and fuel your fantasies? What if he crosses that divide, discovers that he is honestly and truly in love with you? What if he says it, finally? Then he becomes somebody else altogether, doesn't he?"

Stanley frowned. He wasn't at all happy with the direction of this conversation. If it were anybody else, he'd be inclined to tell them to stuff it. But he and Chris went way back. Chris probably knew him better than anybody else. Maybe Chris knew him too well.

"Not altogether somebody else. I mean, he'd still be essentially the same person he was when I first met him."

"When you first met the man, you declared him an asshole. You called him the Neanderthal."

"That was when I didn't know him."

"And you do now?"

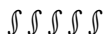
Which gave Stanley pause. Who ever really knew anybody? Even people who lived together, for years sometimes, still surprised one another. And it had only been, what, six months since he and Tom had met.

They'd solved two murders together, though. In police work, "partners" was in itself a kind of wedding. Certainly it was more than just working together. You learned not just to look out for one another, out of necessity, but you even came to think alike. It was a kind of relationship, however, that couldn't be easily understood by those who had never experienced it.

"I know him well enough," he said simply. "As well as I need to, to do this thing." By which he had meant, moving in together. Whatever qualms he had about it, he put resolutely aside. He'd gone after this man, had wanted this relationship. It

was nothing short of a triumph that Tom had suggested moving in with him. He fully intended to make the most of it.

Still, after Chris had left for the burn ward, while Stanley was lingering over a last cup of coffee, the thought nagged at him; had he fallen victim to that most clichéd of outcomes, getting what he wanted at the very moment when he questioned whether he actually wanted it?



So here they were, he and Tom, living together, sleeping together every night—that had taken some getting used to on both their parts, both of them tending to hog the covers—and, in another day or so, working together, at their own private detective agency. Every step of which had certainly been a giant leap for Tom Danzel, a man who, a few short months ago, had never so much as fooled around with another guy.

In that context, Stanley thought it was okay to give him time to get around to “I love you.” Some time, anyway, just not forever. For the most part, Stanley was happy with the situation; and one thing he had learned in their brief time together - you couldn’t go out looking for happiness. Like enlightenment, happiness came to you. Most people, he thought, got their share of it, if sometimes they remained blind to its existence. He knew that he was lucky to have Tom in his life, even if they were still working out the terms of it.

Stanley, too, had to adapt to this different, for him, kind of relationship. For one thing, Stanley had always been demonstrative, openly gay and proud of it, and living in the Castro, surrounded by one’s own, one got used to being upfront about one’s nature.

As affectionate as he could be in private, though, and Stanley had found him surprisingly so, Tom was very reticent in company, even in gay company. They did not mingle much with groups of Stanley’s gay friends, where it was quickly apparent that Tom was not comfortable. They did spend time with one or two of Stanley’s closer friends, with Chris, especially. Chris and Tom had turned out to be surprisingly comfortable with one another.

Even then, though, when they were with Chris or another of Stanley's closest gay friends, Stanley had learned to curb his natural enthusiasms. No hand holding, no little kisses blown across a table, no quick pats at fanny or crotch. Out in public, even in gay public, they behaved as if they were nothing more than buddies.

"It's still a straight world, Stanley," Tom defended his circumspection. "We still have to fit into that."

"What's the point of adapting to their world if I no longer fit into my own," Stanley protested, but for the sake of peace he had learned to subdue his natural ebullience.

This had all started with Stanley's unexpected boost to homicide after no more than a few days with the San Francisco Police Department—a murder involving a gay supervisor who happened to be related to the mayor, and a transgender killer. They'd thought Stanley would bring special insights to the case, which everyone wanted solved the day before yesterday. They'd partnered him with Tom.

Tom Danzel was one of the Department's top homicide detectives, and Tom and Stanley had found themselves working together, an arrangement that started off awkwardly for both of them, and very quickly developed into an intensely erotic, if decidedly prickly, personal relationship. One, however, which Tom had resisted even while he was taking part in it.

Case over, they had resolutely gone their own ways, until Stanley had stumbled into another murder case, this one in a small mountain town in Southern California, and Tom, without quite understanding why, had come in pursuit of Stanley, had rescued him from a dangerous situation, and they'd found themselves not only working together again, but on the mattress again as well.

And by the time they had resolved that investigation, Tom had resolved a lot of his issues regarding his attraction to Stanley. Or at least he had accepted that the attraction was there, and wasn't going away, was something he would have to deal with. On the drive back to San Francisco from the mountains, he had made the suggestion that they live together.

"If we're going to do this, let's do it," was how he'd put it. "I hate doing things half-assed."

So, they had moved in together, Tom moving into Stanley's apartment in the not quite Castro, that apartment bigger and in a more desirable location than Tom's, and Stanley had made a decision to quit the SFPD, concluding after two homicide investigations that they weren't his cup of tea after all. And, not long after that, Tom had suggested that he retire from the department as well, and they open a detective agency together.

Stanley still had some reservations about that—not about the agency, exactly, he thought that was fine. He felt a certain guilt, though, about Tom's retiring from a job that he thought Tom had liked far better than he ever admitted; certainly, one he had been very good at. From his very first day with SFPD, Stanley had heard about Tom Danzel. He was very nearly a legend. "The best," everybody said, and meant it. Tom had been something of an idol to the other inspectors.

At least he had been until it became clear that Stanley and he were not just partners on one murder investigation, but had become something more than that to one another. Very soon then, people who had fawned over Tom began to sidle away from him, and look sideways at him. This in San Francisco, surely one of the least homophobic cities in the country, with one of the least homophobic police forces.

Imagine, Stanley had thought more than once, *if we were in Oshkosh*.

So, yes, here they were, and neither of them was exactly sure where "here" was. "One day at a time," Tom said whenever Stanley brought the question up, and Stanley, happy to be with the man he loved—though a man who could be downright difficult in many ways—was agreeable to coasting.

For some time anyway. Just not forever.

He looked around the office. For the moment, it still looked spare, practically barren. He'd brought in a couple of prints, English hunting scenes, from the apartment, and his friend Chris had bought them a big ficus tree that filled up much of one corner. Apart from two decidedly battered wooden desks,

however—one in the reception area and another in Tom's office—and a slightly newer, more modern metal one in Stanley's room, and two equally worn wooden chairs, that was it. Tom's desk, in fact, was still without a chair, but they planned to go prowling in the second hand stores later this same day to look for one.

"Couldn't we just bring a chair from the apartment?" Tom asked. "Why spend money if we don't have to?"

Stanley thought about the gilt edged art-deco chairs he was quite fond of, despite their unsuitability to sitting, and decided they'd fare better looking for something in the thrift shops and consignment stores in the mission.

"So," Stanley said, "we need a case. How do we go about finding one?"

"Hopefully, they'll find us."

The phone on the receptionist-in-due-time's desk rang shrilly. "Speak of the devil," Stanley said. He picked it up, lowered his voice an octave and said, "Danzel Korski, Private Investigators."

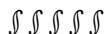
"Korski Danzel," Tom whispered.

Stanley mouthed a kiss, listened. His smile faded, his face sank.

"What?" Tom asked, watching in concern.

Stanley put the receiver down, stood for a long moment staring into space. A tear trailed slowly down one cheek.

"My dad," he said, still staring into the distance. "They said I'd better come right away."



Peter Korski had lived for the last several years of his life in a rest home in Petaluma—Home Gardens, though Stanley thought there was nothing home-like about the ugly pink and gray quasi-Victorian structure, and the "gardens" were nothing more than here and there a flowering bush or a patch of grass bordering the concrete squares that made it possible for wheelchair bound residents to get about more easily than they

would have on a lawn. The place smelled of stale food and body odors not quite masked by the overlay of strong antiseptic.

Though they had come “right away,” Tom driving, Stanley fidgeting nervously, neither of them saying much on the forty minute drive to Petaluma, “right away” proved to be not quite soon enough. They arrived at Home Gardens, to the news that Peter Korski had passed on just a few minutes before.

“You’d like to see him, of course,” the head nurse said.

“Yes, of course,” Stanley said, though he was not at all sure of that.

“I’ll wait outside,” Tom said, and absented himself, leaving Stanley to see his father alone.

“It was peaceful,” the nurse said, coming with him as far as the door to his father’s room, and left him there.

Which, Stanley thought, coming in to stand beside the bed and look down at what had once been his father, *is more than you could say for his life*. At least what the two of them had shared of it had rarely been peaceful.

He thought of the things that had not been resolved between them, things that would never be resolved now. He found himself looking back past the last few years, past the senility, and before that, the harsh condemnation of Stanley when his homosexuality had been revealed; and still further back, the abyss into which they had fallen at his mother’s death.

And far away in the distance, like mountains on the horizon of a vast desert, what might have been a peaceful, maybe even a loving childhood. His father’s love, more than his mother’s. She had always seemed distant, always seemed to be, mentally at least, somewhere else, but he remembered isolated moments with his father, saw them in his mind’s eye like patches of a dark landscape revealed in flashes of lightning, brief, so quickly seen as to be ephemeral. His father holding his hand as they crossed a busy street somewhere; or riding in the car, feeling all grown up in the front seat beside his father, just the two of them; and his father reading something to him while he lay in bed, hearing the rise and fall of the voice more than whatever

his father was reading—which, if memory served, had been something ridiculously inappropriate for a little boy, a funky piece from Mother Earth News, he thought, though he wouldn't have wanted to bet money on that memory.

Memories. All that was left. And the worst memory of all, of that bitterness that had fallen upon them like a noxious cloud, obliterating all the rest, becoming in the end the whole of what their relationship was, and everything else gone from them, stolen by a mother's accidental death, and the fact of Stanley's sexuality.

He'd been sixteen when his father first learned about the homosexuality, though surely he must have had some inklings of it before that. How old had his father been at that time? He tried to calculate, but he got easily mixed up with numbers. Fifty-something, mostly likely. Old enough to be inflexible. People were older then, though, weren't they? A man of fifty today would still seem young, a man of sixty might be barely entering into middle age. Or was that only gay men? Who often seemed younger than their heterosexual counterparts. As if one's genes changed when you came out. Or was it only your attitude toward life?

He thought of the Buddha, his disciples coming to him as he lay dying, to ask for some word of comfort to help them after he had gone. "It changes," the Buddha had replied.

For a long time, after that initial disclosure, Stanley and his father had barely spoken to one another. They lived another two years in the same house together, but in a state of enforced silence; and then Stanley went away to school, and came home hardly at all.

It changes, though. You could not just shut away your childhood. Only try to close the door on your blood relation with someone, and in time the blood will knock, knock insistently.

He came home—and found things more changed than he had expected. Found his father changed, not so much physically, he was still not so very old, but mentally he had become a stranger. The abyss between them had grown, was

now seemingly unbridgeable. Stanley had tried to bridge it, but to no avail, had watched it in time stretch wider and deeper, until it became a rarity indeed when either of them even glimpsed the other side. Although, by this time, Stanley had no idea what his father did or did not glimpse.

“Ah, Dad,” he whispered in a choked voice, and laid a hand on his father’s brow. It was cold already. There was no more communication between them here than there had been when his father was alive. He thought he should say some sort of benediction, say something, but what could he say that hadn’t been said already, in vain. And whatever had been left unsaid was unsaid now for eternity.

“For the living know that they shall die, but the dead know not anything... their love and their hatred and their envy, is now perished...”

A nurse, a different one, came in with her arms full of bed linen. She saw him, said, “Excuse me,” in a flustered voice, and started to back out of the room.

“No, it’s okay,” Stanley told her. “I was just leaving.”

He moved to do so, and paused to ask, “Was anyone with him? When he...?”

“When he passed? Yes, as it happens, I was. I’d just come in to give him his medications. It happened very quickly. He didn’t suffer. I thought you’d want to know that.”

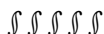
“Thank you.” Stanley hesitated. “Did he say anything? Before he... before he passed? Any message?”

She smiled sympathetically and shook her head. “Just your name, dear, that’s all he said.”

But that was good to know, wasn’t it? At the end, his father had remembered him after all, possibly even with affection. Stanley blinked back tears. Maybe, then, the distant past, the happy past, hadn’t been entirely obliterated in his father’s misted memory.

“Thanks, I’m glad to know that,” he said. “Nothing else, just my name?”

"Nothing else. He smiled, just as if he saw you standing right there, at the foot of his bed, and said, 'Andrew,' and breathed his last."



He called his sister, Irene, in San Bernardino. She said nothing at first, only sighed wearily. "What about the funeral?" she asked finally, as if he had just saddled her with some enormous and unfair burden.

"I'll make arrangements. Here, I guess. There'd be no point in having it in San Francisco."

"I don't suppose...?" she started to ask and, hesitating, let it go. He suspected she was going to suggest they have it in San Bernardino, for no logical reason but that it would be less inconvenient for her that way. "Let me know," she said instead, resigned. "I'll fly in. Into San Francisco. That'll be simplest. Can you pick me up?"

"Of course. Let me know when."

"Hmm. Day after tomorrow, I suppose. Wednesday. If that's okay with you."

"That's fine. Let me know what time. We can do a viewing on Thursday, and the funeral on Friday."

"Do we really need a viewing? I mean, who's going to be there besides the two of us?"

"Maybe nobody. I don't have any idea. He lived here for, what, twenty years? Twenty-five, I guess. There must have been people. I'll put an obit in the local paper, just in case."

"He wasn't very sociable, you know. Neither of them were."

"That's funny. I remember parties." He screwed up his face, thinking. "At least, they were always going to parties, weren't they?"

"Doper parties. Not the kind of people to remember, not past the last joint. How many of them came to visit him there the last few years?"

"Probably none. I don't really know."

“Well, there you are.”

But neither did you, he wanted to say, and didn't. One visit in five years. Two, if you counted the one upcoming, but the old man wouldn't be aware of that one. Or, maybe he would. Who knew?

“I guess. Who was Andrew?” he asked on an impulse.

“Andrew?” She was silent for a minute. “I don't know. One of his old cronies, maybe. Why?”

It was his turn to think for a moment. Once, his father had called him Andrew. Or spoken the name while he was in the room, which might not be the same thing. And he had found a baby's bib in the meager box of his father's possessions that he'd kept when he installed his father in Home Gardens, a bib with what appeared to be the initials AK embroidered into the floral trim. Andrew Korski, maybe.

Who Andrew Korski was or had been, however, he had no clue. Apparently, neither did Irene. He wasn't, in fact, altogether sure of the initials on the bib; they might have been the product of his imagination, just as Andrew might have been the product of his father's imagination.

“I don't know. Just a name he mentioned. Somebody from the past, I guess.” He was about to ring off, and had another thought. “When did we leave Iowa, anyway?”

“Iowa? We never lived in Iowa.”

“We didn't?” He considered that surprising bit of information for a moment. One of those false memories? He'd read about those, the mind tricking you into thinking you'd experienced something you'd only heard about from someone else; but Iowa had seemed so real to him. He thought he remembered looking out a window, at fields of wheat, golden in the sunlight.

“It must have been things Mom said,” he said aloud. “She must have lived there at some time.”

“Dad, more likely. Now that you mention it, I remember he talked about Iowa, sometimes, when he was stoned. Talked

about you. His baby son, back in Iowa. You were always his favorite.”

“Until he found out I was queer.”

“You chose your lifestyle, Stanley. You could have changed it, if you’d loved him, the way he loved you. The way he never loved me.”

Bitterness in her voice. Who could ever forgive the pain of love? Of not getting it. Sometimes the pain was worse when you did get it.

CHAPTER THREE

“Mister Korski?”

Stanley, holding a framed print up next to the window of the reception room, looked over his shoulder at the stranger in the doorway. A tall man, a trifle overweight but all of it looking solid, eyes set too narrow in a broad, craggy kind of face, the skin marked by old battles with acne, the mouth a harsh wound in his face that one could hardly imagine forming itself into a smile.

“Yes?”

The stranger took a wallet from his inside coat pocket, giving Stanley a maybe not altogether accidental glimpse of a shoulder holster. He flipped the wallet open to reveal a badge and an ID card.

“Edward Hannibal, Homeland Security. I wonder if I might have a word with you?”

“Sure.” Stanley leaned past him to yell, “Tom, got a minute?”

Tom was next door, in Stanley’s office, trying to pry the window there open. He appeared in the doorway a minute later, crowbar in hand. “What’s up?” he asked, wiping sweat off his forehead and sizing up the newcomer. Hannibal showed him his identification as well. They regarded one another like two dogs sniffing. Hannibal eyed the crowbar suspiciously. Tom set it aside, but not so far out of reach.

“I wanted to have a talk with Mister Korski.”

“You can talk with both of us,” Tom said.

Hannibal looked from one to the other. Stanley nodded. Hannibal shrugged. “No problem,” he said, and turned his attention on Stanley. “I was wondering what you can tell me about Andrew Korski. I’m interested in his whereabouts, in particular, if you know them.”

Stanley stared in surprise for a moment. He was still holding the framed print. He set it carefully aside on the floor, propping it against a wall, and sat down on the corner of the wooden desk, mindful of splinters. After a long moment, he said, "I can't help you there, I'm afraid."

Hannibal's close-set eyes narrowed. "You don't know where he is?"

Stanley spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness and smiled apologetically. "To be perfectly honest, I don't even know who he is."

Hannibal slanted a glance in Tom's direction. "Beats me," Tom said. "First I've ever heard the name."

"But not the first time for you," Hannibal said, looking back at Stanley.

"Not the first time I've ever heard the name, no," Stanley said. "My father called me Andrew some while ago, when I was visiting him. And they told me at the nursing home that he spoke that name just before he died. But my father was..." He hesitated, as if to mention his father's mental difficulties was to speak ill of the dead.

"Senile," Hannibal supplied for him.

"Well, if you know that much... Alzheimer's."

"And you didn't ask him about this Andrew?"

"Wouldn't have done any good. Most of the time, he didn't speak to me at all. Whether that was the... the mental thing, or his personal resentment toward me..."

"Your homosexuality, you mean?"

"You seem to know a lot about me, Mister... I'm sorry, I've forgotten."

"Hannibal. It didn't take a lot of digging to uncover your homosexuality, Mister Korski." He glanced again at Tom, who glowered in response.

"Well, it's not exactly top secret information," Stanley said. "I'd imagine Homeland could dig it up without too much trouble."

"Look," Tom said, coming to stand somewhat between Stanley and the other man, in a protective stance, "maybe you should tell us what this is about? Is Stanley accused of something? In which case, maybe we need an attorney here."

"You won't need an attorney. And, no, you're not accused of anything, Mister Korski. It's Andrew Korski we'd like to find." He paused. "You say your father mentioned him, mentioned his name. He said nothing more about him?"

"No. Just the name. I had no idea who this 'Andrew' was."

"Yet you made no effort to find out?"

Stanley stood up, looked down at the print on the floor—a lion, feasting on the carcass of a zebra, the zebra nothing more at this stage than black and white stripes on a background of red flesh. The law of the jungle: kill or be killed.

"Not really. Why should I have done? If you know about my father's condition, about Alzheimer's... besides, it could have been anybody, that name. Some old friend from the past, a relative I didn't know about. My father and I weren't close for years, even before he began to lose his faculties. And of course he had a life before I came along." There was a moment of silence. "But, I have a feeling you know more about this Andrew Korski than I do, Mister Hannibal. So, why don't you skip the tap dance and tell me who he is?"

"He's your brother."

Stanley sat back down again, heavily. "I... I never heard of a brother. He was... are you sure?"

Hannibal nodded. "There's a birth certificate. Andrews Korski. Born in Fall City, Iowa."

"Iowa." Stanley said it reflectively. He was remembering a conversation with Irene, about their father; *...he talked about Iowa, sometimes, when he was stoned. Talked about you. His baby son, back in Iowa...*

Maybe it hadn't been him his father was talking about, but another baby. A different son. "He must have been older than me, then," he said aloud.

“A bit. No more, certainly, than three or four years. Did you live there at one time, in Fall City?”

“I... no, not that I remember. But my dad talked about Iowa sometimes. At least, my sister said he did.” Stanley sat and stared into the distance, trying to sort things out. “He must have died, then, this brother, or... but, no, you wouldn’t be looking for him... why *are* you looking for him, anyway?”

Hannibal seemed to be weighing how much he should say. “There’s a group we were interested in. We intercepted some messages, and the name Andrew Korski came up in the messages. Several times. Enough to engage our interest.”

“What kind of group?” Tom asked. Hannibal gave him a look that said he wasn’t going to answer that question, but Tom answered it himself. “A terrorist group? That would explain why you’d be looking for him.”

Hannibal neither confirmed nor denied the guess. “When we...” he hesitated ever so slightly, “...caught up with the people in the group, he was not among them.”

“He disappeared?” Stanley asked.

“Yes.”

“If he ever existed.”

“He existed. We’re sure of that. There’s that birth certificate for one thing, in Fall City.”

“And he disappeared from there too.”

“Yes, something like a year and a half after his birth was recorded, two years on the outside. They all did, your parents and the baby Andrew. And, there’s your grandmother...”

“I had a grandmother?” More surprises. Stanley gaped at him. “My dad always said he was an orphan. Said he’d never known his parents.”

“Sarah Korski. She was your father’s mother. She filed a missing persons report, about two years after the baby’s birth. Said her son and his wife and their baby had disappeared, approximately six months earlier. There was an investigation.

The father—your father—was suspected of dealing drugs, but there was no indication of foul play. The authorities supposed there might have been some kind of drug problem, money owing, that sort of thing, and they skipped town to avoid trouble.

“All the evidence, however, suggested they’d left the area voluntarily. After a while, the case was closed. For the next few years, the mother, your grandmother, continued to push them to look further. Then, she passed away and it was all forgotten. Nobody else had showed any interest.”

“Three people disappear into thin air and the local authorities just shrug it off?” Stanley said.

“Well, as I say, there was nothing to suggest foul play. To be frank, the authorities even looked around the surrounding area, near the house where they had lived, for anything that might be—well, say, something had happened to the baby, an accident, someone shook him too hard. That kind of thing happens. And say, rather than report it, they’d buried the body and skipped town. It’s plausible.”

“So, they looked around for a grave, is what you’re saying?” Hannibal nodded. “But they found nothing?”

“Not a trace. It’s like they just all vanished. Into thin air, as you put it. Of course, by the time the authorities had been called in, a lot of time had passed. That always makes an investigation tougher. And, without even a suggestion of foul play, it didn’t seem all that important.”

Stanley ran a hand through the wheat colored curls on his head. A whole family history he’d known nothing about. It was like those icebergs you read about, the greater part of them hidden beneath the surface of the life he’d known. Then, out of nowhere, here comes the Titanic.

“And now, all of a sudden, after all this time, it is important,” Tom said.

“We have reason to think so.”

“Wait,” Tom said after a moment, frowning, “you said you, uh, caught up with the others in this group, the one you were

investigating when this Andrew's name came up. Can't you just ask them about him?"

"No," Hannibal said, firmly and simply. The face with which he returned Tom's stern look remained noncommittal. He did not elaborate.

"I see," Tom said at length. And thought he did. Whoever these people were, they were dead now. A botched raid of some kind? Certainly, the kind of mistake Hannibal wasn't going to share with them.

Stanley blinked. "My father," he said, stepping into the silence as if the previous exchange between Tom and Hannibal hadn't happened—and in fact, he'd hardly heard it, thinking as he was of the suddenly twisted skeins of his family history, "actually, both my parents, but especially my father—were dopers. I mean, they smoked it, quite a bit of it. He did, anyway, I think she must have too, maybe not as often—but, what I was going to say, is, I was never aware of any dealing, and I'm pretty sure my sister wasn't, either. Maybe he kept that separate. But, usually, if someone in the house is dealing, you know don't you? Even children are aware of it, on some level. The traffic, if nothing else, people coming by to do business. We rarely had company, though." He thought about that. "They did go out a lot. But, it was always more like they were going to parties. I guess he could have been selling at the parties."

"Or it is possible he gave up the dealing. After he left Iowa," Hannibal said. "If he'd gotten a good scare..."

"But wait," Stanley said after a moment's puzzlement, "I can see his giving up the dealing. Especially if, like you said, something happened to throw a good scare into them. But, why would he give up his baby? One doesn't go with the other. Besides, if they had brought the baby to Petaluma, you'd think I'd have remembered him. Even if he died when I was young."

"If he died. But the name is still out there. It was quite recently."

"Well, then, say he didn't die. Say they left the baby behind, in Iowa. I can see that. A young couple, starting a new life somewhere else... Petaluma's a long way from Iowa. Maybe

they left the baby with someone, meaning to get him later, once they'd gotten settled. Or, whatever the trouble was went away. Traveling with a baby can be a chore, I should think. If someone was after them, that would make things more dangerous, I suppose."

"That makes sense, the part about leaving the baby with someone. But the grandmother would have been the obvious one to leave the baby with, wouldn't she? And, according to what you're telling me, they never came back for the baby."

Hannibal's tone was just short of accusing.

"You're saying I'm not telling you the truth?" Stanley said.

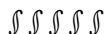
"I'm saying, we've got a baby, no more than a year or so old, make it two years, even, who just mysteriously disappeared. And whose name, just as mysteriously, has shown up recently in a Homeland investigation."

"And you think Stanley knows something he's not telling you?" Tom said in a defensive tone of voice.

Hannibal weighed that for a moment. "Maybe," he said, "maybe something he doesn't know he knows." He turned his eyes on Stanley again. "Why don't you tell me everything you know?"

"That's kind of a tall order, isn't it?"

Mister Hannibal, however, did not appear to get the joke.



Despite Hannibal's prompting, though, Stanley had nothing more to offer. Which was puzzling of itself, wasn't it? If there had been a baby in Petaluma, even when he was very young, there ought to be some vestigial memory. A child, even a very young child, would remember a baby brother, he felt.

"That's all of it?" Hannibal asked. "All you remember?"

"Yes..." Stanley hesitated just a second or so too long before answering. Hannibal raised an eyebrow. "There's a watch," Stanley said. For a long time, he'd forgotten the watch altogether, until he'd found it with his father's things. A pocket watch from the local jewelry store in downtown Petaluma, a

store he felt sure was long gone by now. It had been cheap, but it looked impressive, old fashioned. He had bought it for his father's birthday, the last birthday before their falling out.

He hadn't known until he'd emptied the house that his father had even kept it, could not imagine why he had done so. Maybe he had forgotten who gave it to him. It had been in a drawer of his dresser, under some socks and underwear. Probably, in time, his father had even forgotten it was there. It was the last thing Stanley had given him. Except memories, and too few of them good ones.

"It's just a cheap pocket watch," he told Hannibal.

"If I could see it. You never know..."

Stanley got it from the desk drawer where he'd left it, handed it over to Hannibal for his inspection, feeling in some vague way that he was betraying his father's confidence by doing so.

Hannibal gave the watch no more than a cursory once-over, however, and handed it back to Stanley. Stanley started to put it in his pocket, and held it instead clasped in his fingers. He wondered what possible clue Hannibal might have thought the watch would provide him to Andrew Korski's whereabouts. A hidden map, perhaps? Or was it only that he wanted to leave no part of that troubled relationship untouched by his investigation? A show of strength, of authority. You, and all of yours, are now my province to explore as I will.

"What about your sister?" Hannibal asked.

Stanley shrugged. "I asked her recently, if she remembered anyone named Andrew, but she didn't. You can talk to her, of course."

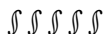
"I will. What about your parents' things. Papers, mementoes, letters."

"There wasn't much. And I got rid of most of what there was when we gave up the house and put my father in Home Gardens. Most of it wasn't worth keeping. There's a box of stuff, at my apartment, that's all."

"Can I look at that?"

Stanley hesitated briefly, but he could think of no good reason to object. "Sure. We can go there now, if you'd like."

"I'll come too," Tom said, and when Hannibal looked doubtful, said, with finality, "We're partners."



In the end, though, Hannibal found nothing more of interest in the one box of possessions than Stanley had—even less, in fact. He picked up the baby's bib and set it aside with no more than a glance.

Stanley opened his mouth to say something about what he perceived as initials woven into the border trim, AK, and changed his mind, without knowing quite why. Some instinctive loyalty? To a brother he'd never known, hadn't even known existed until today and to whom, surely, he owed nothing? And who might be some kind of criminal to boot?

Still, he said nothing, just watched without comment as Hannibal sifted through the rest of what was in the box. Anyway, the embroidery only appeared to be initials if you looked at it the right way. In which case, if he called it to Hannibal's attention, he could very well be setting him off on a wild goose chase. Suggestion sometimes could be as good as fact, and harder to change. And, although the thought was mostly unformed in Stanley's mind, there was a vestige of resentment at the taken-for-granted way in which this man had assumed authority over all matters Korski.

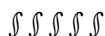
"And this is everything?" Hannibal asked after he'd gone through the box's contents carefully, but not so carefully as to notice that ambiguous embroidery.

"I know, it's not much. Understand, we weren't exactly rich in possessions, and a lot of what there was, was junk. Most of it got tossed. This is all I saved."

Hannibal regarded him with an accusatory glance, as if blaming him for being so careless as to dispose of potential clues.

"You'll talk to no one about any of this," Hannibal said as he was leaving, taking the box with him. It was not a suggestion,

nor even a request. His tone implied dire consequences for disobedience.



It was Tom, however, the seasoned detective, who said, after Hannibal had gone, “You know, Stanley, that’s not altogether true. About your family’s possessions.”

Stanley, thinking of the box Hannibal had carried away with him, said, “No, that’s all there is, I’m sure of it. All that’s left, anyway.”

“Except the house itself,” Tom said.

CHAPTER FOUR

The house had been closed up for years, since Stanley had committed his father to Home Gardens. The sensible thing to do would have been to sell it, and in fact he did put it up for sale, but it was too far out of town and too close to the railroad tracks, where freight trains still rumbled by with discomfoting regularity. It wasn't exactly in a prime real estate area—Petaluma in general was not prime real estate—and after nearly a year without a single glimmer of interest, he'd taken it off the market, thinking maybe the time wasn't right.

Some part of him must have clung to the notion, too, that he would one day bring his father back there. A fantasy, to be sure, but dreams don't depend on reason. There'd been precious little to dream about in his relationship with his father.

The house sat in a thick grove of oak and juniper and, he thought, piñon, across the railroad tracks and near the end of a dirt and gravel road that was nothing more now than a track. A couple of ruts that led past the house and ended about forty feet further on, where a few charred timbers gave evidence that there had once been another dwelling there.

Stanley tried to remember whose house that had been. It had been empty then, he thought. He remembered he and Irene exploring it—but, he'd come to be suspicious of his memories.

How did you know, anyway, what you really remembered and what you wanted to remember? What were really the facts of your past, and what only your opinions of the past? The past, it seemed, was more like what one wanted it to be rather than what it really was, and that subject to myriad interpretations. People thought you needed to know the past to understand the present, but it was the other way round, wasn't it? One interpreted one's past in terms of one's present.

"I'm fond of reality," he had once told Chris, "I'm just not sure this is it."

The house, for instance. Some houses, whether by the design of the builder or mere chance, looked at one with their surroundings, as if they were a part of the natural space, but this house looked as if it had been dropped down in its setting without a thought for how it might fit in or not. Unfortunately, the choice, either of house or setting, had not been successful.

It was much smaller, too, than what he remembered, and ill proportioned, long at the sides and narrow in front. With its steep pitched roof and the chimneys that looked too thin to be altogether functional, it had a pinched, nervous look, like a less than seaworthy ship waiting for the right tide and a favorable wind to bring it to harbor. White paint had chipped and peeled to reveal badly weathered wood underneath.

It was ostensibly two stories, but if his memory was correct this time around, the second story with its ill-suited dormer windows was nothing more than an attic that had been partitioned into three cubicles, one tiny bedroom for himself and one for Irene and an even tinier bathroom in between. Their parents slept downstairs.

For a moment, walking from his car through tall grass so dried-brown that it crackled beneath his feet, he thought he saw a light in one of the windows, and stopped, surprised. But it was only the afternoon sunlight glancing off the glass, the house playing tricks with him, the illusion fading when he feinted to the side.

The two steps leading up to the tiny porch were visibly rotting. He stepped over them, directly onto the porch, gave the boards there a cautious test before putting his full weight on them. They objected, but held.

Hadn't he and Irene played some kind of nonsensical game about the steps that had necessitated jumping them? Or, maybe they'd been unsafe even then. They were shallow steps. Easy for an adult to step right over them, but a child would have had to jump. Surely, though, if they were dangerous, his father would have repaired them, wouldn't he? He paused to think for a moment about his father. His pot smoking father. Or maybe not.

It had been years since he'd been here and he'd been unable to find the keys back in San Francisco, but the door, when he tried it, opened with a faint protest from rusty hinges. He stepped directly into what had been their front room; again, smaller than he remembered, narrow. Dust motes danced in the slanting afternoon light that came in with him. The house seemed to hold its breath, startled into an uneasy silence by this unexpected intrusion. He had an odd sense that he was not alone.

"Hello," he called. His voice echoed back to him, unanswered.

The front room opened directly into the large kitchen—they'd spent much of their time here, hadn't they, especially in cold weather, when the big cast iron stove kept at least this room toasty warm? The stove still occupied much of one wall, the room's only remaining furniture. It had been old fashioned then, looked positively antique now. He wondered if it were of any value. Possibly. He knew from his decorator past that there were people who treasured things like this. It would take a derrick to move it, though. Probably more than it was worth.

His parent's bedroom was beyond the kitchen, in a kind of built-on lean-to that had clearly been added after the house was built. He paused in the doorway, trying to see them in it, but no images came to him.

Maybe he hadn't been permitted to come in here. He tried to remember rules; mostly, his mother and father had seemed preoccupied. Or maybe that was the dope. Dopers traveled a different path. It was odd, when he thought about it—they became almost like children. You'd think they would relate well to other children, real children, but they didn't. At least his parents hadn't.

No, now that he was standing in the doorway, he remembered, of course he hadn't been permitted to come in here. Or... but, yes, there had been *one* time. He'd run in, from outside, he thought, intending to tell his mother something, he couldn't remember now what, although at the time it must have seemed very important to him, and his mother had been crying, lying on her back across the bed, sobbing almost soundlessly,

but with her shoulders heaving, and tears streaming down her cheeks.

He'd stopped in the doorway, confused and frightened the way children are by their parents' emotions, and had finally gotten up the nerve to ask, "What's wrong?"

"The tracks. Those damned tracks." She might have been talking to herself rather than answering him. "I'll never get away from them."

"What tracks? You mean the railroad tracks?"

She turned her head and stared at him for the longest time as if she weren't seeing him, as if she hadn't known he was there, and then she said, in a voice so normal that it contradicted the tears still running down her cheeks, "You're not supposed to be in here."

It was the only time he could remember her actually showing emotion, but that emotion, whatever had inspired it, whatever had brought her to those tears, had nothing to do with him. He had wondered, though, why anyone would be crying over railroad tracks. These tracks weren't even in use anymore. He couldn't recall that he'd ever seen a train on them.

"I'll bet she lost a dog on the railroad tracks," Irene suggested. "Mrs. Miller, my teacher, she says a train ran over her dog one time. She said he was sleeping on the tracks and, smooosh, just like that."

"Why would a dog be sleeping on the railroad tracks?" Stanley wondered, but Irene had no answer for that.



He went back through the kitchen. At one side of the front room, a flight of stairs, with no banister, led upward. He put a foot on the first step and hesitated. The dust on the stairs looked disturbed. Not footprints, exactly, too muddled for that. More as if someone had gone up and down them often enough to disturb the dust but erase any clear footprints.

He looked over his shoulder, at the floor of the living room. Here too the dust seemed to have been muddled about. Animals? There were no droppings, no obvious ones, anyway.

Probably if he looked he'd find evidence of the inevitable mice, but nothing bigger than that.

"Hello," he called again, "anyone here?" Again, that listening silence. Waiting. Wary.

He went cautiously up the stairs, mindful of the lack of banister, keeping one hand on the wall to balance himself, wishing now that he'd taken Tom up on the offer to come with him.

Which was silly. It was just an old house, a long time empty. What possible danger could there be here? It was all those ghosts, those memories, real and imagined, teasing him. Like the spider webs that hung in the corners and from the windowsills, trapping him in the filigrees of the past.

His past, his suddenly mysterious past. That was surely the only occupant here.

Three doors led from the small landing at the top of the stairs. His had been the door to the right, Irene's to the left. Between them the bathroom, jury-rigged, nothing more than a toilet and a sink for washing their hands. They showered in the larger bathroom downstairs.

He opened the door to Irene's room first, pushing it wide with one hand, standing balanced on one foot. Ready, reason notwithstanding, to turn and dash down the stairs if need be.

It wasn't. The room was empty. Across from him, the closet door stood wide. He could see at a glance that it was empty, too.

As was the bathroom between the two bedrooms, when he went to investigate it. He had forgotten how tiny it was, barely room to turn around in. Barely room for the porcelain toilet, its seat missing, and the rust stained sink with the cracked mirror above it.

He and Irene had left secret messages for one another in the mirror. You stuck your finger in a little jar of cooking oil they'd stolen from the kitchen and kept hidden behind the toilet, and you wrote on the glass with the tip of your oily finger. When the mirror was clear, you couldn't see what was written, but if

you ran the water hot enough to make steam, the words appeared as if by magic.

“Why are you kids wasting all that hot water?” their mother would shout up the stairs. “There’s not going to be any left for the dishes.”

He resisted the urge to run the water. It wouldn’t be hot now. The water heater, if it were even still here, was certainly long since turned off. What would he see anyway? He couldn’t for the life of him imagine what messages he and his sister had left for one another. They had hardly communicated at all, it seemed to him. What need could there have been for secrets?

A limerick—yes, he remembered that: “Adam and Eve and Pinch-Me-Tight, went down to the river, to see the fight; Adam and Eve went home, and who was left to see the fight?”

He’d always played the fool for Irene’s benefit, no matter how many times they did the game. “Pinch-Me-Tight,” he would answer with all the innocence he could muster, and she would oblige him, laughing merrily while she gave him a pinch on his arm. He smiled at the memory. Had they really ever been that carefree together, he and the sister who was so uncomfortable with him now, so distrustful? Because he was gay—but what did she have to fear from that, he’d often wondered.

It occurred to him that they were their only playmates when they’d been little. No one ever came here. It wasn’t until he’d gone off to school that he had any male friends. Until then, his older sister had been his only friend. Had that influenced him, he wondered? Contributed to his being gay. But probably not, he thought; didn’t they say now that the tendency was inborn? It seemed to him as if he’d always been attracted to men. But how could he have been, when apart from his father, he hardly saw any until he started school?

He turned the hot water tap, half expecting to see words emerge from the glass, and got nothing for his efforts. The water was off. Which, surely, he might have expected.

“You’re being a goose,” he chided himself, and leaving the bathroom and its cracked mirror behind, strode boldly to the

door of what had been his room, pushed it open and stepped in without hesitation.

And stopped dead just inside the door. A bed—a cot, really—was pushed against the wall under the window, blankets piled carelessly atop it. Near the head of the bed, a scarred wooden table, one broken leg resting on a couple of bricks for balance, and atop the table, a Coleman lantern.

Not, he was sure, things he had left behind when he emptied the house. He stared at the bed for a long moment, scoured the room with his eyes. The closet door here was closed. Childhood fears came back to him: the bogey man hiding in the closet, the ogre under the bed. All those things that went bump in a childish night.

“Now, that is just silly,” he told himself aloud. Even to his own ears, his voice sounded uncertain, tremulous. He knew he should cross the room and look into that closet, he willed his feet in that direction, but they refused to obey.

Finally, he turned and went out, leaving the bedroom door open, and went back down the stairs, not looking back, but listening, straining for any sound of footsteps following him. The stairs creaked once, and he hesitated, but it was just an old house complaining of stiff joints. The wind, blowing in a quick gust through an open window somewhere (had he left a window open when he’d cleaned the place out?) sounded like someone’s ragged breath.

There were ashes in the stove in the kitchen. He sifted them through his fingers. Not warm, of course not. They might have been years old. How could he say? Had he looked in the stove when he was here last? He doubted it. Why would he? Why, really, did he do so now? What would you find in an old kitchen stove, if not ashes?

Unlike the front door, the back one, off the kitchen, opened without any rusty squeaks, as if it had been greased recently. He ran a finger over one hinge, but his finger came back clean, no trace of oil on it. Doors rusted differently, didn’t they?

He went from room to room again, looking for any evidence of occupancy, but there was nothing more than the strangely

disturbed patterns of the dust on the floor, and he couldn't even be sure of that. Animals might have come and gone, without staying. Might have pushed an unlocked door open. And closed again.

He made himself go slowly back up the stairs, treading still more cautiously now, almost tiptoeing, as if he might disturb some sleeping giant. He went straight to his old bedroom, crossed it without a pause, and flung the closet door open, his heartbeat faster, holding his breath, and took a step back, half expecting someone to charge out of it at him.

There was no one, but there was a pair of jeans hanging against the back wall on an old nail. He took them down from the nail. They were stiff and in need of a wash. The pockets, when he checked them, were empty. But, really, what had he expected to find in them? A note, apologizing for making use of the premises?

Because that, assuredly, was all this meant. Some wayfarer, a homeless person, a drifter, a passing hiker caught out in a rainstorm, had taken advantage of an empty house to spend an afternoon, a night, a few nights even.

He threw the jeans down on the floor of the closet, and looked again about the room. A wayfarer, let it be said, with a cot and blankets, and a Coleman lantern.

Well, then, someone homeless, who had set up temporary quarters here. Why not? An isolated old farmhouse, nearly three miles off the main road, obviously left empty for a long period of time. A perfect place to shelter for a while. Probably, this had all been long ago.

He went to the table and ran a finger over the base of the lantern. The lantern was dust free. Not so long ago, then. Which told him... exactly nothing.

He took the blankets from the cot and shook them out and a paperback book fell out of them. He picked it and looked at the cover. Karl Marx. A literate traveler, then, which somehow seemed to make it stranger still. An all but illegible name had been inscribed on the inside cover, Donna, maybe. He knew

any number of Donnas, and couldn't imagine any of them reading Marx. People could surprise you, though.

The wind gusted again. A peculiar chill went up his spine and quickly back down again. Suddenly, quite unreasonably, he felt unsafe, felt certain he was not alone here. There was a scent—no, not quite a scent, even, more a sense—of someone's presence. He thought that the house didn't smell empty, whatever empty smelled like.

He tossed the book back among the blankets, turned, and hurried down the stairs, out the front door, slamming the door behind himself.

The light outside was fading. He stood by his car, looking around for... he had no idea for what. The darkness was already thick among the trees.

The trees. They'd had a swing, he was sure of that. Not a real swing, but an old rubber tire that had hung from a branch. He tried to identify the tree, but couldn't. There were too many of them, growing thickly together, edging closer to the house than he remembered. Memories. How could one trust them, how could one know what was real, what only dreams? A line from *Blade Runner*: "Memories. You're talking about memories."

He thought of something he'd read once, about pre-Columbian Mexico. The Spanish conquistadors had destroyed nearly everything the Aztecs had written or painted. Later, though, they regretted what they had done, and tried to reconstruct some of it from memory. Most of what is "known" of the Aztec civilization is nothing more than the memories of others, of their conquerors.

The Spartans, too, kept no written records. Their "history" is what was recorded by their long time enemies, the cultured Athenians. Athenian memories, not Spartan.

Maybe all of history was nothing more than a dream. Maybe that's all his own history was.

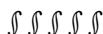
It was already dark among the trees. It occurred to him that anyone could be standing there, watching him, unobserved. He should perhaps walk toward them, but he did not want to do

that. He stared at the shadows there for a long moment, turned slowly around, stared at the charred ruins of what had been another house, forty feet away.

Someone could just as well be standing there, really. For all of that, the weeds in the field nearby were tall enough for someone to crouch in them unseen. He looked at the trees again. The vagabond wind set the branches in sinister motion. They might have been waving at him.

This is silly, he scolded himself, but he got into his car rather more quickly than he need to have done, turned it carefully around, and drove back down the lane, a little too speedily. The car bounced around in the deep ruts and he had to hold on to the steering wheel tightly.

He could not help himself glancing into the rearview mirror, half expecting to see someone—some *thing*—loping after him, but the rutted track behind the car was empty.



Stanley. He'd known him at once. How could he not? And of course Stanley would come. That was inevitable, wasn't it?

Why he himself had come was less clear, though that too seemed to have had some inevitability about it, at least until he had come. There were no ghosts to exorcise, surely or, whatever ghosts there were, this was surely not their haunt, not his ghosts. Nothing here that he need do anything about.

Something would have to be done about Stanley, though, he realized that now; eventually at any rate.

People said he had no feelings, and that was certainly true. He had long ago taken all his feelings, made them into a bundle, and shut them away in the attic of his mind, where they could no longer trouble him.

Nevertheless, it troubled him that anything had to happen to Stanley, troubled him in a way not altogether clear to him. They'd never known one another, probably never would. Even blood ran thin, didn't it, in due time?

Still, needs must where needs matter. At some point in time, more likely sooner than later, Stanley would become a problem. A problem that must be dealt with.

More likely sooner than later.

CHAPTER FIVE

"I'm not imagining it, Tom. I tell you, somebody's been following me."

"Who? And why?" Tom asked. "Some boyfriend from your past, jealous about us?"

Stanley did an uncanny imitation of one of Tom's grunts. "I can't imagine who that would be."

"Bill collector?"

Stanley shook his head.

"Look, have you actually seen someone? Someone you could describe?"

"Yes." Stanley paused and changed his mind. "No, not that I could describe. And, well, I haven't really *seen* anyone, not anyone specific, I mean. It's more, I don't know, it's more like a feeling."

"Stanley, you're just spooked. It was that visit from Hannibal. And the stuff you found in the house, the cot and things."

"Okay, what about that stuff? It's gone. You saw that for yourself. What happened to it? Why did it disappear like that, between my first visit there and our visit yesterday?"

"Who knows? Most likely you were right to begin with. Someone was living there, a homeless person, a transient. And, maybe they saw you, the day you were there by yourself. You said you had the feeling there was someone around, someone watching you. So, as soon as you left, they cleared out. They could have figured you'd be back, and the next time you probably wouldn't be alone. You could have been bringing the local Sheriff, say, or a whole posse."

They were in bed. Stanley frowned and put his hands behind his head, staring up at the ceiling. "I suppose you're right," he said, but without conviction. An F car went by outside, clanging

noisily. Distant voices, laughing. The beep of a horn. San Francisco-at-night sounds.

“You just need something to help you relax.”

Tom’s hand slipped under the sheet. After a moment, Stanley turned on his side and scooted closer, reached under the sheet himself... and forgot, at least for the present, the idea that someone was following him.

Despite the fact that he’d downplayed it, though, Tom hadn’t forgotten it. He began to keep a closer eye on Stanley, because he too thought something odd was going on. Just instinct, nothing concrete.

Nothing except that stranger, the day of the funeral...

§ § § § §

“So, Danzel, no more homicides.” That was Lieutenant Mallory, chief of the homicide bureau. He held the inevitable cigar between his teeth, switching it from corner to corner of his mouth, unable to light up, thanks to San Francisco’s stringent anti-smoking ordinances.

It was Tom’s last day with SFPD. Homicide was having a farewell party for him at a cop-friendly bar in the Tenderloin, a party he couldn’t very well have skipped, funeral or no funeral.

“You never know,” he’d told Stanley. “Most likely we’re going to need some good will in the department somewhere down the road. Better not burn all my bridges.”

“It’s my father’s funeral. How would it look if you weren’t there?”

“I’ll get there, okay, I promise. I just need to do this first...”

§ § § § §

“So, Danzel, no more homicides.”

Tom was standing near the door, contemplating escape, thinking of Stanley. It took him a moment to home in on Mallory’s question.

“Most likely not,” he said, sipping the cheap Scotch the other inspectors had provided for the occasion, and wondering

if he could sneak a Chivas past them. He hated cheap Scotch. "You never know, though. Look at that Sam Spade." About whom he would know nothing, if Stanley hadn't made him watch that movie, *The Somebody Falcon*. He was beginning to like old movies, something he'd never been into before, but which were food and drink to Stanley. He'd particularly liked that one. Bogie had been impressive - had, in fact, given Tom the idea for the detective agency.

Mallory frowned. "Spade? He one of ours?"

"Long time ago." Tom thought about explaining the movie, decided Mallory wasn't the movie type. And, probably, he'd think it was a pansy thing if Tom brought it up.

Mallory tried for another awkward moment or two to make conversation, finally nodded past Tom at someone, slapped Tom on the shoulder, and said, "Well, good luck with everything. Call me if I can give a hand," and drifted away, looking relieved to be done with an awkward conversation.

It had been an awkward get together for all concerned. Everybody knew why Tom was quitting, knew that he was living with Stanley, knew Stanley was queer. Which meant to their way of thinking that Tom was almost certainly queer too. To a group of mostly certified homophobes, this felt as if they had been betrayed by one of their own, as if Tom had been unfaithful to some vow of heterosexual fellowship they had taken together.

Uncomfortable with this knowledge, more glad he was leaving than sorry, they'd forced an exaggerated bonhomie, had been a little too boisterous, slapped him on the back a time or two more than warranted, a bit harder than necessary, had bought a round or two too many of drinks.

Tom had promised Stanley in no uncertain terms that he would make it to the funeral. He glanced at his watch, frowning. Probably, he should have hit the road by now. For sure he'd been here long enough; anyway, he knew that everybody would feel more at ease once he'd left, notwithstanding that he was the ostensible guest of honor.

He became aware that someone had taken Mallory's place at his side, was actually speaking to him. He turned his head to listen.

"So," Bryce was saying, "let's stay in touch, okay? Maybe get together some time, for a drink. Or," he added, his voice dropping to a near whisper, "you know, whatever," looking a trifle embarrassed when he added that.

Bryce was one of the younger inspectors, new to the bureau. Until today, they hadn't spoken more than a few words to one another. Tom remembered now that he'd heard Bryce was unmarried, or that he lived alone, at least. That in itself was not so unusual. Had Bryce been married, he wondered, and was now divorced? He didn't remember if he'd ever heard. Divorce was an occupational hazard of police work. It took a special kind of woman to stay married to a cop. Or, thinking of Stanley, a special kind of man.

He gave Bryce a careful look. He was short, like Stanley, but that was their only similarity. Bryce's hair was carrot colored, his eyes emerald, his outsized nose dotted with freckles, and he had a slight overbite that gave him an oddly rapacious look, as if he were about to take a bite out of—out of something. Cute, Tom supposed, though it surprised him to think that. Until a few months ago, until Stanley, he would never have described another male as "cute."

Bryce returned Tom's scrutiny for just a second or two, and then dropped his eyes, grinned a little self consciously. Cruising? Not so long ago, that thought wouldn't have crossed Tom's mind either. There were lots of things he was more aware of now, though he hadn't been aware until now that he was aware of them.

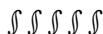
"Sure, let's do that," he said, grinning. "See what comes up." Couldn't get much more pointed than that, could you?

Maybe a little too pointed for Bryce. This time he didn't even try to meet Tom's eye. "Sounds like a plan," he said.

"So," somebody punched Tom's arm, "new fields to plow, huh, Danzel?"

Bryce had gone. This was his partner, Carlson, the bureau's number one fag hater. He gave Tom a smarmy grin. Tom considered briefly wiping it off his face, felt his fist itch for it, and decided that this wasn't the time or the place. Like he'd told Stanley, no sense in burning all his bridges.

He turned his back on Carlson instead. It was time for the funeral.



He arrived at the funeral home just a couple of minutes late, and not quite drunk, but not quite sober, either. He paused in the door at the back of the room. It was a small assemblage. Stanley and his friend, Chris, and Stanley's sister Irene, whose husband hadn't come.

"Someone has to stay with the kids," she'd said, and made a point of adding, "I have to get right back, too. He's got to go to work tomorrow. This wasn't a good time for me." As if her father's death had been in poor taste.

Chris sat on the other side of Irene. In the chairs directly behind them, a couple of local biddies sat with heads together, whispering. Tom wrote them off as just funeral groupies.

One man, a total stranger to Tom, sat by himself in the last row of the chapel. He jerked his head around, startled, as Tom came in, and quickly turned away, lifting a hand to run his fingers through his hair, a casual gesture, but one that effectively masked his face from observation.

Or maybe not a complete stranger, Tom thought, because his face, the quick glimpse that Tom got of it, anyway, was vaguely familiar. Tom looked at him, puzzled, trying to place him, was about to go to him and offer a handshake—cop tactics, you got a closer look and could do a little sniffing about, like a dog, making an inspection—when the man got up abruptly, head lowered, mumbled "Excuse me," and, edging past Tom, hurried out. The mortuary's outer door opened and closed quickly.

Tom looked after him, wondering. A stranger, at a mostly unattended funeral? Another funeral groupie? Something

rippled through him, some cop-sense. The stranger had been too startled by Tom's sudden appearance, hadn't he? A funeral groupie wouldn't look quite so furtive, wouldn't jump up and disappear like that.

Tom's cop hunch was to follow the man out, get a better look at him, maybe engage him in a little conversation, but Stanley looked over his shoulder at that moment, frowning because Tom was late.

Tom dismissed the stranger from his mind and hurried up to sit beside Stanley, resisting the urge to take Stanley's hand, but sitting close enough that his leg touched Stanley's, felt the familiar electrical jolt that he always got when his body touched Stanley's, that scared him almost as much as it thrilled him.

He gave the minister an apologetic nod, smiling across Stanley at Irene, who made no secret of her disapproval and gave him a frosty look in return.

"Their beloved father..." the minister intoned.



At home after the funeral, Tom and Stanley had almost immediately engaged in some particularly enthusiastic sex, which Tom had initiated in a rather calculated manner. An old pro at the sexual games, if formerly on the heterosexual side of the arena, he had long been aware that there was something about funerals, the desire to affirm life, maybe, that made women horny. It had never particularly affected him in any appreciable way—because, he thought, he was more or less horny all the time and so probably wouldn't have noticed the difference. He was glad to discover, however, that Stanley was not immune.

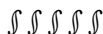
"Did you know," Stanley said while carefully hanging up his dark suit, making sure of creases and pockets, "Victorian prostitutes used to take their clients into graveyards? The flat tops of some of the tombs made for a convenient bed. Free, too."

"Sounds cold," Tom said. "Plus, wouldn't you be thinking of rotting corpses and worms feasting on them? A turn off, sounds like to me."

"Well, not if you were horny enough."

"Speaking of which..." Tom was already naked on the bed, his dick making its interests obvious.

Stanley looked, and was duly interested. He shoved the suit into the closet and quickly tossed the rest of his clothes on the floor. There was a time for neatness, and a time to move it along.



Only later, only after Stanley had made his comment, about feeling that he was being followed, did Tom think of the stranger again. He tried to visualize the face. It was familiar and yet not, at the same time, like someone he'd met long ago, or seen at a distance.

Maybe Stanley's feeling that he was being followed meant nothing, of course, but, scatterbrained though Stanley could be, Tom had learned that Stanley's instincts were often spot-on.

So Tom began to watch, too, without saying anything to alarm Stanley. And after several days of watching, was no more sure than Stanley of what he saw. He, too, had an impression of someone, something, hovering just beyond the edge of recognition, yet there was nothing concrete, nothing or no one he could actually point a finger at and say, "Aha, there you are."

Which meant there was no one there—or, alternatively, and this was far more worrisome, whoever was there was very good indeed at staying in the shadows. A pro, in other words.

He thought of Hannibal's visit. Terrorists. Hard core terrorists, if he could rely on what he'd read between the lines of Hannibal's story, terrorists who had killed themselves rather than be arrested, or possibly had died in a shootout. Not, then, casual dabblers in minor violence, but the real thing. And one of them had gone missing.

Which was not to say that the missing man was literally Stanley's long lost brother, Andrew Korski. Names got

appropriated. People, bad guys especially, needed to establish other identities, and a baby who had disappeared years before offered good prospects.

Still, the possibility was there, that someone, for some reason, was on Stanley's tail. And protecting Stanley was what Tom did, was the most important part of what he did now. Stanley was his. His what, he wasn't altogether sure, but unquestionably his regardless.

Tom wasn't a philosophical type and not a romantic, but whatever the word was, that was all it was, a word, and in his opinion, words sometimes made things more muddled instead of clearing them up. What mattered was what you were, and what you were to one another.

The way he saw it, Stanley had come into his life so Tom could take care of him. Stanley might not understand that, probably didn't. Hell, Tom didn't understand it exactly himself, but he had no doubt of it.

Tom had been married once, long ago—not, they had both soon enough agreed, a marriage made in Heaven. They had divorced, gone their own ways amicably enough. For Tom, that way had involved many women, and no commitment. Until he had met Stanley, he had never engaged in any kind of sexual activity with another male, had never even considered it, at least not consciously. Had he considered it, it would probably have been with, if not repugnance, certainly great reluctance.

Yet, when that first situation arose with Stanley, he could hardly say he responded with any great reluctance. The truth—which it had taken him some time to face—was that he had downright encouraged it, if mostly unconsciously. And had enjoyed it to an astonishing degree, though he hadn't been altogether willing to admit that to himself either, not at the time.

He didn't understand what had happened to him, with Stanley. It was like nothing he had ever known, had ever imagined knowing. Was it love? How could he know? If it was, then he had never known love before. But he already knew that, didn't he?

He knew that Stanley was in love with him, and wanted to hear the same from him in return. Stanley wanted a commitment, beyond just living together—which for Tom *was* a major commitment, maybe as far as he was willing, or able to go. Stanley's dream for some kind of marriage was as yet an impossibility for him even to contemplate.

He had wrestled with his feelings for Stanley from the beginning, had broken off with him in all sincerity, determined that the relationship, whatever it was, had to end; had found himself drawn back inexorably into the radiance of Stanley's aura.

He had surrendered finally, still not sure what it was he had surrendered to. He couldn't—or perhaps wouldn't—define it. Certainly it brought with it though, an almost frightening sexual intensity.

That he couldn't deny.

It brought with it something more as well, something that, had Tom only believed in it a bit more, might even have been happiness. For the present, at least for him, that was enough. More, in fact, than he'd ever found in any other relationship over his relationship-crowded past.

So, though he couldn't give Stanley the kind of long-term commitment that he knew Stanley wanted from him, though he couldn't bring himself to say, "I love you," and probably never would, he had no intention of letting Stanley go either—not for the immediate future, nor for any future that he could see in the distance.

Why would he?

Confused though he might be, however, on the nature of their relationship, of some things he was quite sure, and the most fundamental of those was Stanley was his, in some indefinable way. Part of it was purely physical, that sexual part, the sensations that Stanley roused in him, to a degree that he had never known before. More than that, though, was the male thing—perhaps understandable only to a male, and not all of them could face up to it—the pleasure in possession, and the discovery that he could give so much pleasure. And the

pleasure, as well, and it was no small thing, that he took from the giving. Like a god, bestowing his gifts. It actually felt like that sometimes, though he had never phrased it in exactly those terms, not even to himself.

There was the protective thing, too, and that was a male thing as well, the impulse to protect, to defend, and he was sure, too, that looking after Stanley was his God given assignment, and one he took very seriously.

So, who was this, hovering on the fringes of Stanley's life, and did he constitute a threat to Tom's own? Because no one—No One—was going to lay a finger on Stanley Korski without taking Tom Danzel down first. Much he might be unsure of, but of that he was entirely certain.



“What do you think?” Stanley interrupted his thoughts. “Here?” He was still struggling with the placement of the lion picture, as Tom thought of it. Tom was not an artistic sort, but in fact, he personally rather liked this print. The lion, looking utterly majestic, the flesh at his feet, a once beautiful, graceful zebra, now nothing but bones and torn flesh.

Still...”Stanley, don't you think it's just a little gruesome for an office?”

“Is it?” Stanley held it at arm's length and studied it briefly. “Well, we're detectives, aren't we? We've dealt with gruesome things before. We probably will again. What if... the other side of the room, by the door? The clients won't see it till they're leaving. It will remind them of the fruits of crime.”

Tom had to think about that. “Which one is the criminal?” he asked. “The lion? And the fruits of crime are, what? You get to eat a zebra? That's not how I remember it. Wasn't it something about 'bitter fruit'?”

“Don't be flippant.” Stanley gave him frosty look and carried the picture to the opposite wall, holding it up for inspection next to the door, and giving it a measuring look. He propped the picture against the wall, debated aloud about the placement, and went to get his hammer and a nail.

Tom had observed long ago that when a man is engaged in physical activity and talking at the same time, he is mostly conducting a conversation with himself and any other audience is pretty much beside the point. Anyway, Stanley would hang the painting where he thought it belonged, and rightly, too. He was the one with the artistic sense. Tom was perfectly aware he had none. He went back to his own musings.

Which were, how was he to sort things out, this possible threat to Stanley? Start with Hannibal, which was where it had started. What did Hannibal know that he didn't? A lot, probably. When you got down to it, he knew almost nothing, and what he did know was as much supposition as fact.

Okay, Homeland had been investigating some group. That much was known. You could make a safe assumption that they were terrorists, or something close related. The group was gone, or not available for questioning—which probably meant dead. Maybe in a shootout, maybe they'd gotten wind of what was coming down and blown themselves to kingdom come. A lot of crazies played the terrorist game.

Only one of them had not played in the final scene, had disappeared. Make that, at a guess, Andrew Korski, or in any case, someone using the name Andrew Korski. But, if it were the real, the missing, Andrew Korski, why would he now be interested in a brother he hadn't even known, ever? Even less reason if he wasn't the real Andrew Korski.

Then there was the house in Petaluma? Stanley'd had the impression of someone there, and Stanley's impressions were sometimes eerily accurate. Same question then, why would Andrew Korski even be there, at a house he'd never lived in?

Maybe, the thought popped into his head, simply because he had to be somewhere? Homeland Security was after his butt, had probably killed his cohorts. This man, this Andrew Korski, had to disappear, and an old, abandoned house in the middle of nowhere was as good a place as any to disappear, a house with only the most tenuous connection to Homeland's suspect, quite likely a house they weren't even aware of.

It would have been reasonable to suppose that the house, long deserted, had been long ago disposed of as well. Given time, enough digging, Homeland would have learned otherwise, but it wouldn't have been all at once. A man on the run could count on a grace period while he regrouped, got his bearings. Who could have expected Stanley to show up there the way he had?

And whoever had been there had disappeared almost immediately afterward, which said very clearly, man on the run.

Maybe it wasn't just expedience, though. Maybe there was some family thing, too, that had taken this Andrew Korski to Petaluma. Curiosity about the family he hadn't known, about the life he hadn't lived. If your present life was seriously fucked up, it wasn't surprising that the alternative life would look more attractive.

"You're awfully deep in thought," Stanley said, intruding on Tom's reflections. "Ouch, damn it." Stanley had been hammering his nail into the office wall. Turning to look at Tom, he hit his thumb instead of the nail, though not so very hard. His expression was more startled than pained.

Looking at him, at the expression that came and went quickly, Tom saw the stranger who'd been at the funeral, saw his face superimposed over Stanley's. The stranger who had looked startled and, yes, even pained a little.

Andrew Korski. Of course, and the real Andrew Korski, too. He should have seen it at once: the brother resemblance. Now that he had seen it, he was dead certain.

CHAPTER SIX

“What’s this?” Tom, sorting through the office mail, tore one envelope open and extracted a card from within it.

Stanley took the engraved card from Tom’s hand and looked at it carefully. “It’s an invitation. To an art showing. The opening of a new gallery.”

“I can see that. But why? Or why me, anyway? I could see someone inviting you, but I’m no art fancier. Anyway, there’s a Giants game tonight. The Padres. I was going to head down to the park.”

Stanley looked at the card again, and at the envelope it had come in. “It’s addressed to both of us. Well, to the agency, actually. Danzel and Korski, Private Investigators.”

“You ever heard of this... what’s it called?”

“Bentham Gallery? No, not that I recall.” He fanned himself with the invitation—the window in his office continued to resist efforts to open it—and frowned thoughtfully. “Maybe it’s a potential client. You know, someone looking for investigators.”

“Why not just call and make an appointment? That’s how it’s usually done.”

“Maybe someone wanted to look us over first, see if we were suitable.”

“Suitable? What way, suitable?”

“Well, it’s an art gallery, right? That means, most likely, upper crust types, the artsy fartsy set. If they wanted something investigated, they wouldn’t want just anybody sniffing around. They’d want someone who could fit in.”

“Crook their little pinkie, you mean?” Tom grinned. “Maybe you’d better go alone. I’m no good with that set. I always manage to step on somebody’s toes.”

"The invitation is to both of us. Besides, you may learn something. I say we both go."

"What am I going to learn at an art gallery?"

"Maybe which toes to step on, and which not."



Bentham Gallery was on Bayshore Drive, in an area that could best be described as anti-chic, mostly populated with warehouses and discount stores: Beverages and More; a Smart & Final; a rug and floor tile place; an appliance store—businesses of the kind that needed large spaces

Most of them were closed now, some for the evening, some of them permanently, with the derelict look that failed businesses assumed, seemingly overnight. The lack of trees, of houses with lawns and gardens and foot traffic, gave the neighborhood a sterile, barren look. If it weren't for the cars, it might have been the high desert, the surface of the moon, even.

There were cars aplenty, however, at least for this evening. The parking lot of a boarded up electronics store was filled with Land Rovers and Jaguars and Mercedes Benzes, with a Bentley claiming the place of pride at the front entrance to the gallery, right next door. Tom ignored the valet in his smart red and black uniform who stepped out to take the truck from him.

"Looks like a high school kid," he said, and drove his Ram pickup to the rear of the lot, aloof from the expensive metal parked closer to the door. "I'm picky about who drives my truck."

"I drive it."

"That's different. You're not a teenager."

Gulls jeered scornfully from overhead as they got out. "I've always wondered, why gulls?" Tom asked, looking skyward. "I mean, we're way inland. We must be miles from the water. What are they doing here?"

"They follow the pigeons," Stanley said. "Pigeons are the food finders of the bird world. If there's anything anywhere to eat, the pigeons will track it down. Then the gulls swoop in to

share the repast. Sort of like the local foodies when someone finds a new restaurant.”

Two pink and gray pigeons landed on the ground nearly at their feet and, as if to demonstrate Stanley’s theory, began to waddle around pecking at the ground. “Feathered rats,” Tom said disgustedly. He made a half-hearted kick in their directions. The pigeons hopped a few inches away and, ignoring him, went back to pecking.

“I could say the same about some of the foodies.”

A pigeon on a utility line above delivered his own comment, just missing Tom’s shoulder with it. Tom glowered, and stomped toward the door of the gallery. Stanley bit back a smile and followed him.

Inside, the decidedly chic gallery was filled with Land Rover sorts of people, and Jaguar and Mercedes sorts, dressed down expensively if not attractively. The object seemed to have been to make oneself look outrageous, even bizarre. After considerable discussion, Stanley and Tom had worn Dockers and polo shirts, a sort of default costume for San Francisco, but it was they who looked strangely out of place.

Judging from attendance alone, the gallery’s opening could be deemed a success. Although it was a large space it was jam packed, an exotic muddle of people who milled about alone or in twos and threes, examining paintings and sculptures and engaging in spirited conversations that ran together in a kind of elegant bee-hum. There was the smell of upper class perspiration, too many expensive perfumes—Anteus, Obsession, Opium, a blend of precious scents that in the aggregate smelled like nothing so much as money—mingled with that odd oil and lacquer odor peculiar to art studios and galleries.

They paused just inside the door, alongside a faux marble column. “Do you have any idea why we’re here?” Tom wondered. He didn’t like crowds, and not, certainly, this kind of crowd. Rich, pissy and mostly gay. Not just gay, either, but the kinds of gays who would look down their noses at him, treat him with little disguised contempt.

"Because we got an invitation," Stanley said.

"But why did we?" Tom persisted, feeling somewhat grumpy, and not just from his close encounter with the pigeon kind. He was missing out on a game at AT&T Park, a game he'd really wanted to see; the Giants and the Padres were a perennial rivalry. Besides, under the best of circumstances an evening at an art gallery was not his idea of a big night out. Worse, an art gallery where none of what he saw hanging on the walls made any sense to him or looked at all recognizable—lines and cubes and zigzags, mostly in a riot of color, and right next to where they were standing, just inside the door, an entire canvas painted in a kind of purple, like spilled wine, with a single yellow egg-yolk of a splotch off center. "Neither of us has ever been here, neither of us knows this Wombat fellow..."

"Wembit, Cyril Wembit." Stanley read the artist's name from the invitation. "He does interesting work, though."

"Huh," Tom grunted, unimpressed.

Stanley was studying the purple and egg expanse, lips pursed. "Maybe for the apartment. What do you think? The bedroom?"

"That? It would give me purple nightmares, if you want the truth."

"Like drowning in a vat of wine, I should think," a melodious voice said just behind them. They turned to find a woman had come up while they'd been considering the painting. She smiled at them, at Stanley especially, as if she had been waiting the entire evening for his appearance, a smile slightly warmer than welcoming.

"Hello." She held out a hand. "I'm the owner, Daniella Bentham. Welcome to Bentham Gallery."

Daniella Bentham was beautiful—dark skinned and tall, taller than Stanley, nearly as tall as Tom, and what paperback novels often referred to as statuesque, and which Tom was more inclined to describe as "big hooters." In this case, big hooters, it appeared, free of any encumbrance beneath the red silk of her jump suit. She wore a black Pashmina stole, knotted

with careless chic about wide shoulders, a crystal Ohm on a silver chain about her neck.

It was a striking costume, and it made Stanley's thoughts jump at once to that famous Bronzino portrait, the one Henry James described in *Wings of the Dove*. It was one of Stanley's favorite paintings. He had a framed print of it at the apartment, in fact.

Of course, the Lucrezia Panciatichi of the portrait wore a dress, not a jump suit, but the colors were exactly the same, the dress just this somewhat off-shade of crimson-not-quite-rust red, with black puffed sleeves in lieu of Daniella Bentham's black stole. Both women wore Bloodstone rings, too; a different sort of Bloodstone, to be sure. The stone in the portrait was the scarlet variety. This one was green, with flecks of red Jasper in it. A man's ring, he thought, but then her hands were as large as a man's, big boned and it did not look as out of place as it might have.

Still, Bloodstone rings. And outfits of the exact some colors. What a remarkable coincidence—if it were a coincidence.

"Amour dure sans fin," he murmured—the words were famously inscribed in the portrait—and he saw in the quick flicker of her eyes that she recognized them. Not mere coincidence, then. A woman who knew her Bronzino and her Henry James? He looked her over with increasing curiosity.

Her inky hair, improbably straight and as raven black as her stole, had been arranged artfully atop her head to look as if it had hardly been touched, a single long strand falling by merest chance along a classically sculpted cheekbone. Her mouth was oddly small and vulpine, and painted crimson to match her outfit, and her eyes, tilted just slightly to lend her a vaguely Asian appearance, were cat-like and of a green so bright as to look artificial.

Everything about her, in fact, had an air of artificiality. It seemed to him that the impression you got, that initial impression of startling beauty, owed as much to money and makeup—and especially to a certain flair, the cleverness, for

instance, of her chosen colors, which not every woman could wear to happy effect—as it did to physical gifts. The milk chocolate of her skin looked less as if it came from genes than as if it was applied from a makeup box. Even the electricity that seemed to crackle in the air where she stood was more like neon than lightning. Just as the evocation of the famous painting seemed not coincidental, but calculated.

This was not Lucrezia Panciatici's composed, impassive face, then, watching him slyly. This was a beautiful woman, to be sure, but it was a created beauty, not nature given. And a beauty of which she was altogether conscious.

Unfortunately, it took no prescience to see that Tom did not share his critical assessment. Tom had gotten that gleam in his eyes, a look Stanley hadn't seen for a while now, not since they'd begun living together, and was far from happy to see return. A way Tom had of looking at certain women that stopped just short of licking his chops, but gave the impression of it just the same. And Stanley could all but smell the machismo, that scent of recklessness that came over him at times like these.

And what, Stanley wondered, was he to do about it, about this sudden flare up of Tom's heterosexual predilections? This had been, from the very first, inevitable, notwithstanding that he had tried never to think about it. He was all too aware of the fragility of their relationship, most especially of its newness in Tom's experience. A man couldn't be expected to change his lifestyle in so dramatic a fashion without some vestiges of what he had been before. And in Tom's case, what he had been before was a woman chasing bed hopper. Who, as he'd confessed more than once, had a taste for "big hooters."

So, here Stanley was, standing so close at Tom's side that he'd hardly have had to wriggle his fingers to take hold of Tom's hand, and feeling as if they were suddenly separated by immeasurable miles, a vast and uncrossable Sahara of emotion and desires.

Oddly enough, just as their hostess's initial smile had been for Stanley and not for Tom, it was Stanley now on whom she

fastened those laser beam eyes. "And you're Mister Korski, aren't you?"

Flirting with me? Stanley wondered. It certainly seemed that way, but it was hard to imagine how she could not read his gayness, which was not exactly a closely guarded secret. Still, to make things clear, he gave his head a little toss, as if to get the yellow curls out of his eyes.

"Very percipient." He came unconsciously close to a lisp. "And this is my partner, Tom Danzel."

Tom, not used to women overlooking him, had noticed too the attention she was giving to Stanley. He moved slightly, not quite putting himself between them, just making his own presence more conspicuous, and gave her one of his sun-breaking-through-the-clouds smiles, which he knew from fruitful experience few women could resist.

For a strange moment, Stanley saw them as if watching a trio of strangers from the distance, saw Tom actually competing with him for someone's attention, never mind that Stanley didn't want the woman's attention.

Of all the many things he had imagined might happen at some time or other in his relationship with Tom, the possibility that they might be in competition for some woman's attention was one he had never imagined.

Of course, if he thought about it, if competition there were to be, it would have to be over a woman. Tom had no particular interest in other men, was still trying on his interest in Stanley, like a new jacket that he wasn't quite used to wearing yet.

Nevertheless, it was beyond rare when a woman came on to Stanley—if, for whatever reason, that was what she was doing. But, why would she? Every gay man knew there were women to whom their homosexuality was a challenge; the old, "he just hasn't met the right woman yet" school of thought.

There was surely a greater question here, though. It was rare for a woman to rise to that challenge when right there also at hand was a masculine hunk all but drooling over her, and she was certainly not the kind of woman who would fail to notice that.

Did not, in fact, fail to notice. After the briefest study of Stanley, her eyes slid, reluctantly, it seemed as if against her better judgment, in Tom's direction. A fleeting glance, but enough, clearly, to like what they saw. Better, obviously, than what she had been seeing.

"You're the detectives," she said.

"With a mystery on our hands, it seems," Stanley said.

"And that is?" One eyebrow went up slightly, but she looked altogether amused.

"Why we're here," Stanley said. He made an expansive gesture.

"You don't like modern art?"

"Oh, yes. Very much," Tom said, a shade too enthusiastically.

"Yes, of course I do," Stanley said, the emphasis on the personal pronoun. "My question was, rather, how did you come up with our names? Why we were invited."

"Maybe because you are detectives?"

"Like, you're saying you've got a job in mind? A detective job?" Tom said.

That upward tilt of the eyebrow again. "Perhaps. Something." She gave Tom a look into which much could be read with little imagination. At his sides, Stanley's fingers clenched and unclenched of their own volition. He tried not to think where he'd like to put them.

Instead, he waved a hand in the direction of a piece of sculpture, nothing but wires and blocks of Lucite. "If you won't take offense..."

"I'll take whatever I can get," she interrupted him, and the glance she threw in Tom's direction underscored her willingness. She looked down, then, at their empty hands. "Oh, but you've got no bubbly. It's not bad, really, for this," she made an inclusive motion with her head, "this kind of affair." She verbally underlined that word "affair." It seemed to take on a physical essence between them, almost to scent the air, to

promise something more than an art showing at an out of the way gallery.

"I'm a big bubbly man," Tom said, which Stanley knew was a blatant falsehood, unless the bubbles were in the head of a mug of beer. Stanley almost said as much, and bit his tongue. If looking fair won't woo him, looking foul won't do it, he reminded himself—although if memory served, Sir John Suckling hadn't specifically ruled out an elbow in the ribs.

"Then, we must have some." She looked around, as if the champagne might be dangling from a thread just within reach, and smiled directly at Tom, blood-stained lips parted to show perfect teeth. "It's over there," she said, without moving in the direction of the makeshift bar in the corner. Tom made no movement either. They stood as if they were carved out of stone.

Which seems to leave me, Stanley thought, and couldn't think of a single valid reason why he shouldn't go for the champagne. Not, certainly, because he was wanted here.

"I'll get it," he said, and moved quickly away without waiting for anyone to reply, afraid that no one would object to the suggestion, that Tom might not insist that he be the one to go.

Weaving his way through the crowd of would be art lovers, Stanley had a horrible moment of wondering if either of them had noticed his leaving. And rather thought not.



Daniella had noticed, however. She looked after him as he made his way through the throng. The little one had been her instructions. Only, she hadn't been told that he was as queer as a three dollar bill. Quite clearly, her chances of seducing him were non-existent. But shouldn't her instructor have known that?

On the other hand, his companion... Tom kept his eyes resolutely down, looking at his shoes. Looking, in fact, unhappy. When he lifted his eyes, Daniella was smiling at him, a mocking smile.

"My apartment is just upstairs," she surprised him by saying.

Tom did look after Stanley then, his eyes drawn against his will, but Stanley was lost in the crowd. Tom felt torn. Since he'd surrendered to his feelings for Stanley—whatever they were, he reminded himself—he had actually not thought of being with a woman, a fact which had surprised him no end, considering his considerable history with them.

Now, however, the old habits came back, rose up in him like a fury. He looked at Daniella and felt the blood boil up within him, was afraid to look down, afraid he might see his trousers tenting outrageously—he simply couldn't help himself, couldn't help what was happening inside him. It was an act of will not to grab her, fling her to the floor, fuck her right here and now.

And all his instincts, which had served him pretty much unerringly throughout his heterosexual life, assured him she would not object greatly, crowded room or no crowded room.

"Daniella..."

"My friends call me Danna."

"Danna." He tested it on his tongue. "How far upstairs?"

"They'll hardly notice we're gone."

He doubted that, doubted that quite absolutely. Stanley would know, would know even before they were gone. He couldn't help that either, though. There were things you had to do, that held you in so possessive a grip that there was nothing for it but to surrender to them.

Still, he stood without moving, until she said, "And I really did have something in mind. That you can do for me, I mean."

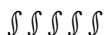
He nodded. What more needed to be said? This was not social, not even a good thing, he wasn't fool enough to pretend to himself like that. It was animal business, in-heat rutting. There was no need to make it more than it was. That kind of lie would surely be more of a betrayal to Stanley than the act itself, wouldn't it?

He couldn't pretend, either, that he wasn't betraying Stanley, betraying him just by standing here thinking the things he was thinking. He was capable of a lot of shitty things, but that kind of self deception he couldn't manage.

But, fucking... he'd never thought it mattered all that much in the grand scheme of things. He did it, he liked it, but he didn't think it was of much consequence. Maybe because, like the rich man with his money, he'd always had it to burn.

She smiled and nodded back, and turned, walking toward the rear of the gallery, not quickly, but not slowly either, ignoring the greetings of those she passed. Tom followed close behind her, looking at no one, not even at her. Looking, in fact, at something inside himself.

Something he didn't much care for.



At the bar, Stanley took a single flute of champagne from a dewy eyed bartender who looked too young to be serving it, leaned with his back against the bar, and sipped the wine while he let his eyes rove about the room, carefully avoiding the place near the faux marble column, where he'd left Tom and the faux beautiful Daniella, wondering how long it would be before either of them missed him.

The glass emptied, and none too quickly, he signaled the bartender for another and, unable to contain his curiosity any longer, looked directly at where they had been when he left them—and were no more. It would have been difficult to miss that crimson silk.

His heart turned into a chunk of rock, plummeting downward, surely would crash through the floor beneath his feet. He drained the glass in one long swig.

"Another?" the bartender asked, flashing a flirtatiously sweet smile.

"No, thanks, I've think I've had all I can handle." Stanley set the empty glass atop the bar with such force that the stem broke, making the bartender's eyes go wide with surprise and wiping the flirty smirk from his face altogether.

"Charge it to my tab," Stanley said, sucking a tiny bead of blood—the color of Daniella's jump suit—off one finger.

He strode for the door, not bothering to look for Tom and the She Wolf.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A single flight of stairs, hidden behind a brocade tapestry at the far wall, led to an apartment on the second floor. A surprisingly small apartment, considering that the whole second floor was there to be used, but an enormous mirror that covered most of one wall made the small space appear larger than it was.

The room into which Daniella led him was decorated in starkly modern pieces: tables made of great slabs of rock, uncomfortable looking chairs that mocked human physique, masses of twisted wire that functioned as lamps.

"Nice," Tom said, glancing around.

Her laugh was like a cat's purr. "You're just being polite. It's grotesque, really. It's all stuff from downstairs."

"But it's what you represent. In the gallery."

"It's what I sell. Modern art sells well in San Francisco." She paused to turn the heat off. The apartment was warm, too warm for her tastes. It got cold in Dayton, Ohio, in the winter, and more often than not, they hadn't been able to pay for heat. She'd grown up used to cold rooms. "The moneyed people here don't want anything too easily understood, that goes for friends and lovers. As for myself," she slipped off the Pashmina stole, tossed it negligently onto a sling shaped chair, from which it promptly slid to the floor unnoticed, an inky puddle, "I like my comfort. My bed, for instance, is quite conventional. And, really, it is my favorite piece of furniture."

"Oh," Tom said, sounding nearly as blank as he felt. He didn't understand why he was here. He knew, of course, what had motivated him to come, but the detective's mind never stopped looking for mysteries, or clues to their solution. Notwithstanding his hot nuts, he felt oddly unsure of why she had invited him. Lust, yes, he recognized that, had always been finely attuned to it in women. She wanted him. He'd known

that from the moment she first laid eyes on him. He wanted her too. And yet...

Something was wrong, a false note that he couldn't put his finger on, but which his detective's instinct could feel thrumming between them. It wasn't him she'd set out to pick up when she'd approached them downstairs. It was Stanley. Now, he personally thought Stanley was as cute as could be, in his *tutti frutti* way, but it would be a pretty unsophisticated woman who couldn't tell at a glance that Stanley wasn't turned on to women.

Daniella Bentham was not that unsophisticated. She must have known before she even spoke to them, yet she had made a play for Stanley, even knowing from the start that it was doomed to failure.

Even before that, though, she had invited them here, to her gallery, for reasons not explained, had come to seek them out only minutes after they had arrived, as if she had been waiting for them to walk in the door. Why, he wondered? Something planned in advance, it would seem. And if so, what exactly was planned, that involved Stanley? Because, whatever it was, he was certain of that—it was about Stanley. His involvement, the fact that she was hot for him, was mere chance. The rest of it wasn't.

He wasn't even aware that he had spoken Stanley's name aloud but he might have, because she asked, "Will he be very angry?"

He didn't like the question, and he especially didn't like the smile that accompanied it, that looked too much like a self-satisfied smirk.

Because, aroused as he was, as badly as he wanted to fuck the woman standing in front of him, taking a step now closer to him, her invitation blatant, intentions unmistakable, he couldn't forget Stanley. His to protect. And none of her business, fucking notwithstanding.

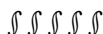
He was torn in two, wanting her, knowing she was his for the taking—and thinking of Stanley, going away from them, walking away without a word or a backward glance; knowing

absolutely what was afoot, and hurting with the knowledge, and yet giving Tom his freedom to do what he wanted.

Was that what love was? To sacrifice your own happiness for your partner's? He'd never had anyone do that before. Before Stanley.

"Daniella," he said.

"Danna." Then she was in his arms, kissing her, and there was no question of his kissing her back.



He couldn't, though, couldn't go through with it. Much as he wanted to take advantage of her desire to appease his, to use this time with her, the time wasn't his. It had been a gift—no, more a loan—that Stanley had given him. The truth was, Stanley hadn't left him at all, was still very much here with him. Between him and the woman, as it turned out.

"Sorry," he mumbled, feeling stupid and embarrassed, a total asshole. "I've got to go."

She was too astonished to say anything, for which he was grateful. She stood and watched as he left, moving like a man in a big hurry, the door closing after him with a decisive snap.

Danna stared after him briefly, not sure whether to be disappointed or insulted. Finally, she shrugged and went to the liquor shelf against the one wall, pouring herself a large cognac.

"Make that two," a male voice said from behind her.

She looked over her shoulder. The huge mirror at the far wall had been pushed aside and Andrew Korski stood in the opening that was now revealed. She looked at him, worried about what his expression might say, but it said nothing. His face was blank. It often was, and she found that perversely appealing, exciting, even, but it could be unsettling, too.

She had found him both unsettling and exciting since their first meeting, a chance one at a watering hole she liked to frequent. A gay bar, as it happened. She liked to go there when she got tired of men hitting on her.

Not that she disliked sex or men. On the contrary, she liked both very much. But more often than not, it was only the sex men wanted from her, and after a while, that got repetitious, boring. How many ways could a man move his hips, after all? Surely there were men who had more to offer—more importantly, who wanted more from her.

When she got to this stage in her thinking, then she went to the Castro, to her gay bar. She could still meet men there, talk to them, but these men were interested in her mind, or her personality at least, in something more than jumping her bones. The other men, the horny ones, affirmed her sexual desirability. These men, the ones she met at the gay bar, affirmed her special woman-ness. Sometimes, she needed that even more than the other.

She thought, when she discovered him standing next to her at the bar, that he was gay. Not that he looked it, he emphatically did not, but she had spent enough time in gay bars to know that there were men who looked not at all the part, were every bit as macho as the studly ones you met in a straight bar.

She noticed—it was one of the first things she did notice about him—his scent. She'd gotten used to the colognes and perfumes that gay men wore, often drenching themselves in them, to the point sometimes where she felt she was drowning in them as well.

This man had a scent, detectable only when he leaned close, and so subtle that she thought it was rather an expensive soap than a cologne. She could almost fancy it was his naturally, that faintly sweet, faintly spicy odor that clung to him. It smelled, she thought at the time, and not unhappily, of male sex, the pheromones embodied. Although she had gone there in avoidance of it, sex, in fact, was almost the first thing that came to mind when she saw him. Certainly when she smelled him.

Afterward, she had wondered if perhaps their meeting wasn't as chance as she initially supposed. She thought, looking back, that he had set out deliberately to pick her up.

Well, she didn't mind about that. He was deliciously attractive, and if he intended all along to bed her, he was nevertheless not like the others. They chatted first, a long time, sorting one another out. She liked that he quoted poetry, and he listened when she talked, not as if he were impatient to get that out of the way, but as if he were really interested.

She commented on his ring. "Bloodstone," he said.

"I thought Bloodstone was red."

"A different stone. That's Haematite. From the Greek for blood. This is Heliotrope."

"But Heliotrope is a flower, isn't it?"

"Heliotrope is that which turns to the sun."

"And you turn to the sun?"

"I'm here beside you, am I not?" Said with a smile that saved it from sounding as corny as it might have.



Of course, they became lovers that same night—much later that night, as it happened. She suggested his place, and he explained that he shared it with some others, so they came here.

And stayed. It was like a honeymoon, just the two of them; for days, as it turned out. "I have to stay in seclusion," he told her after the second day.

"Are you on the lam?"

He smiled. "That sounds like something out of a bad gangster movie." He had not quite answered her question, though. Which left her to conclude that he was in some kind of trouble, probably with the law. She didn't mind. It gave their relationship a little extra fillip of excitement.

Whatever the problem was, however, he clearly was not on any Most Wanted List. He avoided any contact with the people preparing the gallery below for its grand opening, and they went carefully in and out the back entrance, but beyond that, he seemed unconcerned about being seen in public.

"Is this safe?" she asked him the first time they'd strolled the Castro. Not, as she would have liked, hand in hand. He was affectionate when they were alone together in her apartment, but not, as a rule, demonstrably so in public

"Safe?" He looked genuinely puzzled.

"No one's going to recognize you? Call the gendarmes?"

He laughed. "No. Nothing like that."

He liked the Castro, which was where, she reminded herself, they had met So, no, whatever his reason for avoiding people, it wasn't a fear of recognition. He liked finding things for her. He did not buy them for her, that she had to do herself, because apparently he had no money, but he had an excellent eye for unusual things that were particularly suited to her looks, and she was glad to buy anything he suggested.

"Here," he would say, holding up a vibrantly patterned scarf probably intended for a man, "this will look perfect with your coloration."

He was always right, too. It was he who had chosen the crimson jump suit. He found it in a men's store in the Castro. No doubt it was designed to be worn by someone male, but she was as tall as most of the men shopping in the store, and broad shouldered. He found it on a rack—she'd not even glanced at it, she did not often wear red—and brought it across the store to where she was, and held it up in front of her.

"Do you know Lucrezia Panciatichi?" he asked, studying the effect of the garment next to her skin.

"No, I don't think... oh, wait, is she from Pacific Heights?"

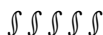
He smiled and put the jumpsuit in her shopping basket. "Never mind," he said. "I was thinking of my brother."

Later, they found the black shawl, but at the time, in the Castro, she was a bit miffed by his dismissive attitude. She thought he was talking down to her. For the most part, she did not question his choices in clothes for her, but now, she took the red silk from the shopping basket and fingered it critically. "Isn't this a little over-dramatic for me?"

He leaned close, to kiss her cheek in a rare burst of public affection, and murmured, "Amour dure sans fin."

"Which means?" she asked.

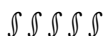
"Love lasts forever."



Which was how she'd recognized the quote when Stanley had spoken it downstairs. She'd thought, at the time Andrew had spoken it, that he was referring to his love for her, but later, when she had quoted it, badly, to a patron in the gallery, secretly savoring what she had thought of as Andrew's declaration of love, the patron corrected her pronunciation and said it was from a painting, that it was inscribed on a piece of jewelry in a portrait, though he couldn't remember exactly what portrait.

"Italian, I think," was the best he could do.

She dismissed him in her mind as a silly old queen, but she would like to have known nevertheless whose portrait it was. She didn't know who to ask. Definitely not Andrew. She didn't want to show her ignorance.



Mostly, they bought gifts for her. Andrew rarely got anything for himself. She tried more than once to buy him gifts, but he would invariably decline them, saying, "He travels fastest who travels lightest." Which she took to be a hint that one day he would travel on, unencumbered by possessions. Unencumbered by her. She tried not to think about that.

He did, however, sometimes find things that he wanted "for my brother," and he was always glad when she bought them for him. A brother he didn't talk about, though she had begun to piece together some sort of portrait of him. He liked poetry, for instance. Andrew liked to shop in the used bookstores, more often than not in the poetry section. He often found a small book of verse "my brother would like," and sometimes other books as well, weighty tomes that made her think this brother must be some kind of scholar, or a theologian, even. Certainly a bookish sort.

Neither did Andrew talk about himself. He had a way of smiling when you asked a question that told you he was not going to answer it, but it was not a malicious smile, or cold. It was gentle, really, almost sad, as if he regretted his silence. Of course, it was impossible then to question him any further.

At the same time, oddly, he did not seem evasive. His reticence, his reluctance to talk about himself or to answer questions, did not come across as calculated, but as simply a part of his nature. For a long time, she thought it was mere modesty, a very becoming modesty, let it be said, considering how good looking he was, and how obviously intelligent.

He was a good listener, unlike a great many other men she had known. She found herself telling him what it was like to grow up Eve Bartles, on the west end—the wrong end—of Dayton, Ohio, in shabby, drafty apartments that could never be warm in the winter or cool in the summer. The girls who had been close at hand then—she couldn't call them friends, because she had never been close enough with any of them to use that term—had mostly been pretty in that little girl's china doll collection way. Fair skinned blondes for the most part, cheerleaders, baton-twirlers, perpetual debutants in flared skirts and ballerina slippers.

Too tall and broad shouldered, graceless in comparison, with her jet black hair and her tawny skin, she had stood out among them like a dandelion in a garden of roses.

As early as possible, she'd plucked herself from that garden, come to San Francisco, where for the last couple of hundred years people had been shedding their old personas and creating new ones for themselves, and she had immediately gone about transforming herself: a new name, a new appearance, the shy, gangly girl swapping sweat shirts for molded tank tops, loose shapeless skirts for designer jeans. Here, she waited for Prince Charming to come into her life.

"I can't believe you were as unattractive as you say," he said.

"You just don't know."

He insisted she show him her photographs, which she had shown to no one else since she'd arrived in San Francisco. She

didn't even know quite why she had kept them, a shoebox full, but, at his coaxing, she got the box from the shelf of her bedroom closet, where it was hidden beneath stacks of sweaters, and they sat together on the side of the bed while he went through the pictures one by one, some of them going back into the shoebox after no more than a glance. Others he pored over for what seemed to her an excessively long time.

"My mother," she said with an embarrassed laugh when he held up that photo. "Wasn't she a size?" The woman in the picture was not un-handsome, but of prodigious weight, her enormous body enclothed in a faded pink shift that might have passed for a tent.

"You were an only child?"

"Yes."

"I'd hate not having my brother."

Which touched her deeply. She'd wanted siblings herself, a brother or a sister, but that subject was one her mother had quickly brushed aside.

"Not for me," was all her mother would say on that score. She had been the only one to care for her aging father, had married late and, as she put it, "as innocent as the day is long. I had no idea what they got up to, men."

"What do you mean?" the child Eve had asked, and got no answer.

"Never you mind, that's not for little lambs to know. It lasted all of a week, that marriage, and I told him I was done with it and moved right out. But by then the damage had been done."

It wasn't until later that Eve had realized she was "the damage" referred to. By then she knew too how it was done. Knowledge she did not share with her mother, who thought there were three sexes: men, women, and bad women.

By then, she'd have ranked her daughter in the latter category.



"I've often worried," she said, looking over his shoulder at her mother's picture, "if I would end up looking like that when I got older?"

"You needn't," he said, returning that photo to the shoebox also. But the way in which he said it made her think that he had the same expectation for her, that she would in time run to fat. As she had always feared.

It was the photos of her, however, over which he spent the most time. She squirmed uncomfortably beside him while he studied each one like a student preparing for his dissertation.

"You see, I told you," she said finally. "I really was the ugly duckling."

"No, as a matter of fact, I don't think so," he pronounced finally. "The problem wasn't you, it was in the people seeing you. They just didn't have the necessary discernment to see what was there before their eyes. I would have."

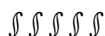
Which, happily, she rather suspected was true. She felt, when he picked out a scarf, a piece of jewelry, suggested a new way of styling her hair, that he was applying the finishing touches to her transformation, polishing the gem that she had made of herself. Probably, the process would have been simpler and faster if she had met him back then.

She was willing, though, even eager, to put herself in his artful hands now. It was, in fact, one of the happiest periods in her life. Certainly, one of the most sexually satisfying. When he made love to her, she might have been a virgin all over again, as if she had never known before what it meant to be with a man. Each time was like a first time.

She honestly believed for a while that he had fallen in love with her. He never said, however, despite all her artful conniving to get the words out of him. She found myriad ways to introduce the subject, even just the word, into their conversations; she read love sonnets from the books of poetry he'd gotten "for his brother." He seemed interested in her thoughts on love, and although he said little himself on it, he listened attentively to everything she had to say, sat in respectful

silence while she read the poems, sometimes twisting her tongue about the unfamiliar rhythms.

In time, though, she began to think it was the subject, of love, and not love itself, that fascinated him. He would cock his head to one side, as she read, contemplating, or smile at her observations, but they seemed to interest him in the way a scientist might be interested in some new study, perhaps of some heretofore unknown species.



Later, she couldn't recall just exactly when, or how, he had introduced the political business into their relationship. Not long after they had become lovers, surely, and only, initially, a discreet mention of "a little political association. Anti-political, really."

At first, she had not been much interested. Politics really weren't her style. He began to mention it more frequently, however, and, sensing that this was something that mattered to him, she decided it should matter to her as well, and she encouraged him to tell her more.

He never did tell her much, though. "It's better if you don't know," he said, and in such a way that she could see it was her well being that he was thinking of, not his own. Still, when he'd said, "I need a safe house," she'd been quick to say, "What's wrong with here?"

"People come here, even now. When the gallery's open, they'll come more often, won't they? I can't just go hiding under the bed every time we hear someone coming up the stairs."

Which meant, apparently, that he might really need to hide, and not just duck into the other room, which was what he had been doing. "There's plenty of room," she said. "Why shouldn't you just have a room all your own?"

He nodded, and looked around, studying the space. Of course, she had meant just that he could take one of the rooms that were already there, which she supposed would be private enough for him.

So she was completely surprised when a trio of his friends showed up one night, long after the gallery was closed, and proceeded over the next several, very late nights, to make two different living spaces out of one large one: another bathroom, a small but functional kitchen. Where an archway opened into the rest of the apartment, they had installed that clever mirror on tracks, completely disguising the existence of nearly half the space.

Not a two-way mirror—"they're too obvious," he said, "a sharp eye can spot them at a glance." Instead, they installed a peep hole in one little corner of the decorative frame. You would have had to know it was there, or searched very carefully, to discover it, but it made it possible for someone in the hidden room to see into this one.

No one said much to her while they were there. Mostly, they worked in silence, hardly speaking to one another except to talk about dimensions or wiring or track installations. She didn't mind. Something about them made her nervous. She was a Johnny-Come-Lately to their group, if even that, and she had quickly decided that she didn't really want to know exactly what "their group" was. She had known all along that she was not trusted enough to be a part of its inner core, which was perfectly fine with her. Politics still bored her, except as they provided a connection between her and him. The passions that motivated her were different from theirs, although they had coincided in some ways. Mostly, they coincided in him.

She did wonder, though, about one thing. "Which one of them is your brother?" she asked one night when the strange, unnamed men had gone, and the two of them were in bed together, resting from a particularly athletic session of lovemaking. Resting up, she had learned from experience. Once was never enough for him.

"My brother?" He'd sounded surprised by the question, had looked at the doorway as if his companions might be standing there, lined up for the choosing. "Those men?" He laughed. "None of them. I wouldn't claim any of them if he were."



Then, suddenly, he was gone, just disappeared. One night he failed to show up, and the next night as well, and the one after that. She went back to the bar, she walked up and down in the Castro, and in and out of other bars, but there was no trace of him.

She had no idea how to get in touch with him. Those other men, they must have lived somewhere, but she hadn't a clue where. She had just supposed that at some time they meant, all of them, to make use of that hidden room behind the mirror, but none of them came, either.

He was gone for a week, and then he was back. She came up one night from the gallery, almost ready now for its grand opening, and she had no more than glanced at herself in the big mirror that covered much of that one wall, that hid the room beyond, than the mirror slid aside, and there he was, smiling—fairly brimming over, it was quickly evident, with desire for her.

Later, lying in bed, she broke her promise to herself never to question him. "Where have you been?" she asked.

"I had to disappear for a few days, to be safe."

"What...?" she started to ask, but he laid a finger across her lips.

"I'm here now," he said.

She wanted to ask for how long, but she was afraid. She did say, "I didn't know how to get in touch with you."

She half-expected a rebuke for her audacity, but to her surprise, he gave her a phone number, a cell phone. Gave it to her verbally, and warned, "Memorize it. Don't write it down."

She had written it out, though, because she wasn't good at remembering numbers, but some instinct warned her not to tell him. She knew, without his saying it, that he wouldn't want anyone else to find it.

No one would, either, not the way she had written it. An old trick, from her childhood. Some knew it, but not everyone. The number was safe this way, and she could see it anytime she needed to. If she needed to.

He was here for the present, though, apparently full time. There was no need for her to telephone him. They did not go out anymore. He did not, at any rate. She left to buy food, things that they needed for the apartment. When she came back, he was always behind the mirror. He never questioned her about her outings, however. It seemed that he trusted her.

Of course, she suspected that he had few alternatives but to trust her now. She made a passing comment about his friends and he said, with no further explanation, but very firmly, "Forget them. Forget you ever saw them."

The mirror, of course, and the room behind it, could not help but remind her of them, but she never again mentioned them. At least the secret apartment had brought him more fully into her life than he had been before. Once or twice a week sex became sex every day, and sometimes more than once a day. She had come to know his body and its needs, its special pleasures, in detail.

Yet she came to realize as well, as time passed, that she still knew nothing at all about him, about the man. That mask was always in place. She was aware of it now, in a way that she had not been before, before he disappeared.

It fascinated her, that mask of his, and it offered her a challenge, too, the sort of challenge that appealed to a woman. She had a desire, a need, in fact, to learn what was behind the mask. Hadn't women always been intrigued by challenges, by the need to know? The man would never have bothered with that apple, would he? That was a woman's way of looking at things: what is it that makes this fruit forbidden? This man dangerous?

Something else had changed, too, but it was harder for her to put her finger on it. She thought—had thought—that he loved her, and now she thought that he did not, and even more painful for her to consider she thought that perhaps he never had. Where this idea came from, that he had fallen out of love with her, or perhaps had never even been in that state, she couldn't exactly say. The desire was still there, the sex still breathlessly exciting, as obviously for him as for her.

It had changed though, some subtle shift in their relations. Something had happened, she thought, in that week when he had been away. She wanted to know what, and wanted not to know, in equal measure. She watched and listened, trying to find some specific point to touch upon, and couldn't quite find it. He looked the same, he sounded the same, he even tasted and smelled the same. He wasn't, though. *They* weren't the same. That much she knew from woman's intuition, if the rest were beyond her intellectual capabilities.

She did not speak of these matters to him, however, and she was careful about asking questions, even more careful than before. He was here, and she had the number. For the present, that was enough. When he asked her to invite the detectives to the gallery opening, she had done so without hesitation.

She had tried obediently, too, to lure the little one, Stanley, here for him. That he had expected her to do so puzzled her. If he knew the man at all... and if he didn't, why should he have wanted him here?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Stanley had taken the pickup. Which, all in all, Tom had pretty much expected. It was a long walk back to the Castro, through not the best neighborhood in the city. A couple of drifters on the opposite side of the street paused to gaze with some brief interest at this man walking alone, where few did at night. They quickly decided he was not promising prey.

Tom noticed them not at all, nor did he mind the long walk. He needed to sort out his thoughts. Especially, he needed to think what he was going to do, what he could say to Stanley. He would apologize, profusely, but it needed something more than that. This was the first real crisis that had come up since he'd moved in with Stanley.

He wasn't very good when it came to relationships, he knew that he lacked a certain sensitivity that others had, but he knew well enough that this was a critical juncture for them. He could lose Stanley, if he hadn't already. As vague as his attitude toward their relationship was, he was quite definite that he did not want that to happen.

In the past, with the many women he'd known, there had never been any commitment nor, so far as he knew, any expectation beyond the immediate giving and receiving of pleasure. Not only had he not anticipated love, he had hardly thought of it. That seemed to him something alien, something that "happened" to other people, but so beyond his expectations as to be quite unreal.

He couldn't exactly say it was love that he wanted from Stanley—no, not from, but with—but neither was he such a fool as to not perceive that there was something he wanted, and it was from Stanley he wanted it. He thought that if he failed with Stanley, he would fail himself as well, in some great way that perhaps would never again be put right.

Thinking this as he walked through the Mission, he quickened his steps.



"Make that two," Andrew said, stepping through the looking glass portal.

She poured a second cognac, brought it to him. He took a mere sip, and set it aside.

"I meant for you to pick up the other one," he said.

She laughed. "With what, ice tongs? He's queer. Not just gay, queer. What could you have wanted him here for, anyway?"

She went to one of the misshapen sofas and sat rather heavily, suddenly tired, dispirited. She felt all at once a failure; but why should she, simply because one man had turned her down? A man with a boyfriend pissed off at him. You could hardly call it a failure on her part.

"Call it a whim. Maybe I just wanted to see him up close. Hear his voice."

"Why?"

His look told her he didn't mean to answer that. There was that unspoken rule again. He didn't like to be questioned. Sometimes it irritated her. Sometimes she broke the rules. Not this time, however. Some instinct told her it was not the right time. She did not repeat the question.

"So you settled for the other one," he said. "On your own whim." In a disapproving tone, the voice one might use with a disobedient child.

She was annoyed with herself that his tone made her feel guilty.

"I thought that was better than nothing," she said, regretting at once that she sounded so petulant. "I thought you must be hoping to pick up some kind of information, and maybe he would have it, maybe it would slip out in conversation, or well..." She shrugged. "But, really, I don't know what it was you were hoping for. You never tell me things."

"There are things it's better for you not to know."

Which, she thought, was surely true. She said, wanting to put them on a more even footing again, "Anyway, a bird in the

hand, as the saying goes. He's a very attractive man, the other one. And, he was the one who was interested."

He gave her a cruel smile. "Not so very interested, as it turns out. He left. Maybe he doesn't like chocolate."

She glowered at him, lips tight. "I think he was interested. Just... reluctant. I think he was worried about the boyfriend."

"And now you are disappointed? By his reluctance?"

"Yes, frankly. He looked... intriguing." She smiled involuntarily. The detective had been ruggedly handsome, and instincts had told her he would make a good lover. Best, though, not to say that aloud. She'd learned that long ago. One lover never wanted to hear that someone else might be as good, let alone better.

Andrew went to a Lucite topped writing desk, a slab of clear plastic atop four spindly columns of chrome. He picked up a letter opener shaped like a scimitar, and ran a finger along its edge, as if testing if for sharpness. "So am I, to be honest. Disappointed, I mean."

That surprised her, in any event. "You mean you actually wanted me to fuck him?"

"Yes. Or, lead him up to it. I didn't exactly want to see him planting the seed, so to speak, but I'd have liked for you to get him sufficiently distracted that he wouldn't notice if I joined the party."

"A three way?" She raised an amused eyebrow. "If I'd known that was what you wanted..."

"Of sorts. Oh, not what you're thinking. My goodness, you do have a dirty little mind, don't you?"

She pouted, unconvincingly. She was on more familiar ground with sexual topics. She didn't always understand men—who did?—but she understood male sexuality. She thought she understood that part of him, at least, whatever mysteries the rest of him might hold. Get their drawers down, and men weren't very much different, to her way of thinking. "You've never minded before, as I recall."

"It has sometimes been useful." His finger traced the edge of the letter opener again. He frowned, and set it aside on the Lucite slab, and took a cashmere scarf from around his neck. She was surprised to see it. It was one he had bought for her. She hadn't noticed that he was wearing it, hadn't even noticed it was missing from her closet.

"What I thought was," he said, "as long as you had him here, it would be a perfect time for me to kill him."

She blinked, surprised again, in a more unsettling way. "Kill him? Why, for Heaven's sake. Don't tell me, please, because you're jealous."

She would like to have thought he was, but she did not truly believe so. In her heart, she had begun to suspect that, really, she meant very little to him. Perhaps it had all been about that hiding place after all. Perhaps he had only used her, as so many other men had before him, only he had just been more clever at it; and that was perhaps because he had more at stake.

"No, not jealous," he said. "Hardly that. Women were made for men. You, especially, were made to give men pleasure. If it weren't me, it would be another, wouldn't it? There's no reason for us to pretend."

She found that she resented his remarks. *But you have, haven't you*, she wanted to say. *It's all been a pretense with you*—but she did not. Something about his expression, about the way he no longer looked directly at her, worried her. She had a sense that things were spinning out of hand, in some way that she couldn't fathom. Why? What had she done? Or not done? This whole quarrel made no sense to her. It seemed contrived, as if they were simply reading from a script. Or, he was, at least, while she was left ignorant of her lines.

"It's simply that, he's seen my face," he said.

Which, she thought, made no sense either. "But, people see your face all the time. When we've gone out shopping..."

"That's different. They had no reason to pay attention to me. Who was I to them? Just a man, passing by on the street, shopping in a store, drinking in a bar. There was

nothing to connect face to name, to identity. He's different. He knows who I am. The name and the face. He can put them together, don't you see? He can identify me."

She knew she shouldn't, but she asked anyway: "To whom?"

To her surprise, he answered without hesitation. "To Homeland Security, for starters. If push came to shove."

"Homeland Security? But, they look for..." she caught herself before she said, "terrorists," but in a twinkling, remembering the men who'd come here late at night, remembering his secrecy, his disappearance, she knew; knew as certainly as if he had written it all out for her, that this was why he was hiding here.

Jesus, she thought, what have I gotten myself into?

He seemed not to have noticed her omission, was still speaking as if to himself, still not looking at her. "I can't have that, of course. He'll have to be eliminated, and not too far in the distant future, either. This would have been a convenient time to do it, since you had him here. If you'd managed to get him a little more worked up."

She thought about that and frowned. "It would hardly have been convenient for me, would it? There I'd have been with a dead man on my hands, and an army of witnesses to say he left the gallery with me, that we came up here together. I'd have been arrested, charged with murder."

"So you might have."

He smiled at her, a frigid smile that sent a corresponding chill through her. She suddenly realized that for once, she was seeing behind the mask he wore, just as she'd always wanted to do, could suddenly see exactly what was going through his mind. What she saw was not a welcome sight.

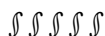
As if she'd spoken aloud, he said, "Well, you have the name as well, Danna, and the face. You could identify me too, you see."

"But... I couldn't," she said, genuinely frightened now. "Ever. You know that. I won't."

"Yes. I know that. You won't."

He stepped toward her, twisting the neck scarf between his hands. Her emerald green eyes went wide and she half rose from the sofa, but he was quicker than she was. She struggled, but without much hope. She'd always half known, hadn't she? He'd always seemed dangerous.

Somewhere inside, she'd always known Andrew was a snake; his beauty had blinded her to the truth. Like the cobra with his victim, he'd hypnotized her, held her in his spell. And now, the bite. The deadly bite.



Holding her pressed to his body, yanking the scarf tight around her neck until her struggles grew weak and weaker still, and finally ended altogether in a long, harsh sigh, Andrew felt his dick rise up against her.

Killing always gave him a hard-on.

CHAPTER NINE

*"Who is as safe as we, Where none can do
Treason to us, Except one of we two?"*

Donne had that right, Stanley thought, that two-edged sword of intimacy. An enemy couldn't betray you. Who could, indeed, except someone you loved?

Or maybe, he thought with bitter humor, gloomy old Tennyson would be more appropriate to the evening: "He cometh not, she said..."

He had put Mozart on the stereo, started a fire in the small fireplace and was seated on the floor before it, a snifter of brandy in his hand, thinking of Tom and Daniella Bentham. Probably at this very moment Tom was fucking her—energetically, which was how he tended to fuck. Nothing mild-mannered about Tom Danzel once he got in the saddle.

Oddly, Stanley's feelings on the whole business were somewhat muddled. He was angry, but thoughtful, too. He'd always known Tom was part heterosexual; the larger part, indeed. However painful he himself might find it, it was surely inevitable that Tom would revert at some time to the sexual rituals more familiar to him.

But, assuming that Tom was fucking at this very moment, it was only sex, wasn't it? Their relationship, his and Tom's, was surely more than that, or it was meaningless, they were reduced to tricking, on an extended basis. He'd had himself plenty of what he'd once heard called "snack fucks." Who hadn't? And one or two of them he'd had while involved, at least to some degree, with someone else, never mind that he suffered some pangs of guilt at the time. Not enough guilt, let it be said, to bar him from doing what he wanted to do.

Someone—who he couldn't recall—had said that sexual intercourse had a certain stink to it. It was utterly selfish, at least

at its ultimate moment, when no one had awareness of anything but the sensations he himself was experiencing, love for the partner be damned. It was almost invariably messy and, like murder, it found men surrendering to their most animal of instincts, putting aside thought and refinement, all that was noble and profound in their natures. No one thought of Donne or Mozart at the moment of orgasm, certainly.

Of course, sex could be beautiful too, and sometimes approached the spiritual. But, Stanley thought, so could murder. If there were nothing beautiful nor splendid in the act of murder, it would surely not have fascinated so many writers, and some of them fine ones, so greatly for so many centuries. It was not unlikely that more words, more beautiful words, had been written about the nature of murder than about the nature of love. Or, were they so very different? "...each man kills the thing he loves..."

Still, all in all, he thought if Tom had murdered Daniella Bentham he might have minded that less than his fucking her. Love was not a rational state, nor even most times a reasonable one.

He had an idea that there ought to be something else for people who were in love, not just sex, which was only lust, wasn't it? You could have that, and very nicely, too, without a modicum of love. You could have sex, and highly enjoyable sex, without even liking the other person; certainly, without any respect. Without, in fact, a word of conversation.

But what he meant by "something else" was not just friendship, either, nor being together, talking, the pleasure in another's company, all of which was fine, too. It's not that there was anything wrong with any of it, really, it was simply that anyone, in or out of love, could share all those things. He just couldn't get past the idea that there must be something different, something more and special, something transcendent for two people when they were in that transcendent state. The dying for love, the killing for love, the way people did in those old fashioned sagas. Tristan and Isolde, Violetta de Valery, Heathcliff and Cathy.

Of course, people didn't talk that way anymore, or even think that way. Maybe they never had, except in novels and operas. It was too over the top. Silly, he supposed, though the idea of dying for love did strike him as awfully romantic, in its old fashioned way.

Love. Love and hate. They were both non-judgmental, weren't they? Maybe, really, not so very far apart, although he couldn't quite say. He didn't think he'd ever really hated anyone, the way some were said to do. Things, surely, he could hate: homophobia, for instance. But to hate another person, it seemed so, he couldn't think what, so utter. He thought that it must devour you, that kind of hatred, in a way even more utterly than love did. And that, certainly, he knew about. Otherwise, why would he be so miserable now—and so addled by it?

Eleanor Steber sang softly in the background. *Dove Sono*. Where have they gone, the happy hours? Stanley watched the gules of light dancing on the white stone of the hearth, only half listening to her, his senses attuned instead to the sound of a key in the lock. He stiffened slightly when he heard it, but did not immediately look up as the door opened.



Tom was not surprised that Stanley was still up when he arrived back at the apartment. Was more surprised, in fact, that the door wasn't bolted from inside, the way he'd half expected it to be. He was both relieved and sorry. It was human nature, he supposed, to want to avoid, or at least put off, unpleasantness. The accessible door meant that he wasn't going to be able to put off the upcoming scene. He wanted to, and he didn't, and he had no idea which prospect he wanted more.

The scene, at the start at least, was calmer than he would have expected. Stanley generally listened to opera when he was upset, but the fact that he was upset now was hardly big news. Tom stood just inside the door, despite all his mental preparations, not sure what exactly he should do, hoping Stanley would provide him a clue.

After a long moment, Stanley looked up. It was difficult to read his expression. Tom found it wary rather than angry.

Tom had rehearsed a long scenario of what he wanted to say when he got here, but what he blurted out instead, standing just inside the door, was, “Stanley, I’m sorry as hell. I’m the dumbest shit in the whole world.”

“I hope you’re not expecting an argument from me on that score,” Stanley said.

Silence fell. Tom looked away, looked around the room as if he might find some help somewhere, and back to Stanley. “Will you forgive me?”

“Depends. What exactly do I have to forgive?”

“The whole damned thing. I shouldn’t have gone with her. I know that. Hell, I knew it at the time, I was just... you know what I’m like when my dick gets stiff.”

Stanley did know. It had worked in his favor a time or two, in fact. Even when Tom had been protesting, at the beginning of their relationship, that he couldn’t, with Stanley, his dick had been making other plans. King Kong had proven a useful ally in the past but, clearly, the beast wasn’t to be trusted.

“And now,” Stanley said, “here you are home again, jiggedy jig. I’ll skip the part about the pig.”

“Yes. Here I am. To stay. If you’ll let me.”

“Which is to say, you decided to stick with the horse you’ve been riding. All the oats you want to eat and no rent to pay for the stable.”

“I didn’t fuck her, Stanley. I give you my word.”

For the first time since Tom had come through the door, Stanley was surprised. Once Tom’s dick got aroused, it generally had its way.

“Why on earth not?” he blurted out, for all the world as if he were disappointed—and maybe, he thought fleetingly, he was. Because if nothing had happened, really happened, what did he have to be sore about? Maybe, in fact, it should be the opposite.

If Tom, as tempted as he so obviously had been, had managed to resist the temptation, well, then...

"Because I didn't want to." Tom sighed and shook his head. "No, that's bullshit. I did want to. I wanted to very badly."

"Well, then, why didn't you?"

"Because you've put some kind of old gypsy curse on me, is why," he said with an embarrassed laugh. "I was in a clinch with this woman, I'd been thinking since I laid eyes on her of getting her in the sack, of getting into her and... fuck, this is embarrassing..."

"Please don't tell me King Kong fell asleep on the job?"

"No. He was willing, but the rest of me... ah, man, I don't know." Tom gave him a rueful smile. "All I could think of was you. How I would rather be here with you, be holding you in my arms. I just gave it up finally, told her I was sorry, and came home. Boy, talk about dick whipped."

There was a lengthy silence while Stanley considered this, considered what he should do about the situation. He could have a major hissy fit, which would get him... what? Tom fidgeted, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, trying not to look too hopeful.

"Well," Stanley said thoughtfully, "you *could* be dick whipped... if you're so inclined."

Tom took that for forgiveness—of a sort, and at the moment, that was all he had hoped for. He came to where Stanley was seated, leaning down. They kissed, gently, as if afraid they might damage something terribly fragile between them. Still, it was a good, a very good kiss, Tom thought. He dropped to his knees beside Stanley and kissed him again, longer, more confidently.

It was going to be all right. Something blossomed unexpectedly inside his chest. He felt like jumping up and down, shouting, fucking. Especially, fucking.

"Do you ever pray?" Stanley asked after a moment.

Tom, his thoughts about as far as they could get from the subject of prayer, almost said, "I'm not the praying type," and

thought about that fragile peace. He said, cautiously, no more than the tip of a toe in the water, just to try it out, "Yeah. Sometimes."

"What kind of prayers?"

Tom considered for a minute, rolling his eyes up at the ceiling. "Lord," he said, "Cleanse me of these evil lusts, free me from my desire for this man beside me."

"Huh?" Stanley reared back, gave him an astonished look.

Tom ignored that, continued to stare ceiling-ward. "Only, not tonight, Lord, okay? Starting, oh, sometime next year, or maybe the year after. Oof. For a pansy, you've got a wicked right."

The kiss this time was considerably less fragile, the interruption to the conversation considerably longer. They didn't make it so far as the bed, just stripped naked before the dwindling fire.

Tom had given considerable thought, on the way home, of how he would make things up with Stanley. There were things he knew he should do, some of which he was not yet ready for—but there was one thing he had made up his mind that he would do, or at least, give it a try.

And no time like the present, he told himself, and scooted down, running his tongue over Stanley's chest, down across his belly, and lower still, till it touched the silky-wiry hair below. He took Stanley's rock hard dick in his hand, brought his face down to it, and put his lips on the swollen head. Above him, he heard Stanley gasp in excitement and surprise.

He didn't know quite what he had expected. Not much, really, having never actually contemplated doing this until an hour or so earlier. Even then, he'd thought it would be repugnant to him, even when he had made up his mind that he was determined to do it.

The sensation of having something big and hard in his mouth was mostly new to him, though he had the odd image of himself sucking on hard candy when he was a child. This wasn't so far different from that, really. Not as sweet, but not sour and

acid, either, as he'd imagined. It was musky, a little sweat salty, altogether animal. And in fact the taste was less strange to him than he would have expected. It occurred to him that it wasn't, really, all that different from pussy, a taste he was plenty familiar with, had always much enjoyed.

The experience wasn't the same, though. The big difference, the thing he flashed on as he lay there for a long moment, just holding the head in his mouth, is that this was Stanley he was tasting, Stanley in his mouth, Stanley he was experiencing in perhaps the most intimate way it was possible to experience a man.

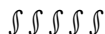
Stanley misinterpreted the pause. He put his hand on Tom's head, ran his fingers lovingly through the dark curls. "Tom, you don't..."

Tom, however, didn't hear the rest of it. He brought his head down quickly, before he had a chance to change his mind, took the full length of Stanley's cock into his mouth, down his throat. Gagged, drew back slightly for a deep breath, and swallowed it again.

This time, it stayed down. Tom took a long moment, to get used to it, decided it wasn't at all repugnant. After a bit, he sort of found himself savoring it—that, no doubt, because it was not just a cock, but Stanley's cock—and, when he slid slowly upward on it, he could feel Stanley's pleasure and his excitement, seeming to vibrate right through his rock hard dick. That, Stanley's excitement at having his dick sucked, turned Tom on in a way new to him, taking the greater portion of his pleasure in the pleasure he was clearly giving Stanley.

Tom held the head between his lips, finding its velvety smoothness pleasurable, and slid back down again. Sucking cock, and to his immense surprise, enjoying it.

Sucking Stanley's cock, he quickly amended.



All in all, Tom thought it was the best sex he had ever experienced. The giving of head had been a bit of a challenge, especially the part where Stanley had shot off. He'd had to give

up on the idea of taking his load, had let it instead run down his chin and onto Stanley's belly. Maybe the next time...

Apart from that, though, the entire session had been the sweetest he'd ever known. Certainly, the emotional part of it, he guessed, the making up part, repairing the damage he knew he had done. Not just that, though. He'd had plenty of hot sex in his life, with women in the past, but he had never before experienced the sweetness of making it with Stanley, hadn't even known until Stanley that there was anything missing from the act.

They were lying naked, entwined, savoring the afterglow of fire and good fortune, when Tom said, "I'm sorry about Danna. About leaving with her the way I did, skipping out on you. You can't know how sorry."

"It's okay. You needed something, something you couldn't get from me. I understand that. In a way, I think it didn't have anything to do with me."

"It didn't, actually. It has nothing to do with the way I feel about you. It's just... oh, fuck, I don't know, I'm not good at all the psychology stuff. But, I made you unhappy, and for that, I'm truly sorry."

"Don't be. It's okay."

Tom raised himself on one elbow to look down into Stanley's face. "Are you trying to tell me you weren't unhappy?"

"No, of course I was unhappy. What I'm trying to tell you, Tom, is that it's my problem, not yours. Nothing ever goes right all the time. Life doesn't work that way, for anybody. The ocean's power isn't just in the surge of the tide, you know, it's in the ebb as well. Relationships are the same. It isn't just the ups, the good times, that make a relationship special. Probably, they're the least of it."

Tom sighed and held him close. "How did I ever get so lucky?" he wondered aloud.

Stanley thought it tactful not to answer. And in any event, something else had flitted across his mind, come and gone before he'd really spied it, but left a shadow behind. He closed

his eyes, searching the last few minutes in memory. It came at once, like a faithful friend.

“What did you call her?”

“Who? Daniella?”

“No, you said...”

“Danna. That’s what her friends call her. So she told me.”

Stanley found himself thinking back, to Petaluma, to the house, and a book with a name scrawled in it. He closed his eyes again, tried to visualize. Donna, he’d thought at the time—but, it might have been Danna.

Danna—and Andrew?

CHAPTER TEN

“Stand up.”

Tom was seated at the kitchen table, reading the Chronicle. He stood obediently, and Stanley tied an apron about him. It matched the one Stanley was wearing, frilly and covered with pink flowers—and little. Tom looked down at it.

“Baby, this doesn’t even cover my dick.”

“After last night your dick ought to be sleeping. I’m surprised it hasn’t turned blue.”

Tom grinned and took Stanley in his arms, kissing him lightly. “I was smokin’, wasn’t I?” He ran his hands down Stanley’s back and squeezed his butt—the sweetest butt, he had decided, in the whole wide world. He was thinking, it would be worth the occasional disagreement if making up was going to be like this—but he also thought it wiser not to say that aloud.

Stanley gave him a quick peck and stepped back. He took a bowl of eggs and a wire whisk from the kitchen counter, and shoved them at Tom. “Here, make yourself useful.”

Tom took the bowl, made a face. “What do I do with these?”

“You whip them up, with that. Not a lot of skill required, just a little muscle.”

“I’m not sure I’ve got the strength.” Tom made a half-hearted swish with the whisk through the eggs.

Stanley slanted him a look before turning back to the coffee grinder. “I wasn’t the one who kept rolling over in bed.”

“Rockin’ and rollin’. You didn’t roll away, either.” Tom grinned to himself in self-satisfaction. “You know, I think that was a personal record for me, last night.”

“Times? Or, what, intensity? Volume?”

“All of the above. ‘Course, you were no slouch either.”

Stanley was saved the necessity of a rejoinder by the ring of the doorbell.

"I'll get it." Tom set the bowl of eggs aside with evident relief.

He found San Francisco Homicide Inspector Bryce at the door. For a second or two, seeing Bryce there, looking downright sheepish, Tom thought of what he had interpreted at his farewell party as a hesitant attempt at flirting, and wondered if Bryce could possibly be so tactless as to pursue that possibility here, at the apartment everyone now knew he shared with Stanley.

In the next moment, though, he saw that Bryce was not alone. His partner Carlson stood just behind him, looking not so much sheepish as triumphant. Carlson had never liked Tom, and had made it clear he liked him even less when Tom's relationship with Stanley had become common knowledge.

"This does not look like a social call," Tom said.

"I'm afraid not," Bryce said. "Can we come in?"

Tom hesitated for only a fraction of a second. He felt embarrassed for them to see him here, ensconced with Stanley. Not that they didn't already know the truth, but somehow, meeting here seemed to underline it. And the next moment felt guilty for his embarrassment.

He quickly told himself he was being an ass. What did he care what they thought? He stepped aside. "Sure, come in," he said.

"Who is it?" Stanley asked and came in from the kitchen. "Oh." He paused in the doorway, the bowl with Tom's eggs in one hand and the wire whisk in the other. He was suddenly all too aware that he and Tom were wearing matching aprons, dainty ruffled things, Tom's looking ridiculously inappropriate for his burly physique.

"Maybe we should talk to you alone?" Bryce said, blushing. Carlson smirked, looking from one pink-flowered apron to the other.

"No, this is okay," Tom said, face kept resolutely blank. "We're partners."

Bryce seemed to search for the words he wanted, chewed at a lip, finally asked, "Daniella Bentham. Name mean anything?"

"Yes," Tom said, his voice carefully noncommittal.

"You were with her last night."

"I was..." Tom started to elaborate and instead said again, simply, "Yes."

"We both were," Stanley added. "There was an art show at her gallery. Bentham Gallery on Bayshore. We went together."

The look Bryce gave him was unhappy, but Carlson was quick to say, directly to Tom, "You were seen leaving the party with Daniella Bentham. Several witnesses have told us the two of you disappeared in the direction of her apartment over the gallery. Without your partner." He managed to invest the last words with the suggestion of something ugly.

Tom thought carefully, wondered exactly where this was going, but two homicide inspectors at his doorstep? That pretty much narrowed the possibilities, didn't it?

"Yes, I did go up to her apartment with her," he said. "There was some talk of a job she wanted us to do."

"And you couldn't discuss this downstairs?" Carlson asked.

"There was a considerable crowd, pretty noisy. It was her suggestion that we go upstairs."

Carlson looked at Stanley. "But not you."

"I went to get a glass of champagne."

"Hey, let's skip the tap dancing, why don't we?" Tom said. "Where exactly is this headed?"

Carlson looked altogether pleased with the question, but it was Bryce who answered. "Daniella Bentham was found this morning in a dumpster a few blocks from her gallery. She'd been murdered."

Tom, only recently a homicide detective himself, asked a detective question, "Murdered how?"

“Strangled. A scarf, tied around her neck. A man’s scarf. A cashmere scarf. The killer left the scarf with her.”

For a fleeting second, Stanley flashed on his thoughts of the night before—that he would have minded less Tom’s murdering Daniella than he did Tom’s fucking her. He chased that thought resolutely from his mind. That hadn’t happened. Neither had, in fact. He trusted Tom in that.

“Do you own a neck scarf?” Carlson asked Tom abruptly.

“No.”

“None?”

“I’m not a neck scarf kind of guy.”

Carlson looked at Stanley. “How about you?”

“A cashmere scarf? Hmm. Not exactly,” Stanley said.

“What’s that mean, not exactly?”

“I’ve got an old boa around here somewhere, marabou feathers. I’ll get it for you, if you’d like to borrow it.” Stanley tilted his head and regarded Carlson solemnly. “Now that I think of it, the color might be very good on you. Kind of a green black.” Carlson had the sense to look abashed.

“Are you saying I’m a suspect?” Tom asked.

“All we’re saying,” Bryce said before Carlson could answer, “is that you were seen leaving this party with her. You may have been the last one to see her alive.”

“Except her killer,” Tom said.

“Yes,” Bryce agreed, “except her killer. How long were you with her, in her apartment?”

“Not long. Five minutes maybe, probably less. But you already know that, don’t you? If you’ve got witnesses who saw me go with her, you must have some that saw me leave shortly afterward. Her apartment and the gallery.”

The fact that Carlson avoided his eyes told him that they did. “Five minutes is plenty of time to off somebody,” he said, but his voice lacked conviction.

“That’s true. But why would I? Because she invited me up to her apartment? She was a beautiful woman. I’d have been more likely to fuck her to death. Or, I could have choked her, I guess.”

Carlson looked altogether surprised. “You’re saying you might have done it? Choked her?”

“I’m saying, I’ve got a big dick. You know.” He stuck a finger in his mouth and made a crude gagging sound.

Both inspectors reddened, but Bryce couldn’t quite help an involuntary glance in the direction of Tom’s crotch, as if to confirm the evidence. He jerked his eyes away immediately and looked at Stanley instead, but Stanley’s expression was innocence personified.

They all eyed one another for a moment in silence, a speculative silence. Tom could not help remembering Daniella as he had last seen her—so beautiful, so desirable. He felt, of course, a pang of regret, a heavy sadness. Murder was such an ugly, a final business. It was ridiculous, but it somehow seemed worse when the victim was young and beautiful.

But he could not pretend, either, that he was not aware of the electric charge that went through him at the announcement of her murder. He had been a homicide detective most of his adult life. It was in his blood. He knew full well there were some among his kind, homicide investigators, who actually savored the murder itself, who were excited in a sense by the stabbing, the shooting, the garroting. He’d always thought that obscene, but he knew it was so.

It was different with him, though. It was the challenge, the matching of wits with the killer. He wasn’t as clever as Stanley, he couldn’t quote poetry, didn’t understand art or philosophy, but he understood the mind of the murderer.

Was this, he wondered, why Stanley had recently gotten so into sharing murder movies with him, so that he could enjoy second hand the challenges the movie detectives faced? Did Stanley understand what he was missing?

This, however, was not second hand, it was the real thing, and one in which he had played some part. And, suddenly, he very much wanted to be a part of its investigation.

"Look," he said aloud, "you're investigating a homicide, and I don't for a minute believe you seriously suspect me of it. Here's a suggestion. Why don't I come with you, take a look at her apartment. Maybe I'll see something different from what it was last night."

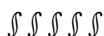
When Bryce looked unsure, Tom added, "Hey, I have had some experience investigating homicides. If it'll make you feel better, you can put the cuffs on me."

It was Carlson, though, who said, "No need for that. I'm sure it would be very helpful to have Mister Danzel's assistance." The way he said that, to Bryce, the way he emphasized "Mister" made it sound vaguely insulting.

Stanley set the bowl and the whisk aside, yanked off his apron. "I'm coming too."

Bryce looked as if he were about to object to that, but when he met Tom's eyes, Tom only grinned.

"Partners," he said.



When they were in the department's Crown Vic, on the way, Stanley surprised them all by saying, "Should we look at the body first?"

Everyone looked at him, even Carlson, who was driving, stared into the rear view mirror.

"I just, umm, I never quite believe someone is dead if I haven't seen them for myself," Stanley said.

"This woman is dead," Bryce said. "Believe me."

"No, I think Stanley's right," Tom said. "I'd like to see her too. Sometimes you see something... Say, she's wearing different clothes or, I don't know. Sometimes you just get a feeling."

In the end, they detoured by the city morgue. Daniella Bentham had only recently been brought in. She was laid out on

a stainless steel table, still clad as she had been when the body was found. As she had been, Tom saw at a glance, when he'd last seen her, or very nearly. She still wore the red silk jump suit, though the black stole was missing.

"She was wearing a piece of crystal jewelry around her neck," Tom said.

"An Ohm," Stanley added. When the Inspectors looked unsure, he obligingly chanted, "Ohmmm." Carlson continued to look blank, but Bryce nodded comprehendingly.

"Would it have been valuable?" Bryce asked.

"I doubt it," Stanley said. "Not very, anyway. But it was crystal. At a glance someone might have thought so. She was wearing a ring, too. Bloodstone."

"Red, right?" Bryce said, making a note.

Stanley shook his head. "A different stone. That's Haematite. Iron ore, of a sort. This was Chalcedony. Or Heliotrope. Green, with flecks of red in it. A man's ring, I'd say. Maybe. She had big hands, didn't she?"

"Who found her?" Tom asked.

"A couple of homeless, scrounging for cans."

"Check out the homeless guys," Tom said. "If they haven't got the jewelry, there might have been a robbery motive."

"In which case," Bryce said, "there should be stuff missing from her apartment, too. Or from the gallery."

"I wouldn't know about the stuff downstairs. Not my kind of thing," Tom said. "As for her apartment, I was only there for a few minutes." He shrugged. "I might notice something. Can't say."

He stood for a moment looking down at the woman with whom he'd nearly had sex the night before. There was nothing beautiful about her now. Her face was contorted, her eyes enormous, her mouth twisted into a grimace of pain and horror. He was thinking of how very dead she looked.

He was accustomed to death, or as accustomed to it as one could get—which maybe was not very. Having spent his

childhood years on a farm, he had grown used to death at an early age. You killed cows and pigs, even a boy's pets, and his had been the job of hacking off the heads of chickens when it was their time for the pot.

Yet it seemed to him that people were so much deadlier than animals, although he couldn't explain why. Maybe the minds, all those thoughts, that space inside. A whole universe, suddenly vanished. He made a mental note to ask Stanley, who always had an answer for him.

He was glad, all in all, that Stanley had given up homicide. He would be spared the virus that infected homicide detectives, all of them, in time; that he knew he himself was not immune to. The ugliness they dealt with, nurtured by grief and bloodshed and anger and guilt. None of them really escaped it. Some of them weathered it and survived. Some of them were broken and fell to pieces. He felt sure that Stanley would have been one of the latter. He wouldn't have wanted to see that happen. If Stanley hadn't decided on his own to quit, Tom would have tried to persuade him; but he was glad, too, that hadn't been necessary after all.

"Anything more here?" Bryce asked. Everyone looked a question at Stanley.

Stanley had taken no more than the merest glance at the woman laid out on the stainless steel table. He had found, working homicide, that he really didn't like looking at bodies, and he couldn't have explained why he'd wanted to see hers.

Maybe it was just what he'd said, that he needed to confirm that she really was dead. She had been a threat to him, only a few hours earlier. Death was final, though. Whatever threat Daniella had represented, to whomever, had been erased.

But the question remained: what kind of threat had she been, and to whom? Who had wanted, needed, to kill her. Admittedly, he'd considered the possibility the night before, but someone had gone far beyond considering it out of jealous pique.

Jealous pique? Had someone else been unhappy that she'd come on to Tom? People had murdered for no more motive

than that. Had they, by accepting the invitation to visit Bentham Galleries last night, set in motion the events that had led to this woman's death?

Which in turn brought up the question that had troubled him before, and to which he still had no reasonable answer: why had they been sent that unlikely invitation?

He thought of something Tom had once said to him, on their first murder case: "Get to know the victim. The better you know him, the more he will tell you. Sometimes he'll tell you who murdered him."

He realized, despite his aversion to homicide investigations, that he wanted to know who had killed Daniella Bentham, and why. But the answers weren't here. In the most literal sense, neither was she. She had been a life, a living, breathing, moving person. This was only a shell, a discarded husk. Not even an autopsy would tell them much more than what they already knew, that she was dead, by strangulation.

He shook his head. "No," he said aloud, "I've seen enough."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Bentham Gallery looked different by daylight. The carefully contrived lighting, the champagne atmosphere, the chic crowd, had conspired to create a glamorous and festive air. In broad daylight, the champagne glasses and bar long since removed, it looked stark and uninviting.

The crowd was different too. In place of art patrons and hangers-on, it was crawling with crime techs and a few bystanders that Stanley took to be employees of the gallery.

One of those, a thin, owlsh man in black slacks and turtleneck and oversized glasses—he looked like some misplaced beatnik from the fifties—saw them come in and pointed a finger at Tom.

“That’s him,” he said in a dramatic voice straight out of a TV movie, “that’s the man. I saw him leave with Danna. They went up to her apartment together.”

“This is Mister Wetzel,” Bryce said, “The gallery’s manager.”

Tom greeted him with a smile and a nod, unperturbed by the identification. This was something everybody already knew, that he’d gone upstairs with Daniella. The big question now was, who had murdered her? He already knew it hadn’t been him, and he felt pretty sure Bryce and Carlson knew it too.

“Anything missing, that you can see?” Tom asked instead, indicating the gallery with one sweep of his hand.

The question surprised Wetzel. He blinked, had to think for a moment, taking in the room with one slow, panoramic gaze. “Not that I can see,” he said. “I’ll need to do a real inventory, of course, but, no, I think not. I haven’t been upstairs, though.” He looked expectantly in the direction of the stairs.

“This place,” Tom said, “Does it make money?”

Wetzel gave the room another look, as if that question had never occurred to him. “No,” he said with some reluctance.

“Not yet. It’s only been open a little over a week, two weeks, I guess. Last night was the official opening party. It takes time to get a business settled, especially this kind of business. Why?”

“Someone had a reason to murder Miss Bentham. Money’s a good motive. That might have some bearing on her death.”

“Agatha Christie is very big on motive,” Stanley said.

Wetzel looked from one to the other, puzzling something out behind the oversized glasses. “Are you saying I have a motive?”

“Not unless you’re an investor,” Tom said, and saw by the quick drop of Wetzel’s eyes that he had struck a nerve.

Before Wetzel could reply, a man hurried across the room to interrupt. “Inspector,” he addressed Bryce, “you’d better come look at this.”

They all trailed after him to the stairs behind the brocade tapestry. “I wonder,” Tom said, following Bryce up the stairs, “how did she get from here to that dumpster without anyone seeing. Assuming she was murdered here...”

“We don’t know that yet,” Bryce said.

“Still, assuming... surely someone didn’t carry her through the gallery. Is there another entrance?” Tom asked.

“Yes,” Wetzel, bringing up the rear, answered. “There’s stairs to an outside door, opens into the alley behind.”

They paused at the top of the stairs, just inside the apartment. “It’s cold in here,” Stanley said. He looked at a thermostat on the wall. “No wonder. The heat’s turned off.” He started to turn it on, but Bryce said, shortly, “No, leave it alone.”

“She liked it cold,” Wetzel said. “She said it was like when she was a kid, she was always cold.”

“Not last night,” Tom said. They all looked at him. He looked embarrassed and shrugged. “The apartment, I mean. It was warmer when we came in last night. Lots warmer.”

“I’ll bet,” Carlson said, and smirked.

Wetzel ignored the exchange. "Something's different," he said, looking past the policemen with a puzzled expression. "The room's much larger." He looked at an open archway in the far wall, and gasped.

"That wasn't there before," he said.

"What wasn't here?" Bryce asked.

"That room. That whole part of the apartment." He looked around, puzzled, and pointed a finger at a huge mirror propped against the wall beside the arch. "That was there, where that opening is."

"He's right. The mirror was there last night," Tom said. "Across the opening. Like, to hide that other room. I didn't even know there was a room there."

"Neither did I," Wetzel said, still puzzling.

Bryce led the way across to the open doorway. A separate apartment lay beyond; small, only one room with a bathroom and a Pullman kitchen, and sparsely furnished. Unlike the room that had served as Daniella Bentham's sitting room, there was no modernistic chic here, just a simple single bed with a cheap cotton coverlet, a wooden table with an unpainted chair, a gooseneck lamp on the table. Everything strictly functional.

Only the draperies covering the two windows, heavy brocade, spoke of any luxury, but Tom suspected their purpose was rather to block any light from escaping, and the single gooseneck lamp wouldn't have cast much light to begin with.

He went to the window and pulled one of the draperies back. The window looked out on an alley behind. Passersby would have been rare; this wasn't a part of town where pedestrians strolled. Even had somebody walked by out there, and even had he looked up at the second story windows, the draperies would have kept the windows dark.

He turned to Wetzel. "How long have you been manager?"

"I came on board about a month ago. I was up here, in her apartment. This is where she interviewed me. But this part of the apartment must have already been blocked off the first time I saw it. I never knew anything about it."

"So, it was done sometime before you were hired."

"Yes, it must have been. But Eve lived here, I think, for the better part of a year, she..."

"Eve?" Tom asked.

"Sorry. That was her real name. Eve Bartles. She didn't think that was glamorous enough for the future she had mapped out, so she changed it. Legally, I think, but I'm not real sure of that."

Stanley heard Irene's little girl voice inside his head: "*Adam and Eve and Pinch-Me-Tight...*"

"Anyway," Wetzell was still talking, "she lived here while they were getting the gallery set up. So that mirror could have been put up any time. Or, maybe before she moved in. Maybe she didn't know about it either."

They all thought about that. Stanley remembered a newspaper story a few years back, about a couple who had discovered a man living in their attic, who'd lived there for years. He would come down into the house during the day, when they were out, and retreat to the attic before they got home; and, one day, the wife had come home unexpectedly. Was that what had happened to Eve? Had she come in unexpectedly, surprising someone she didn't know was sharing her apartment with her?

Tom went back to the doorway into this part of the apartment. There was nothing to indicate that any major carpentry had been done. The opening looked as if it had been there all along, had simply been concealed behind that giant mirror. He checked the mirror. It was on rollers, like a closet door. It glided easily back and forth, with no more than a touch of fingers.

"Hard to believe she wouldn't have discovered this, even just cleaning the glass," he said. He studied the mirror for a moment, leaned close to it to examine the frame. "There's a peephole, here," he said, "in the frame. So anyone in here could see out there."

He thought about that briefly. He and Daniella, in the other room—someone watching them surreptitiously. It was an

uncomfortable thought. Had Daniella known? She must have, surely.

Wetzel showed them the back stairs, hidden behind another wall hanging. They trooped down the narrow stairway single file. At the bottom, a heavily barred door opened into an alley.

"Perfect for getting in and out," Tom said. "This is how he removed the body."

"If she was killed here," Bryce said again.

"She was, I'm sure of it," Stanley said. They all stared at him. "The crystal Ohm," he said. "The one she was wearing last night. It's on the floor upstairs, half under that ugly sofa."

Which was exactly where they found it. Carlson picked it up by its broken chain. The crystal glinted, winking conspiratorially in the bright light. Carlson looked from the crystal to Stanley. "How'd you happen to see this?" he asked. "It was practically hidden under there."

"I was a homicide detective too," Stanley said.

Tom bit back a smile. "Stanley's got a sharp eye," he said in an approving voice.

"He might have known it was there," Carlson said, his mouth set in a petulant line.

"That's silly," Tom said. "I was the one that came up to the apartment with Daniella. Stanley wasn't even here last night."

"Wasn't he? You've made a big point of telling us you're partners. A beautiful chick invites you up for some action. He'd be jealous, seems to me." The look he gave Stanley was minatory. "Weren't you?"

"Of course not. I trust Tom. He didn't fuck her. Did you?"

"No," Tom said.

"There. You see."

"But you didn't know that."

"I'll bet if you ask around, you'll find a bunch of people who saw me leave, while Tom was still..." He hesitated slightly, realizing he'd said more than he intended. "...Still discussing business with the young lady."

"You could have come back."

"Someone would have seen me."

"You could have come up the back way."

"And I would know about that... how? I'd never met Daniella Bentham before last night. I'd never been to her gallery. Are you suggesting I just prowled the alley in back until I found that door, and opened it? And how could I, by the way, it bolts from inside? Or do you think she slipped downstairs to let me in, so I could murder her. Or, maybe she wanted to fuck me too?"

Which Carlson apparently found too much to imagine. He turned his attention to Tom instead. "You said she wanted to talk to you about business. What kind of business?"

"I don't know. We didn't get into it. She said she needed detectives. That's why she invited us, apparently. I left before we got into any intimate details."

"Why?"

"I was worrying about Stanley."

"You knew he'd left?"

"I thought he might have. He had a headache."

"That's true," Stanley said. "I was suffering."

"This is getting us nowhere," Bryce said when Carlson seemed to run out of questions. "We could probably come up with a dozen witnesses who saw Stanley leave, and I doubt anyone saw him come back. And you'd have to know about that back door. I don't see how Tom or Stanley either one could have been aware of that, or had access to it. I think we'd do better to concentrate on finding the real murderer."

Carlson looked about to protest, but Bryce cut him off. "So, that crystal thing."

"Ohm," Stanley said.

"Right. Ohm. If she was wearing it last night, and it was on the floor today, it means most likely she was strangled here."

"And carried out the back way," Tom said. "How far was that dumpster?"

"A block, block and a half," Bryce said.

"She wasn't exactly petite, though. So, we can assume it was a man who carried her there. I can't see most women doing it."

"I couldn't have done it," Stanley said. "She was taller than me. Probably outweighed me, too."

Tom nodded his agreement. He looked around the room again, and went back to the one that had been hidden behind the mirror. "But, you know, we can pretty much assume that Daniella knew about this. It's hard to imagine someone living in there without her knowing about it."

"It makes a perfect lair," Bryce said, "for someone."

"A priest's hole," Stanley said. Carlson gave him a puzzled look. "A hiding place," Stanley explained, "although I think we all know these days how safe a priest's hole might be."

"But a hiding place for who?" Bryce wondered aloud.

"Whom," Stanley corrected him. Stanley exchanged a quick glance with Tom, remembering the book, with the name Danna in it, that he'd found at his parents' house, where someone had been living and where he had felt certain he sensed someone nearby, and the mysterious invitation to come here last night. Most especially, he thought of Daniella Bentham's initial and puzzling interest in him, only minutes after they had arrived. As if it had all been arranged in advance, for some as yet inexplicable reason.

He had a sudden flash of intuition. He thought he knew who might have hidden here. Andrew and Eve...? *Who was left to see the fight?*

Was this the time and place, though, to try to explain about his brother, Andrew? It was a long story and one to which he only knew the sketchiest outlines.

Still, if Andrew and Daniella—Danna—knew one another, and the book inscription suggested that was a possibility, then it might well have been Andrew who'd been hiding here, and if that were so, then Andrew was certainly implicated in Daniella's murder.

There was a bonus, too, in these possibilities. Shifting attention to another suspect took it away from Tom. He believed what Tom had told him, without a shadow of a doubt, but to others, there was that suggestion of guilt. So, then, Andrew needed to be explained, brought into the picture. But, Hannibal from Homeland Security had cautioned them to silence.

"I think I need to call someone," he said.

He ignored the suspicious looks Bryce and Carlson gave him and stepped into the front room, punching Hannibal's number into his cell phone. Someone—it did not sound like Hannibal's voice, but Stanley had never spoken to him on the telephone—listened without comment while Stanley quickly explained the situation. When he had done, the voice said, "Let me speak to the Inspector in charge."

Stanley stepped back into the other room and held the phone out to Bryce. He took it, identified himself, and listened for a long moment, his face growing rigid with anger and frustration. Finally, he said, "Right. We'll wait for you here," and disconnected.

"That was Homeland Security," he said to Carlson, who looked at Stanley as if blaming him personally for this complication. "They're taking over the investigation. Someone will be here shortly. In the meantime, we're to do nothing, speak to no one, touch nothing."

The manager sidled in the direction of the stairs, as if he meant to descend again, return to the gallery below, but Bryce forestalled him. "I think you'd better stay here with us, Mister Wetzel. There is apparently a definite need for containment. You," he addressed one of the uniformed policemen, "stay by the stairs, see that no one comes up or down without my permission. Get someone to watch that other door as well. The rest of us will wait here." His look said he included Tom and Stanley in that directive.

"I suppose we can make ourselves comfortable?" Stanley said.

“So long as you don’t try to leave.” He thought a minute, and added, “don’t touch anything, either.”

They waited, mostly in embarrassed silence. Stanley took advantage of the preoccupation of the investigating officers to drift back into the apartment’s front room, taking it in with his decorator’s eye. It had a kind of expensive ugliness in its aggressive modernity. There was nothing in it of warmth or comfort. The only mildly attractive thing, to his mind, was a Chagall print on one wall, but, as Picasso had put it, “Chagall is for shop girls.” Of course, Daniella Bentham had been a shop girl, hadn’t she, no matter that it had been an elegant shop.

The pashmina shawl she’d worn the night before was on the floor by the sofa where he’d found the crystal, and near that was a purse, an oversized cube covered in sequins, with a sequined shoulder strap attached. The lid was up, indicating someone had rifled through it. He would love to look inside it, but felt sure that the inspectors would disapprove. Anyway, Hannibal was taking charge of everything, wasn’t he? He’d want first look himself. Maybe, Stanley thought, I can peek over his shoulder.

He looked in Bryce’s direction. Bryce flicked him a glance but seemed uninterested in Stanley’s meanderings, so long as he did not try to leave, and at the moment, leaving was the furthest thing from Stanley’s mind. He stepped into the bedroom. It was cold in here too. He could almost see his breath.

After the front room, the bedroom was a complete surprise. It couldn’t have looked more different. It was not Spartan, as the hidden room was; was in fact quite comfortably furnished, but here there were no ultra modern pieces, no stark angles and barren artwork. It was utterly traditional. An old oak dresser, a heavy carved armoire against one wall, a huge four poster bed covered with an embroidered throw, pillows that looked as if you could sink into oblivion in them. A bedside lamp had been turned on, casting a well-staged glow over the bed’s surface, and the spread was turned back in invitation. The scene struck him as poignant. Daniella’s invitations were a thing of the past now.

Andrew and Eve... Andrew—if it was Andrew—was the past, too, the ghost of childhood past, a deadly ghost, perhaps. A

month ago, Stanley hadn't even known this brother existed—and now, he suspected him of murder.

Incongruously, because they were so old fashioned, three early and surely valuable Staffordshire pieces sat atop the dresser, next to a tortoise shell jewelry box, lid open. If there had been a robbery, they hadn't bothered with the Staffordshire, though a common burglar could be excused for not knowing their worth.

They hadn't, apparently, bothered with her jewelry either, although it was hard to say at a glance how valuable any of the pieces might be just looking down at them, and he knew better than to pick any of them up. There might have been more, of course. He did not see a Bloodstone ring. What had happened to that? He made a mental note to ask Mister Wetzel if she had worn it regularly.

He went to a wall shelf unit to look at the compact discs, still careful not to touch anything, though he instinctively doubted that Andrew—if it had been Andrew in hiding here—would be so careless as to leave fingerprints. They were mostly jazz—Nina Simon, Maxine Sullivan, Bix Beiderbeck—but there were several classical selections too. Mozart concerti, Vivaldi, even an orchestral disc of music from Wagner's Ring Cycle. Her tastes were more catholic than he would have guessed.

Many of the books were poetry, with a few novels. Moby Dick, War and Peace. Serious reading. She hadn't looked the War and Peace type, had she? You couldn't always say, of course.

But, Sir Thomas Aquinas? A beautiful tooled leather edition, perhaps bought for its decorative binding. His mind balked completely, however, at the image of Daniella curled up in bed with *Life and Letters of Eminent 19th Century Divines*, in two plainly bound volumes.

Could the books have been Andrew's? Stanley's fingers fairly itched to get at them, but he resisted the urge. Maybe when the investigation was complete? He wondered who they would go to. Wetzel might know.

As interesting as the compact discs and the books were, though, the most astonishing thing in the room, to his way of thinking, was the life size portrait of Daniella that hung over the bed. At first glance, he hadn't even realized it was her. Here was none of the exaggerated sexuality, the huntress on the prowl, that he had seen in the woman when he had met her the night before. Her face was hardly made up at all and she was wearing a plain white dress, that might have been suitable for a confirmation ritual, but that had nonetheless a kind of *dégagé* elegance that last night's determined chic had failed to achieve. Her hair was pulled back in a bun at the nape of her neck, her eyes lowered modestly, hands folded in her lap. She looked very young and very demure. And oddly more attractive, he thought.

Stanley found himself thinking, not for the first time, how difficult it could be to read people. Clearly, there had been another side to the brittle, sophisticated Daniella Bentham. Eva Bartles, it appeared, had longed for some kind of old fashioned comfort. Or, knowing that was not really a possibility for her, had surrounded herself here, in her most intimate space, with the trappings of it. Had lived here, perhaps, in dreams that she had known she would never attain.

Had she dreamed of love while she practiced her seductions, the man who would see the woman beneath her showy exterior? Who would claim her for his own, possess her as lesser lovers could not?

What she had found, surely, had been that most possessive of lovers, Death. Had she died fulfilled in his embrace? The ultimate embrace, really—nothing could ever eclipse it. "O vast and well-veiled death, and the body gratefully nestling close to thee."

Perhaps Whitman had gotten it right. Perhaps she had nestled in her bed with well-veiled death.

He turned, to find Tom in the doorway behind him. They exchanged glances, and Tom looked at the bed with its turned down coverlet.

"If I'd fucked her..." he said, speaking more to himself than to Stanley, and let his voice trail off.

“But that was in another country. And besides, the wench is dead,” Stanley quoted, and added, though Tom was unlikely to care, “Marlowe, I believe.”

Stanley looked again at the portrait over the bed. “Where did she meet him, I wonder?”

Tom looked at the portrait, too, and back at Stanley. “A man on the run,” he said.

“He wasn’t running then, was he, whenever they met? He’d stopped somewhere long enough to link up with her. I don’t see Daniella picking up hitchhikers.”

“Maybe they hadn’t just met, either. They might have known one another for years. Since childhood.”

Stanley thought of a baby who had disappeared years ago; of the house in Petaluma, and someone living there clandestinely; and, after that, living hidden behind a mirror in a room above an art gallery. Andrew, who had been, was still, nothing more than a shadow, and Daniella, who had been so very much alive.

“No, not since childhood, that’s my hunch, anyway. This doesn’t have the feel of childhood friends,” he said. He thought a moment longer. “A man on the run ought to want to get away, oughtn’t he, not stay around, however cleverly hidden? You don’t hang around for the sake of spending time with a childhood friend.”

“But, hang around for what?”

They exchanged glances. Stanley thought he knew for what, or at least, for whom. But, why? That was the real question. Why should Andrew, if it was Andrew, be stalking him? Because, if he was right about the presence at the house, if he was right that it had been Andrew living here, Andrew who had arranged for their invitation to the gallery, Andrew who had prompted Daniella to flirt with him when they arrived, then that was what it came down to certainly: Andrew was stalking him. Why, he asked himself yet again.

“I hope you boys aren’t touching anything,” Carlson said, coming into the bedroom.

Stanley ignored the question, but Tom gave the inspector a withering look.

"Pardon me," Carlson said. He went into the bathroom, leaving the door open. "Don't peek," he said, with a facetious wink, and proceeded to take a noisy pee.

Finished, he turned to the sink, smiling through the doorway at Stanley. "You'll notice, I take precautions," he said, "no fingerprints to muck up those that might already be here," and used his elbow to turn the faucet on, washing his hands in the stream of water.

"Ouch," he cried, and yanked his hands out of the stream, "that water's hot." Which was evident. In the cold air of the apartment, the stream of hot water had already caused a little cloud of steam.

He turned the water off, again using his elbows, and came out of the bathroom. "Maybe we should rejoin the party," he said, indicating the front room.

"I think I'll follow your example first," Stanley said, and started toward the bathroom. "Don't worry, I'll use my elbows too."

Carlson paused, watching him, looking as if he were about to object.

"Oh," Stanley said, stopping in the open doorway, "It's quite all right if you want to peek. I'm not shy."

Carlson scowled and went back into the other room. Stanley winked at Tom, and went to pee. But first, he turned the hot water on full—with his elbows.

While he was there, Bryce came in. He looked toward the open bathroom door, and at Tom. It was the first time they had been alone since what Tom had taken to be a rather inept effort to cruise him at his farewell party. They were not really alone, of course, any more than they had been then, but the gush of water from the bathroom tap provided a curtain of noise that created a sense of privacy, and Stanley, standing at the toilet to the left of the door, was invisible except for the backs of his shoulders.

For a minute, Bryce's eyes met Tom's. He looked as if there were something he wanted to say. Tom met his gaze frankly, willing him not to say it.

The toilet flushed then. Bryce dropped his eyes.

"Better stick with the rest of us," he said, and went out.

Tom wondered, was that a double meaning?

CHAPTER TWELVE

Stanley, however, was in no hurry to quit the bedroom. "In a minute," he said, taking his cell phone from his pocket. He held a piece of toilet tissue in his other hand. Tom could see that he'd written on it with one of Daniella's lipsticks, the markings looking like blood at a glance.

"What's that?" Tom asked.

"A number, obviously. I wrote it down while I was in there."

"I can see that. I meant..."

"A telephone number, it appears to me."

"Stanley, please don't tell me you've concealed evidence from the police. Not to mention Homeland Security."

"I didn't conceal anything. It was written on the mirror in her bathroom. Well, not written, exactly. I mean, it had been written. I'm guessing she wrote it with her finger in the steam on the mirror. If you have just a trace of oil on your finger, or Vaseline, say, and you write on the glass, you don't see it when the mirror is clear. But the glass steamed up when Carlson washed his hands and when I went in after him, I thought I could just see something ever so faintly, so I let the water run for a bit, until there was a nice head of steam, and then you could see it clearly. And, when I turned the water off, and waited a minute or two, it disappeared again. It's an old kid's trick. Irene and I used to leave secret messages for one another. Of course, they were just nonsense, they didn't really mean anything. I expect this doesn't either."

"Stanley, for Pete's sake, you should have said something to Bryce about it. Or wait to tell Homeland, anyway."

"There's no reason why Bryce and Carlson couldn't discover it the same way I did. They are Homicide Inspectors, after all. Damn it, Carlson was in there, washing his hands. If he'd waited around, let the water run a minute longer, if he'd even

been paying attention instead of riding my butt, he'd have seen it the same as I did."

"Even so..."

"As for Homeland, well, what makes you think I won't share it with Mister Hannibal—when he gets here?" He was busy punching in a number on his cell phone.

Tom hesitated. It went against the grain for him, to conceal evidence from the investigating officers. At the same time, his own detective's curiosity was in high gear. Plus, he couldn't help thinking it was damned clever of Stanley to have discovered the number. A number, written in a sort of invisible ink, on the mirror of Daniella's bathroom. It had to be significant. Who would go to that much trouble to record the number, say, of the local pizza delivery shop?

After a moment, Stanley made a moue of disappointment, and switched off his phone. "Out of service," he said.



People milled about in the other room, marking time. Stanley saw that Mister Wetzel was standing off to himself near the mirrored door.

"Ah, just the man I want to talk to," he said.

"Wetzel?" Tom looked surprised. "You don't think he did it?"

"Hardly. In any wrestling match between her and him, I'd bet on her. But, he knows more about her than the rest of us. And I don't think he's telling us everything. Cover for me, okay?"

Tom looked doubtful, but he positioned himself so that he mostly blocked the homicide inspectors' view of Stanley as he crossed to where Wetzel stood alone across the room.

"Dreadful business, isn't it?" Stanley greeted the gallery manager. "It must be very upsetting for you, you and Daniella being so close."

Wetzel gave him a suspicious look, and glanced across the room at Tom. "You two are partners?" Stanley nodded. He

thought he should elaborate on that, but wasn't at all sure how. "But he left the party with her?" Wetzel added.

"Yes."

"You must have been very angry. Very resentful."

"Did I hate her for it, do you mean?" It was Wetzel's turn to nod mutely. Stanley gave a shrug, unaware that he had managed to adopt that habit from Tom. "He didn't have to go. But, yes, I suppose I did resent her. Oh, that's being coy, isn't it? Of course I did. At the very least, she was rude to me."

"I know Danna. She didn't mean to be."

"That's even worse, isn't it? If you're going to be rude to someone, it ought at least to be intentional. Otherwise, it shows a remarkable insensitivity to people, doesn't it?"

"But she *was* insensitive, to other people. She really had little awareness of how other people thought. Or felt. To be honest, I don't think that was particularly important to her. She was a very self centered young woman."

Stanley regarded him for a moment, suddenly seeing the little man in a different light. "You were in love with her, weren't you?"

Instead of answering, Wetzel looked past Stanley. "Here comes that cop. The gay one."

Stanley looked over his shoulder and saw Bryce start in their direction, but Tom corralled him before he'd gone more than a few feet.

"Is he?" Stanley asked, surprised. "Gay?"

"I thought you gays had some kind of special radar, for recognizing one another."

"Our gaydar? It doesn't always work. Not for me, at least." He watched Tom and Bryce talking, saw the way Bryce looked at Tom. Yes, of course, Wetzel was right, to some degree anyway. Bryce had the hots for Tom. Well, he could understand that, couldn't he? Anyway, Tom did not seem to be reciprocating the interest. At least, not for the moment.

“So,” he persisted, turning back to Wetzel, “were you in love with Daniella?”

Wetzel made a face. “I’m not sure what I was. I was in something with her, if that makes any sense.”

“Yes, it does,” Stanley said. “But, was this just from afar, so to speak, or did you know her? I don’t mean in the Biblical sense, necessarily, but, well, did you really know her?”

“I thought so. But, this,” he made a hand gesture toward the hidden room beyond them, “apparently not. I knew she had lovers, of course. You had only to look at her... but, someone living here, in secret... I would never have dreamed. She always seemed such a private person. She kept herself apart. From me, at least.”

Stanley regarded the man standing in front of him. Wetzel was little, not even as tall as Stanley, who was only five eight; and Wetzel was in his fifties, certainly, maybe even his sixties, although he was dressed far younger than that. Stanley had observed long ago that nothing made a man of certain years look older than the obvious effort to look young.

Stanley shared, too, the ageism that was even more common in the gay world than in the population at large, and he had the general disapproval that the young feel for the inappropriate feelings of older people. Surely, the prevailing thought went, the time came when one graciously put aside such actions, if not entirely the thought of them. He tried, fleetingly, to imagine this wizened overage beatnik with the beautiful, vital woman he had met the night before, but it was impossible.

Of course, presumably Daniella had found that scenario hard to imagine as well. He was careful, though, not to let these thoughts show. “How do you think she felt about you?”

“Did she love me, do you mean?” Wetzel made a derisive snort. “Who knows? And what would it matter anyway if she did? Feelings... they’re just words, aren’t they? In the end, it’s actions that count.” He looked over his shoulder at the room that had been hidden by a mirror. “Whoever was here, she must have been sleeping with him. She wouldn’t have had him here otherwise.”

Stanley tried to process that in terms of what he knew about Andrew, but what he knew was too little. A terrorist if one accepted Hannibal's inferences? One of the radical set, then. He'd known a few of them in school, at least casually. Oddly, they had never seemed to be much interested in sex—except as a tool, or a weapon. He'd had little things on with a couple of them, nothing you could have called an affair, but more than one night stands.

The experiences had not been unpleasant, but they hadn't been particularly exciting either. Dutiful was how he'd thought of it at the time. There had been two of them, one in his freshman year, and one while he was a sophomore, and neither of them had actually seemed particularly interested in him, or in the fact that he was male.

He had looked back upon their brief athletic scufflings with him as more a protest against society's conventional mores than as any expression of homosexuality. After that, he'd outgrown the interest those two had sparked in him, deciding that political rebels were not really his cup of tea.

Was there some clue in this, though, to tell him what his brother was like? But it was all like wisps of facts rather than the facts themselves. *If* it had been Andrew who was here, *if* he had been fucking Daniella... it was all so insubstantial.

"And," Wetzel said after a pause, as if he'd been considering the subject while Stanley was thinking about it, "she didn't sleep with me. Not because I didn't try, either. So, what does it matter if she did love me or not? She said she did, I can tell you that much. But, that meant nothing, really, did it?"

"If you think of love only in terms of sex."

He looked coldly at Stanley. "Don't you?"

Which Stanley chose not to answer. It came, he thought, uncomfortably close to questions he'd asked himself too often in the past. Questions regarding his relationship with Tom.

"Who was he?" he asked instead. "Do you have any idea?"

"Not a clue. But he wasn't one of the gallery set, I'm sure of that. I'd have noticed. People can't help giving one another

signals, you know. Glances, little touches in passing, secret smiles. People always give themselves away when they've got a thing going. Nothing like that could have escaped my jealous eye."

"Well, she had to meet him somewhere, didn't she? He didn't just materialize out of thin air. So, where could she have met him, if not here? What was her life apart from the gallery?"

He thought about that for a moment. "You know, it's funny that you ask that. A day ago, I'd have said there wasn't any." He shook his head. "Do any of us really know anybody?"

"Perhaps not. Not fully, anyway. Which is the point, I suppose."

He seemed to be thinking that over. "What we're all after, you mean? When we pursue a relationship?"

"Yes. I think that's what we strive for, that completeness of understanding. But I don't think it's very often found, if ever. And if we did find it, how much of the desire would remain?"

Wetzel was too interested in his own personal complaints, though, to care about generalities. "What I don't understand," he said, "is why he killed her. I mean, it would be different if I had."

He thought about what he'd said and slanted a quick look at Stanley. "Oh, I didn't, don't take me wrong. I couldn't have. I could never have hurt Danna. But, what I'm saying is, he'd got what he wanted, hadn't he? I mean, we can pretty much assume he was fucking her. Why else would she have gotten herself embroiled in such a mysterious relationship? If he was hiding here, he must have been hiding from something, mustn't he? From someone, anyway. Which suggests that it was dangerous, to some degree, doesn't it? You'd need a powerful motivation to put yourself at that kind of risk. Danna was shallow, but she wasn't stupid."

"And you think that a sexual relationship would provide that motivation?"

"I think for Danna it would. What else would? Money? If he'd had tons of that, if he could just fly off to, I don't know,

the Bahamas, why would he be hiding here, in a secret room above an art gallery on Bayshore Drive? So, she wasn't after his money, and you can figure he wasn't a big Hollywood producer who was going to make a star of her. No, I think they were fucking. But, that leaves the question, then, if he was fucking her, why would he kill her?"

"Maybe because the sex wasn't what he wanted from her. Or what he needed. Maybe what he needed were those feelings you dismiss. Maybe he just wanted to be loved."

Wetzel looked long and hard into Stanley's face, as if trying to read something there, something inscrutable. "If she was fucking him, she must have loved him. In her own way. She wasn't as cheap as she looked. I think Danna would have to love a man—or convince herself that she did."

Stanley, who'd had the displeasure of seeing her glom onto Tom, whom she probably had not loved but had seemed entirely willing to fuck at a moment's notice, wasn't quite so sure of that, but he let it pass.

"You know," Wetzel said after a moment, "now that I think of it, there was a bar. She liked to go there. I went with her one time but I wasn't comfortable. Mostly, I think, she went alone. It's called Harvey's."

Which did surprise Stanley. "Harvey's. The one in the Castro?"

"Yes. Do you know it?"

"A little. But, it's a gay bar."

"Yes. That's why I wasn't altogether comfortable. I'm not gay. Danna wasn't either, but she was a bit of a fag hag. Half that crowd who was here the other night, at the showing... well, it goes with the territory, doesn't it? Modern art, wealthy queens. I think when she hired me, she thought I was gay." He considered that for a moment. "Maybe I'd have had a better chance with her if I had been."

"So you think that maybe the man who was living here, the hidden man, that he was gay?"

"No. But I think she might have thought that when she met him. It would have been typical of her, to meet a man in a gay bar, a man she thought was gay, and see him as a challenge. He wouldn't have been the first gay man she seduced, or tried to seduce. Look at what happened with your partner."

Stanley felt he ought to say something in response. But what could he say, really? Daniella had tried to seduce Tom, and he had gone with her willingly enough, even if he had fallen out of the race before it reached the end.

"Where did you meet her, anyway?"

Wetzel looked defensive. "Not in a gay bar."

Oddly, Stanley thought Wetzel would not have looked particularly out of place in one, but he thought it not politic at the moment to say that.

Their conversation ended there, however. Mister Hannibal, of Homeland Security, came in the front door of the apartment then. Everyone seemed to snap to some kind of attention.

Hannibal looked around, ignored the movements of Bryce and Carlson in his direction and, spying Stanley, came directly to him.

"What the hell are you playing at, Korski?" he demanded and, with scarcely a pause for breath, nodded his head in Wetzel's direction, with a curt, "Excuse us, please, Mister Korski and I need to talk."

Wetzel's lips tightened, but he nodded and turned away without a word.

"What do you mean, playing at?" Stanley answered.

"That number you called, just a bit ago, on your cell phone. Where did you get that?"

There was a lot for Stanley to take in all at once, and paramount was that his cell phone was bugged. He opened his mouth to protest, to insist this was illegal. But, was it? Homeland had extraordinary powers, that much he knew. And how would he have known if they had gotten a search warrant?

"I ran across it. I was curious. Why?"

"Ran across it? Where? Here?"

"Yes."

Hannibal put his feet apart, in a stance that looked unmistakably combative. Tom came up then, asked, "What's going on?" and found himself ignored by both men.

"Where did you find it?" Hannibal did not ask, he demanded, in such a voice that Stanley abandoned all thoughts of prevarication.

"In the bathroom. On the mirror."

"On the mirror?" Hannibal looked skeptical. "I suppose you're going to tell me it was written in lipstick."

"No, even more mysteriously."

"Show me."

Stanley did. He led the way into the bathroom. Hannibal did not object to Tom's following them. Probably, Stanley thought, he assumed Tom was in on whatever Stanley had been up to. Seeing them, the others trailed after, forming a little cluster just outside the bathroom door.

Stanley used his elbows to turn the hot water at the sink full on, waited while the air clouded up. After a moment, the ghostly numbers began to appear in the mist on the glass.

"Son of bitch," Carlson swore from the doorway where the others had crowded after them. Stanley glanced in that direction, saw that Bryce wore a pained expression, as if he had been personally betrayed—which, Stanley supposed with a twinge of guilt, perhaps he had.

"It's an old kid's trick," Stanley said. "The number..."

But Hannibal had used the sleeve of his jacket to hastily wipe the mirror clean before the number had become altogether visible. "Everyone," he said, turning to face the little group gathered at the doorway, "forget you saw that. You," he pointed a finger at Bryce, perhaps instinctively recognizing him as the one in charge, "get everybody downstairs. Keep them there. And don't let anybody mess around with anything. My men will be doing a complete search, starting here."

Bryce shooed the others in the direction of the stairs that led down to the gallery below, but when Stanley would have followed them, Hannibal blocked his way.

"So, having found this number, you called it. You didn't share it with the Inspectors from SFPD?"

"I didn't know that it was of any importance," Stanley said, but Hannibal's look of derision told him he hadn't bought that feeble excuse. "Is it?"

"You know damn well it was."

Which, of course, Stanley did know, and he thought he knew why, also. "But it's been disconnected," he said. "I got an out of service message."

"Now, yes. If you'd called me as soon as you found it, I might have..."

"Or might not," Tom said. He had ignored Bryce's efforts to herd him below with the others, had come back to the bathroom door. "The man you're searching for has proven himself intelligent and resourceful. Once he'd killed Daniella Bentham..."

"Do we know that he did?" Hannibal asked.

"I think it's a good guess, at this stage. And, he must have known she knew that phone number. He wouldn't take a chance that she hadn't written it down or passed it on to someone else, it seems to me. So, I suspect it was disconnected long before Stanley came across it."

Hannibal scowled from one to the other. "I could have you both taken into custody if I wanted."

"A nice vacation somewhere?" Tom said, eyebrow raised. "Guantanamo has been closed."

"There's other places. Believe me, you wouldn't like them any better."

"Come off it," Tom said, unintimidated. "We all know this is about Stanley's brother. That was his phone number, wasn't it? Andrew Korski's?"

Hannibal chose not to answer that question. "I'm giving you fair warning," he said. "Keep out." Again, he looked a stony glare from one to other. "What else have you uncovered with your inappropriate snooping?"

"Nothing," Tom said, which gave Stanley a moment to compose his face. He was not, as Tom had pointed out more than once, a very convincing liar, but by the time Hannibal had looked back at him, he'd managed to make his expression bland.

"And there's nothing more either of you want to tell me?" Hannibal asked.

Putting it that way left Stanley to shake his head in innocence. Because, no, there wasn't anything else he *wanted* to tell the Homeland investigator, not at the moment, anyway.

Hannibal snorted like an angry bull. "Get out of here, both of you," he said. "And stay out of my hair, or you'll be dropping out of sight somewhere, I give you my word."

"And don't go anywhere I can't find you," he added as they started down the stairs to the gallery.

"I don't know where that would be," Stanley said in a stage whisper, and when they had reached the bottom of the stairs, in a lower voice, "he has my cell phone tapped."

"I would have made that a safe bet," Tom said. "Mine too, most likely. Bryce and Carlson were just whistling in the wind, Stanley, but to Hannibal, you and I are suspects of some kind. Best keep that in mind."

"Absolutely," Stanley agreed.



Not until they were on the street outside of the gallery did Stanley say, "We're going out tonight. To the Castro."

"Is there a reason why?"

Stanley batted his eyelashes in mock innocence. "I thought it would be nice to have a drink out for a change. Don't you?"

Tom gave him a doubtful look. "Did you have some place in mind? Some particular place?"

“Have you ever been to Harvey’s?”

“The one on Eighteenth Street? I’ve seen it. I’ve never been inside the place. Why? What’s there?”

“Maybe nothing. Or, call it detective’s curiosity.”

“We’re not supposed to be detecting. You heard what Hannibal said.”

“But, detectives are what we are, right? Anyway, it’s nothing more than curiosity. I haven’t been in that place for ages. I’m just curious to see how it’s doing. I don’t see how Mister Hannibal could object to that.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

So, then, Andrew thought, he must consider Stanley. The difficulty was, his feelings for his brother were so ambiguous that they might have related to two entirely different people.

He felt an inexplicable tenderness toward him—not love, how could that be? He'd never actually known him, and yet, they shared a blood, and that tied them together in a way more fully than love, more fully even than a shared life might have done; perhaps more fully because it was pure, unsullied by conflict, boyish quarrels, competing maleness, those familial things that so often got in the way. If family loves were strong, family bitterness could be stronger still, sibling rivalries could fester and grow over a lifetime shared. They, on the other hand, had no shared lifetime. They would always be what they were—brothers, pure and simple. Brothers in blood.

At the same time, though, he could not help resenting Stanley, with a resentment so strong that it boiled over into something very like hate. That life Stanley had lived, the happiness that he had known, in which he, Andrew, had had no part, of which he had been so utterly deprived. As he had been deprived of family. Neither one nor the other, as it had turned out; not the original, and not its replacement.

“She wasn’t your mother.” He remembered the day Julio—whom he had once called “father”—told him that, harshly, almost glad-seeming. It was the day they’d buried her in the ground. After she had killed herself, slashed her wrists, died bleeding in the bathtub.

He couldn’t blame Julio for that. Even then, as a boy, he could see that she was ill, seriously ill. She’d tried at least twice before, that he knew of, to take her own life; Julio had tolerated that. Perhaps he had even hoped that she would one day succeed—as she finally had.

“She wasn’t your mother.”

Andrew was appropriately astonished by the announcement—and at the same time, he wasn't, not as much as he ought to have been. It seemed as if something inside him had always known this, that the wild-eyed woman given to fits of hysteria wasn't the one to whom he belonged in that way that a son always and inevitably belonged to his mother. Even in hysteria, a mother would recognize her son, wouldn't she? But, often, she hadn't, had looked at him as at a stranger, a stranger who, in some inexplicable way, she blamed for her unhappiness.

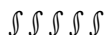
He'd never told anyone—who could he have told?—of his last, horrible moments in Delia's company. She'd been in her room for a day, two perhaps, in one of her "states"; he was used to them. They were just a part of what she was.

He was asleep in his bedroom when the opening of the door woke him. "Mother?" he'd said into the darkness. There was no answer, but in the faint light from the hallway he saw her edge closer to the bed. Something about her movement, some instinct, alarmed him. He reached to switch on the bedside light.

She was halfway across the room, and in her hand she held a large kitchen knife, held it before her. She blinked in the sudden light, looked down at it, and looked at him, and he knew in an instant that she had come to kill him. And he saw too, in her wide eyes, something very like repugnance. Even then, fleetingly, he wondered what could he have done to make her hate him so?

For a long moment they had remained frozen in place, like a tableau in the school Christmas pageant. Then, she blinked, looked again at the knife in confusion, and, turning, dashed from the room.

He never saw her again. She tried once again that same night to kill herself. This time, she succeeded.



"Who was she, then?" he asked Julio.

"She? You mean, Delia?"

Which he'd thought a stupid question. What did Delia matter now? What had she to do with anything? If she wasn't who he had believed her to be all these years, then, surely, she was nothing.

"My mother? My real mother?"

"The woman who gave you birth? Her name was Martha. Martha Korski. That was her name, anyway. As to who she was, she was nobody. A dumb Pollock from Iowa."

"But, how..."

"She gave you away. Gave you to Delia. When you were a baby."

He had thought about that for a long, agonizing moment—an eternity, it seemed. If she, Delia, were not his mother, then..."You're not my father." A statement, not a question.

"Christ, no." Said with what sounded like relief. After a moment, he added, cruelly, "He didn't want you either, your father. Peter Korski, his name was. A dumb putz. A two-bit drug dealer. They gave you away, I told you. It was part of a drug deal. You were part of the payment, is all."

He fought not to show the pain this caused him. Julio, no longer his father, wasn't entitled to that pain. What was unsaid was nonetheless inescapable. Julio hadn't wanted him either.

He thought there ought to be questions to ask about that drug deal, the one in which he had been handed across as payment, but what could be added to that? It said everything, didn't it?

Instead, he asked, "So that was my name? Korski? Korski what?"

"Andrew. She left that the same, Delia did, in case you remembered. I said that was crazy, you were just a baby, but she said, babies remember things, the way you do with dreams." He thought about what he'd said. "Course, she was crazy. I should have figured that out sooner."

So, he was Andrew Korski. Not, as he'd grown up believing, Andrew Casselnova.

"I don't know who I am," he said.

Julio snorted his derision. "What? Because the name's wrong? What does it matter? It's just something to call yourself. You're not somebody different from what you were a minute or two ago." Which, his tone seemed to imply, wasn't much.

He was somebody different, though. Before the revelation, he might have pretended that he was loved. Not by Julio, he knew that, even before he knew that Julio wasn't his father. But, his mother, crazy or not—he had managed throughout his childhood to cling to the belief that some maternal affection lay buried in the twisted circuits of her mind. Now, he was robbed even of that.

Had he loved her? Perhaps his need for her love was a kind of love on his part. Wasn't that what love was, a large part of it, anyway, the needing, the wanting? How was he to know, however, who'd never had the experience of it? All he knew of love was its lack. Worse, even, its opposite.

Which, ultimately, was what he had to give in return. Bereft of love, he had become an expert at the semblance of it. He was, at least, a convincing lover. It was a gift that he gave to women, who took it from him gladly, eagerly, never dreaming that the package under those careful wrappings was empty.

Daniella Bentham had bought the package without question. He had no regrets over killing her. He never regretted. Perhaps, earlier, in those first giddy days, giddy for her, when she had looked at him with such childlike adoration, was so obviously, so totally smitten, perhaps he might have cared a bit more then, although he still would not have regretted. That just wasn't his nature.

Her feelings had changed, of course, he'd watched them change in her face, in her eyes when she looked at him. Wariness, first, and in time, suspicion, even a touch of fear. He had known at what point in time she became dangerous to him; had known for a long while now, that he would have to kill her.

Even if she hadn't become a threat to him, and that was inevitable, the truth was, she had been too needy, too eager; just as she had been too determinedly chic. And, really, the Chagall

print had told him everything about her, that first night, when he'd gone to her apartment with her. Chagall was for shopgirls.

She was not the first woman he had killed, some with words, some with his hands. It was what he owed to women, to all women, for what he'd been given. They had killed him, those two women he might have called mother and now never could, killed something essential within him that could never be resurrected. He had spent his life since paying them back, through their surrogate sisters.

He had always known, though, since that fateful conversation with Julio, one fundamental truth. An orphan had no need to give real love, because an orphan could not be loved. And, he was an orphan, in the purest sense, with not even a name to which he was entitled. Except for that old one. That, Andrew Korski, was who he had been born. That was the name he should call himself.

Which, afterward, he had. Not openly, because in a sense that was like admitting his shame, that his parents hadn't wanted him, that even as a baby he had already been unsatisfactory. But, inside, privately, he became Andrew Korski.

He left the next night, in the middle of the night, though not for a minute did he suppose that Julio would try to prevent his leaving. He was almost certainly as glad to be rid of the boy who wasn't, after all, his son, as the no-longer son was to be leaving a place where he could never again feel, even as uncertainly as he always had, that he belonged. Up to that point in Julio's home—for it had been Julio's, never Delia's, and certainly never *his* home, they had both been nothing more than unwelcome guests in it—life up till that point had been unhappy. After this, he knew that to stay there would be unendurable.

He had escaped that, by dint of hard work and ruthless cunning and a stony indifference to the wants or feelings of others. What he hadn't escaped from was that distant Iowa, an Iowa he had never seen and yet that occupied the place of birth in his heart, the place from which he had come, and which he, the Andrew Korski he'd been born, had never left.

Nor had he escaped from those people, Peter Korski and his wife, Martha. He thought of them incessantly, of her especially. Over and over in his mind he tried to play out that last scene together, when she had given him away to strangers. Had she resisted, even for a moment? Had she looked down at his infant face with—not with love, that was beyond his imagination—regret, at least? Had he, if only for a second, truly been her son? Had they been his parents, however poorly, however fleetingly?

He had thought often that he would go back one day to claim them, to make them claim him. First, though, he had to find himself, *some* self, so there would be something for them to claim. And by the time he had, had found the field in which he felt he best belonged—destroying people's lives, robbing them of their happiness, which was the closest to happiness he'd found for himself—they were gone and it was too late for him to do any more than adopt the name they had given him.

It was the name that had allowed him to find them. He'd searched, endlessly; after all, it wasn't a terribly common name. So, when the name Martha Korski had come up in a funeral notice, and he'd seen the name of her husband, Peter Korski, listed among the survivors, he knew that he had found them.

What had surprised him, though, had been the mention of surviving children, a son and a daughter. He'd always imagined what it would have been like to have a brother, and now, suddenly, he had one; not the dream brother of his childish fantasies, but a flesh and blood sibling. The daughter he cared nothing about. Women were for one purpose only, and sisters needn't apply. But Stanley... Stanley Korski. He might almost have fallen instantly in love with him, with his name, at least, and from the first moment when he'd seen the name in the newspaper printout, he'd begun to imagine what it would be like to know one another.

That was when he had adopted the name, Andrew Korski, for his own. There was no one then to know the difference, to know the stigma it symbolized.

Or hadn't been, until Homeland Security had somehow discovered the name. One carelessly asked question, passed on discreetly to him, and he had known at once who had asked it.

If not exactly who, what kind of whom. No one else would be asking. Certainly not his brother, Stanley, nor his sister, Irene, who almost certainly had known nothing of his existence. Not his mother, because she was dead. And not his father, because it took little investigation to ascertain that he was living in a rest home in Petaluma, a vegetable, without memory, without the wits to question. It had taken only one brief, clandestine visit, to confirm that.

Which left it, then, police, of one sort or another. Which was all that was needed for him to know that it was time for him to vanish. Not just carefully extricate himself, either, from the plans he and his cohorts had been formulating, plans that were in a sense only an expansion of the havoc he had all along been wreaking in individual lives, women's lives, mostly. All those bridges to blow up, lives to be taken in large numbers, society to be shaken out of complacency and into uncertainty.

He hadn't time now for their fiendishly sophomoric plans. No, he had to disappear, at once, before the askers of the question got their answer. And, as it turned out, he had managed to vanish none too soon, mere hours before their bloody fates had befallen his less careful associates.

Once again, he had survived, by virtue of some luck, but mostly through his own cleverness and quickness of action. The others had died. They would tell no one what they knew about him, which was little enough. He had the sense, too, to keep himself to himself. No one got more of him, ever, than bits and pieces, and they were the parts most easily and safely shed.

Homeland had the name, though, the sacred name. And now, they had Stanley. Who didn't know him, not on the surface, at least. Still, who knew what Stanley did know, that he didn't know he knew? What might they have talked of, he and his mother, he and his father; or, father and mother together, overheard by a little boy who would barely have the conversations in memories long buried, but still capable of surfacing, if only in his dreams.

Dreams that could prove deadly, for Andrew.

For the longest time, he had found himself adrift, not sure from what he had escaped, nor to what he was going. Now, at last, he had his destination, and somewhere inside himself he felt as if he had always known it, known that it was Stanley for whom he had been seeking.

Which had brought him here, to the Castro. Not that he expected to find Stanley here. What he needed, however, now that Daniella was removed from the picture, was a place to stay while he formulated his plans. He already had a hidey-hole, in fact, had prepared that while he was still at Danna's—a lesson he'd learned early, when he had first realized that his status in life was outside the laws that governed ordinary people. Always have somewhere to go, some place safe.

That place he'd prepared, however, was too close to Bentham Gallery. Dangerous, while the police were doing their investigation. Despite all the precautions he'd taken with Daniella, someone might have seen him coming and going with her, might see him again, and remember her companion.

In time, in only a few days, probably, the attention of the police, of Homeland, would be directed elsewhere. Probably Bentham Gallery would be closed, at least temporarily. There was nothing else within a block or so of his nearby lair, and it was not an area that brought in foot traffic. His nearby lair would once again be safe to use, and he had a particular use already planned for it, had already furnished it for what he intended.

In the meantime, however, he needed a temporary stopping place. "The foxes have their holes," as the Bible put it, "and the birds their nests, but I have nowhere to lay my head."

Easily remedied, however. He knew from past experience, Castro Street was a good place to start searching for such a haven. A good searching place, certainly, for a man like himself—straight, good looking, eminently desirable to the habitués here, the kind of male that queens tended to get all goggle-eyed over. If he'd cared for male lovers, he could have had them by the dozens, he knew that.

It wasn't male sex that he wanted, however. He was aware that sex would be part of the price he would have to pay, and he would perform as necessary, but that was only a down payment on far more important things. It just happened to be a coin that he had in excess, and that he knew how to spend.

Cruising the Castro on a Saturday night was a calculated risk, albeit not a very great one. There was always the possibility that he might run into Stanley, but, even if he did, it would be only by the greatest leap of consciousness that Stanley would even guess who he was, even give him a second glance.

As for Homeland, what did they know of him, more than just a name? There were no pictures on file, he was confident of that. Not, in any case, of Andrew Korski, and who would ever link pictures of little Andrew Casselnova, who'd vanished a more than a decade ago, with Andrew Korski, vanished long before? Julio, perhaps, but Julio wasn't likely to go to the authorities, and there was no reason for them to associate the name with Julio, and seek him out. And, why would Homeland be looking for him here, on Castro Street, of all places? Hiding among the peacocks.

No, the only risk was Stanley's friend, Tom Danzel. And his reading of Danzel told him that he was unlikely to be strolling around here either. Since they had settled into some kind of domesticity, though Andrew wasn't altogether clear on what kind it was, and wasn't happy with what he suspected, Stanley and Danzel had mostly foregone The Castro's clubs. Anyway, Danzel had only seen him once, and very briefly, at the father's funeral.

Of course, Danzel was an experienced detective, almost certainly with a detective's eye for details, for faces, particularly. Brief though the glimpse had been, he felt sure that Danzel would remember his. Which meant that Danzel was a threat to him, one that must be eliminated, and before any great time had elapsed.

Reasonably, he knew that should be his first goal—but his thoughts were far more preoccupied with Stanley, almost to the point of obsession. Tom Danzel, moreover, was dangerous,

physically and mentally; his removal would have to be carefully planned and managed.

His instincts told him, too, that the way to reach Tom Danzel was through Stanley. So, again, he came back to Stanley; but there was little likelihood that he would encounter either of them here, tonight.

The streets were crowded with cars, the sidewalks with the neighborhood's gaudy flotsam, who shoved in and out of the many bars, leaking loud music onto the sidewalks. It was a part of the city that he disliked, not only because of his distaste for things homosexual.

It was a city unto itself, and, really, it was what one saw it to be. Some came for the gay scene, of course, but others because it was a dining destination; and some were here to shop in the clever stores, where they bought pasta in the form of penises, or women's breasts, clever greeting cards, sometimes genuinely interesting jewelry or gift items. He had enjoyed shopping here with Daniella, had taken a certain pleasure in finding the perfect accessory to complement her rather unique beauty. Until she'd grown tiresome—and expendable.

For him, though, the miasma of lust that hung over the neighborhood was all-pervading. It stunk in his nostrils, but it smelled too of safety. Two sides to everything. For tonight, he had his safety to think of. There were ways of expunging the stink when he got to it.

As, in due time, he would.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

For Toby Halderman, Saturday night in the Castro was a double-edged sword. It got him out of his scruffy apartment. For a few hours after work, he could forget how lonely it was, could lose himself in the noise and laughter and the gaiety.

Of course, when he went home to those shabby rooms, they would be all the lonelier for what he left behind when he closed the door after himself. At least, though, he would be anesthetized.

“Forget the Shadow,” he told people, “the secret to invisibility is to get older and walk into a gay bar. They can’t see you at all, they look right through you.”

Toby was on the wrong side of fifty, barely on the right side of sixty, if sixty had a right side, which he thought it did not in the gay world. There had been a time when he could nurse one drink until someone gave him the eye—most nights it only took the one drink before he picked somebody up.

That was years ago, however. Now, the only thing he picked up was another drink. Alcohol was the gift of the gods to short, aging gays, who walked with a cane and a limp, the invisible men that everyone overlooked in the bars and the pickup spots; though he couldn’t help sometimes thinking, if the gods were handing out presents, they might have done better to preserve his youth and forget the consolation. Surely that would have been kinder in the long run.

It was half past eleven, and Castro Street and its bars were already jumping, and he was well on his way to being anesthetized. He’d stopped in a half dozen places, had a couple of drinks at The Edge, one at The Midnight Sun, leaving before he even finished that when a glance around told him that he was a good thirty years older than anyone else there. After that, three drinks in Moby Dick’s, only because a trio of young gay men standing nearby were discussing old movies, a subject on which he considered himself knowledgeable, and he lingered,

trying to think of a way to invite himself into their conversation, perhaps make a new friend or two—he had no hopes of finding someone to take home with him; that never happened, unless he found a hustler who worked cheap; but, he would have enjoyed some companionable chat.

He waited too long, however, to make a conversational gambit, had just gotten himself a third drink, when the trio finished theirs and left, entirely oblivious to the fact that he had been standing nearby.

He left soon after them, not so soon, however, that they might imagine he was following them. He was altogether aware of the fact that he was at an age where it was incredibly easy to make a fool of oneself.

By the time he came outside, his trio of movie buffs had already vanished. The Castro was in its full Saturday night, glamorously ugly mode. He walked up Eighteenth Street, ignored Harvey's, which was too group oriented. Badlands, he thought, was more like it.

He went in, got a cosmopolitan at the bar, made a little joke with the bartender, who apparently did not hear him and was gone in an instant to the next customer.

Toby left an overly generous tip, took the cosmopolitan, and found an uncrowded place to stand along one wall. He looked the crowd over surreptitiously, not wanting to appear as if he were cruising.

It was a predictably good looking crowd. Too good looking, perhaps, for his purposes. All these beautiful young men, they wouldn't welcome his company. They were interested only in their own kind. It wasn't in fact company that they were looking for at all, and what else did he have to offer any of them? In fairy tales, Beauty might end up with the Beast; in real life, she did not go to the Castro on a Saturday night looking for him.

His eyes lingered for just a second or two upon the tall man by the window. Jeans and leather jacket, windblown sandy hair, model perfect good looks. Something more, too, a kind of raw animal magnetism that seemed to shimmer in the air around him. Toby's masturbatory fantasies come to life, really. How

many lonely nights had he imagined himself with just such a man.

For just a fraction of one of those seconds, their eyes met. Toby dropped his immediately, before the stranger could express his scorn. But now the fantasies, given the slightest of invitations, marched in insistently, would not be denied. In his mind, he saw the stranger, his trousers open, himself kneeling before them, heard words of lustful encouragement whispered above him.

Fantasies. Dreams. All that was left to the aging queen.



“What makes you think that Daniella met Andrew in a gay bar?” Tom asked. “Doesn’t that seem a little unlikely?”

“Wetzel said she didn’t go out much. And he said she was a fag hag. She liked to hang out with gay boys.”

“Okay, if we’re going to make the rounds, what about here?” They were passing the Badlands. He slowed his steps, but Stanley hardly paused. “No. Harvey’s. That’s where Wetzel said she liked to hang out.”

They went down the block, toward Harvey’s.



It was only by the merest chance that Andrew looked out through the bar’s plate glass window in time to see Stanley and his friend Danzel pass by on the sidewalk outside. For a brief moment, they glanced in his direction. Andrew shrank away to the side, turned his head and raised his beer, so that they would not see his face directly, but he could still watch them from the very corner of his eye.

He half feared they were going to come inside and was already thinking how he could avoid a face to face encounter with Danzel. For a moment, in fact, they appeared to be considering coming in, but Stanley said something, pointed, and began to walk south, in the direction of Harvey’s. Danzel hesitated for only a second or two, shrugged, and went after him.

Andrew breathed a sigh of relief, but time had become important now. They might come back. It would not do to run into Danzel. The detective was too likely to remember him. When next he encountered Danzel, it would be on his terms, and for one purpose only. He wasn't yet prepared for that, though.

He looked around the bar again, his eyes coming back to the older man with the cane, standing alone at the far wall, sipping one of those ridiculous pink drinks that fairies were overly fond of. And he was wearing nursing scrubs, had apparently come directly from work. So much the better.

Their eyes met. Andrew smiled. He was altogether conscious of the effect of his smile.



Toby couldn't help himself. He looked again—and found the stranger staring at him boldly. Again, their eyes met. This time, his eyes held Toby's. The stranger nodded, as if confirming some message that had passed between them, and smiled ever so faintly, the merest lifting of one corner of lips so full and dark they looked on the verge of bursting into blood, lips that Toby had imagined pressing against his.

Surely the smile was meant for someone else, wasn't it? Toby looked to his right, and to his left, and back again at the stranger. He was bewildered. Men like this didn't look at him this way, hadn't in twenty years, thirty, didn't smile unless it was in mockery. His legs felt weak. What should he do? No power on earth could give him the courage to cross the few feet that separated them, speak words to this demi-god, but neither could he stand here ignoring him, as if in rebuff.

The problem was solved for him in the most unlikely manner. The man took a long swig from his beer, set the bottle aside, and strolled to where Toby was standing. He stopped just in front of him, so close that Toby was sure he could feel his body heat, and said, "Hi."

Toby opened his mouth to respond, to say something, anything, but no words came out. An unfamiliar stirring in his loins only added to his confusion. He stared into wide brown

eyes, impossibly long lashed. A smile tugged at both corners of the stranger's mouth.

"Cat got your tongue?"

"No. Yes," Toby stammered. "I... hello." Which, he thought, would surely kill any interest.

To his even greater surprise, the man laughed. "Good. I hate chatterboxes."

"You do? Me too," Toby said, though he could be a real chatterbox himself at times. Not at times like these. Or, so far as he knew—he couldn't recall ever having a time like this before. Even in the old days, he would not have dreamed of actually making a connection with a man like this. Too far above his station, he would have said, even when he was young.

Brown eyes appraised him for a long moment, eyes so wide and moist that they were almost calf-like, eyes that seem to draw Toby into their depths. "Can I get you another drink?"

"No. I'm fine." Toby finished the cosmo in one long swallow.

"My name is Andrew." When Toby said nothing, he added, "What's yours?"

"Toby."

"What do you do, Toby?"

"Do you mean...?" he started to say, sexually, but the word stuck in his throat.

The warm brown eyes sparkled fleetingly, as if he guessed what Toby had been about to say. "I mean, for a living."

"Oh. I'm a nurse." A nod that might have been approval. But he was wearing scrubs, Toby thought, had come from work without changing. His line of work should have been apparent or, maybe he was just making conversation. "You?"

A shrug that could have meant anything, or nothing. Silence descended. Toby lifted his glass, realized it was empty, and looked for someplace to set it, but there was nothing conveniently nearby. He held it awkwardly in front of himself and looked down at the floor, expecting this man—Andrew,

had he said?—to move along now, go in search of someone more up to his standards. Someone, certainly, more conversationally adept.

Andrew surprised him yet again by asking, “You live alone, Toby?”

“Yes.”

“No jealous boyfriends likely to pop in? If we go to your place, I mean?”

“No.” *If we go to your place?* As if he was actually contemplating it.

“Is it very far?”

“No. It’s not quite three blocks. But...”

“But?” His look was challenging. He seemed to be finding the scene amusing, though it was excruciating for Toby.

“Did you mean...?” Toby managed to stammer, and couldn’t get the rest out. He simply could not imagine that this beautiful exemplar of manhood meant what it sounded like he meant.

In the next minute, though, Andrew made his meaning clear. “Let’s go,” he said, and nodded his head in the direction of the door.

“To my place?”

“Well, I could fuck you in the park up the street, Collingwood, isn’t it? But that’s kind of risky, I should think. And your place will be more comfortable, won’t it?”

“Yes.”

Andrew went to where he had been standing earlier, picked up a gym bag from the floor. Toby hadn’t noticed that before, but there was nothing unusual about that. Men often came to the bars from their gym work outs. Or, he sometimes thought, some of them just liked to show off their gym bags, whether they had actually worked out or not; *Look at me. I work out.*

Andrew turned toward the door. Still, Toby hesitated. He had never taken anyone to his place. Well, there had been a dearth of opportunities, of course, but even in the old days,

when he had been active, he hadn't taken them to his place. It was dangerous then, still was, from what he read in the paper.

In his day, they had called those burly hustlers rough trade, a label he'd always thought frighteningly appropriate. What they traded for the one-sided and rarely satisfactory sex they offered was often rough indeed. It had been, all in all, safer to find some semi-public place, often the very park Andrew had mentioned earlier, where the act could be performed in shadows, but where there were others near enough that a cry for help might be heard, if things got ugly afterward. As they often did.

Surely, though, this man was not one of those. He had an authoritative air about him, but it was not the bossy disdain of the cheap, macho hustler, it was more an air of confidence—in his masculinity, in his desirability. Certainly, he had the look, the voice, the manners of a gentleman.

A dabbler, Toby suddenly thought—straight, but for whatever reason curious to try it out with a male; and, that being the case, an older man was perhaps the best choice. Most gay men ran into them once or twice. Sometimes it was a man who had become emotionally involved with a gay male friend, and who was curious to know whether he could perform with a male, before he tried it on with the friend in question, afraid if it proved impossible that the friendship would end as well with the sexual disaster.

Well, if that was the case here, who was he to complain, Toby asked himself. Why look a gift elephant in the tusk, as his friend Willard was fond of saying.

Andrew looked back over his shoulder at him. "Coming?"

"Yes," Toby said. He followed him out of the bar.



There was nothing to be seen at Harvey's, nothing more than the usual Saturday night crowd—here, mostly groups or couples having a late dinner. Harvey's wasn't a pickup bar.

Stanley looked around, disappointed, without being quite sure why. What had he expected to find, his brother Andrew,

sitting at the bar, waiting to welcome him? He wouldn't have recognized him anyway, even if he had been.

Still, the place felt right. It was exactly the sort of place that Daniella Bentham might have met and picked up a man, straight, but disguising himself as gay. Such an event would have been far more conspicuous in one of the more blatant make out spots, but here, several of the groups this particular evening were mixed sexes, and one female, lesbian, he thought, sat alone at the bar.

Nobody would have questioned Daniella's right to be here. In some of the other bars, unless she had come in with a group of males, she'd have stood out like a sore thumb, might even have gotten a cool reception. And most of those other bars, people didn't go in groups. Pairs, sometimes, but they drew mostly singles.

"Satisfied?" Tom asked. He was never comfortable in gay bars, was all too aware of the looks he got from the other patrons. If he'd been looking for action... but he wasn't. Stanley was all the man he needed. Maybe more than he needed, but he was still wrestling with that issue.

"I guess." Stanley put his Tangueray and tonic aside practically untouched.

"So, now? Home?"

"I suppose so. Oh, what the hell, as long as we're out, let's check out a couple more places. It can't hurt."

"What are we checking them for? Do you honestly think we're going to find your brother in one of them?"

"It could happen. I think Daniella may have found him in one."

Tom sighed and finished off his beer. "Okay. The Badlands is just up the street. And there's another one on the corner, isn't there?"

"The Edge."

"Fine. And that's the edge of my limit."

"Fair enough. The Badlands, then, and The Edge."

"And after that, home again."

"Jiggedy Jig."

They came outside to discover that a light drizzle had begun to fall. "Oh, maybe we should help her," Stanley said, looking in the direction of the intersection. A young mother was struggling to get across the street with a little boy at one hand and a stroller in the other.

Stanley took a step in that direction, but two men had stopped alongside her, and one of them, exchanging words with the mother, began to push the stroller across the street for her.

Stanley shrugged and they started instead up the street in the direction of The Badlands.

"There's something I don't understand," Tom said. "Why Andrew's interest in you? What connection could he possibly see to a brother he never met, probably never knew existed?"

"Maybe he knew. Just because I didn't, doesn't mean he didn't. He might have grown up knowing all about me. What I don't understand, is, how he vanished, why he wasn't right there, in the house with Irene and me?"

"Kidnapped, maybe?"

"Maybe. But, you'd think that would be the sort of thing our parents would have mentioned. Why the silence?"

"Maybe Hannibal had it right, the baby died and is buried somewhere, and the locals just didn't find the grave."

"No, we know Andrew is out there, somewhere."

Tom grunted. "Which leaves the question—what is his interest in you?"

Stanley thought for a moment. "There's an essay by Lamb, it's called, 'Dream Children,' and it's about the children he never had—he never married."

"You think he was queer?"

"He might have been. I don't think I've ever read one way or the other. Anyway, that essay, I only remember it vaguely, I don't think I liked it very much, to be honest. All about ghostly children, wanting stories of the families they never had, stories

about their pretty dead mother. ‘We are nothing,’ one of them says, ‘less than nothing, only dreams, only what might have been.’“

“So, you’re saying, what? Andrew wants you to tell him stories about his mother?”

“It’s possible, isn’t it? Somehow, they were parted. He was with her, and then he wasn’t. Losing your mother, well, he must wonder. He must have dreams.”

Tom thought about that. “Not very pleasant ones, I wouldn’t think.”

“No, I don’t think so either.”



A reluctant rain had begun to fall, seeming not at all to dampen the spirits of the Castro crowd—now more than before a gay crowd, the shoppers and the diners having finished their business and gone home or back to other neighborhoods.

Toby walked fast, not so much because of the rain but because he was afraid the man beside him might yet change his mind. After all, he had only to look to the right or the left to see companions more appropriate.

Andrew paid attention to no one, however, except a young mother trying to cross the street at Eighteenth and Castro, piloting a stroller with one hand and holding a little boy with the other. Andrew paused, asked politely, and pushed the stroller across for her; took the time, even, to kneel down and exchange friendly words with the little boy.

“I love children,” was all he said afterward, which Toby took to be a good sign. Bad people, hustlers, rough trade, didn’t go out of their way to help strangers, didn’t make conversations with little boys. So he need have no fears on that score.

Nevertheless, Toby had chafed at the delay, fearful that Andrew might yet vanish into the Castro throngs. He was still there, however, when they reached the door to the stairs that led up to Toby’s apartment. Toby had never been more aware of the dinginess of those stairs—the smell of stale grease and

burned food that drifted up from the coffee shop below, the stains on the wall, the torn and patched linoleum.

He led the way upward, embarrassed, half expecting to hear the footsteps behind him pause, begin to descend again. He wished just this once he'd left his cane at home, was altogether too conscious of its thump, thump, thump as he ascended. Really, though, he couldn't walk more than a block or two without it before the pain in his knee became excruciating.

When a hand reached upward and gave his bottom a caressing pat, he was so startled he almost dropped the cane, might have fallen, in fact, if the hand hadn't lingered on his rear to steady him.

"Nice buns," the voice behind him said.

It so electrified Toby, he all but leaped the next step. Did, in fact, stumble. Behind him, Andrew chuckled.

"Nervous?" Andrew asked.

"Yes."

"Don't be. I'll be in charge." Andrew's voice was a whisper, sibilant, promising; it slid up the stairs, twisted about Toby like a snake. "That's how I like it. I'm a take-control kind of man. Should I have told you that before, perhaps? But, you'll like it that way, too, won't you, my running the show for us? That's what turns me on. And, you'll want to please me, won't you? I got that impression. Was I right?"

"Yes." What else could he say? He still could not quite grasp that they were here, that this man was climbing the stairs with him. He couldn't quite imagine why, but it was past the point now where reason might have questioned his good fortune. The gods had been kind to him, perhaps. One of those prayers of his, oft muttered, but rarely in expectation.

There were some who liked older men, he'd heard of them. Older queens liked to talk about them, though he'd always wondered if maybe they didn't exist except solely in wishful imaginations. Well, it seemed after all they did exist. One specimen did exist, in any case, and it was his great good

fortune to have crossed paths with that unique specimen tonight.

No, he would do nothing to dash his miraculous good fortune. He would let Andrew take control, if that was what he liked, do whatever he chose. Certainly, Toby himself was in no condition, flustered as he was, to take any kind of control. Anyway, Andrew was right in his assessment, it would be a pleasure to please him. He fervently wanted to make him glad, whatever that might entail.

He let them into the apartment, paused and looked around as if he had never seen this room before, embarrassed at how tawdry and unattractive it looked: the lumpy sofa with its cheap slipcover, the cigarette scarred table in the center of the room and the mismatched chairs around it, the plastic curtains at the windows. The abode of an old auntie, was what it looked like, an old auntie living on the cheap.

"Home sweet home," he said with a nervous laugh and, when Andrew said nothing, added, "It's not much."

"It's fine," Andrew said, dismissing the room with no more than a quick glance. He looked at Toby instead, gave him one of those tight-lipped smiles. "Actually, I didn't come for the décor."

"Oh." Toby felt tongue tied and helpless. This was a new role for him, playing host to a—a what? A trick, he supposed, but somehow the word didn't seem to fit anyone quite so splendid as the man standing in front of him, looking oddly amused, though Toby wasn't sure just what he found so amusing. *Me? But he was the one who picked me up, wasn't he?*

"The bathroom's just through there," Toby managed to stammer, pointing, "and the bedroom..."

"We don't need the bedroom. This is fine. The couch will do. I think couches are sexy." Andrew slipped off his leather jacket. There was a gun tucked down into the waistband of his jeans. He took it out and laid it aside on a lamp table.

"Oh," Toby said, alarmed. His mouth formed a wide circle.

Andrew looked at him and at the revolver. "It's just a gun. Does it bother you? I can put it in my gym bag."

"No. It's just... are you some kind of policeman?"

"I suppose you could say that." That smile again.

"You..." Toby thought of various possibilities, settled on the one that went with his age, with the time in which he had been younger. In those days, before all the gay liberation business, gay men often had as much to fear from police officers as they did from rough trade. "You're not going to arrest me, are you?"

Andrew seemed to find that amusing as well. "Arrest you? I picked you up, didn't I? Why would I arrest you?"

"Oh." Toby seemed to be saying that a lot. This was all so unfamiliar. He'd never felt such a fool. "The bathroom," he said again, pointing, "Do you want...?"

"I want to fuck," Andrew said. "Don't you?"

Toby reddened, but he bobbed his head up and down fervently. "Yes. Yes, I do." He stared open-mouthed as Andrew began to unbutton his shirt. After a moment, Andrew paused and looked at a still fully clad Toby. "Are you going to leave all that on?"

Toby began to undress, his fingers slow and clumsy. He was uncomfortably aware that Andrew was watching him with... with what? Not desire, at least not obviously. It was difficult for him to see desire in Andrew's expression; but it must be there, mustn't it? He'd made what he wanted unmistakably clear. From the beginning. Why else would he even be here? Unless...

"Are you... did you want me to pay you?" Toby stammered.

Andrew's amusement grew. "Money? No, that's not what I'm here for. I already told you, I want to fuck."

Which, Toby had to suppose was true. If this wasn't what he wanted, what he desired, he needn't have come. If he'd wanted something else—make that *someone* else—he could certainly have found them. He could not have been entirely unaware of the glances he'd gotten from others, not only at the bar, but on the short walk here.

Yes, surely, the hard glitter of his eyes notwithstanding, Andrew must be feeling desire, must be looking forward with pleasure to what was to happen.

Toby found himself tingling with pleasure, too, and just a touch of apprehension. What exactly, he wondered, slipping his trousers down, was going to happen?



“It’s all right if you want to groan, or cry out, or anything,” Andrew said. “I like it, if you want to know the truth. I enjoy knowing that it’s painful for my partner to accommodate me. It makes me feel powerful. It makes me feel very big.”

Toby did groan, but it was not for his fucker’s pleasure, it was altogether involuntary. He hated being fucked in the ass, and Andrew didn’t need anything to make him feel big, he was big, really big. And rough. Really rough.

Maybe if there’d been a bit more foreplay. Toby would love to have spent a generous amount of time fondling and kissing. He’d always liked that almost more than the actual sex.

Andrew hadn’t kissed him at all, though, had turned his face away when Toby had summoned his courage and tried to kiss him. They hadn’t done anything, actually, beyond stripping and getting right down to it, Andrew shoving him peremptorily down onto the sofa.

“Condom,” Toby had said when Andrew lifted his legs in the air.

“I like it bareback,” was the answer, and with nothing more than a handful of spit for lubricant, Andrew had positioned his dick, his particularly large dick, at Toby’s asshole and, before Toby could object, shoved it in, hard, and deep.

But, pain or no, how could he have objected, anyway, when here, above him, was surely the man of his dreams, of any gay male’s dreams. Toby looked up and, seeing Andrew’s eyes shut tight, took advantage of the opportunity to study him up close. Andrew’s face was actually contorted in a grimace, as if he were the one suffering the pain of what was quickly becoming an even more vicious assault, Andrew’s loins hammering

downward, pounding himself in and out in a violent fury that seemed only a travesty of desire. That seemed, in fact, more like punishment being administered.

Toby tried to remain silent, but finally he couldn't help himself, he groaned aloud. Andrew's eyes opened then and he looked down into Toby's face. For a moment, Andrew's expression might have been one of hate, disgust even. He smiled, but it was an icy smile, none of the flirtatious warmth with which he had smiled at Toby earlier, back at the Badlands.

"Like it?" he asked, driving harder. "Like my dick up your ass, faggot?"

Toby grimaced inwardly at the word, "faggot," and a little frisson of fear went up his spine. Andrew had seemed so safe at the bar, so *nice*. This man above him might have been someone else altogether. Or, had Toby only wanted so very much for him to be nice, because he was so handsome, that he had overlooked whatever warning signals there might have been. But, had there been any? He couldn't recall.

"Uh," he grunted, and managed to say, "Yes, sure."

"Liar." Andrew laughed. "You don't usually take it this way, do you?"

"No, I don't," Toby admitted through clenched teeth.

"I can tell. You're tighter than a virgin."

"Actually..." Toby screwed up his courage, meant to ask him if he would stop. He wasn't sure how much more he could endure.

"I like it tight. The tighter the better. That's the sweetest ass I've fucked in a long time, Toby."

After that, how could Toby ask him to stop, regardless of the risk, regardless of the pain? Andrew would be offended then, wouldn't? He might withdraw from Toby's ass, probably would withdraw if asked, but surely, he would withdraw altogether, withdraw from the apartment as well, gone like a dream on awakening.

Still, there were other considerations besides the pain, and even as besotted as he was, he could not altogether dismiss

those concerns. "Will you..." he managed to stammer out, embarrassed to say it, but thinking it important, "will you pull out before you come," and added a humiliating, "please."

"No," Andrew said simply, and pounded him harder.

Andrew stared down at the face below him, eyes now squeezed shut, mouth contorted in pain. The punishment he was inflicting gave Andrew pleasure, the only real pleasure he found in these experiences with other males. He loathed fucking them, but he loved making them suffer.

He looked down between them, watched his dick piston in and out of the upturned ass. Unlike his wrinkled face, Toby's ass was remarkably smooth, the skin so shining it might have been waxed.

Amazing, Andrew thought, how much more slowly the body aged than the face, the age creeping only gradually downward, the chest sagging first, the waist spreading and drooping, while the butt often stayed youthful looking well into old age.

The thought, "a baby's bottom," came unbidden into his mind, and in its wake, "a very sore bottom."

Spanky-spanky.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Andrew slept late. When he woke, however, he always woke immediately, never a moment of disorientation at finding himself in a strange bed, of wondering where he was. He knew where he was, and why.

He had slept on the couch. He pushed the single blanket aside with his foot, letting it fall to the floor, a baby blue bundle, and stretched lazily, like a cat. Reaching down, he cupped his genitals in his hand and fondled them gently but without sexual interest; every morning's ritual gesture, but one he was not even aware of performing, an unconscious confirmation of his maleness.

He went naked into the small kitchen and made a pot of coffee, and while it was brewing went into the bathroom to pee and to shower. By the time he had toweled dry, the coffee was ready. He padded into the kitchen and poured himself a cup, carrying it back to the bathroom with it.

He was shaving at the sink, with Toby's razor, wondering if perhaps he ought to think of wearing a beard for a while, when he heard the sound of a key in the front door. He strode, still naked, into the apartment's main room in time to see a tall, skinny man pause just inside the door.



Willard Blount's mouth fell open at the sight of a naked stranger in Toby's apartment. Of their own accord, Willard's eyes dropped to the man's crotch, where much of a morning hard-on was still in evidence.

"Who are you?" Willard asked, unable to stop gawking.

"I'm a friend of Toby's," Andrew said. "Who are you?"

"I'm Willard." He followed Andrew's glance down to the keys in his hand, stared at them as if he had never seen them

before. "Toby and I have keys to one another's apartments," he said. "In case."

He looked back at Andrew's impressively large cock, stirring, surely getting larger, stiffer, as if it were being sexually awakened. Willard forced his eyes away from the sight, ran a tongue nervously over thin lips, and said, "Where's Toby?"

"He's asleep." Andrew grinned, as if he found the question—or something—funny. "Why?"

The question disconcerted Willard. The entire scene disconcerted him, in fact. It was so unlike anything he'd imagined he would find when he let himself into the apartment. And this man... God in Heaven, surely Toby hadn't picked him up? Toby never picked anyone up, never brought anyone here, and this man was so devastatingly handsome.... positively reeked of male sexuality. Poor old Toby couldn't possibly have gotten this lucky... unless the man, this Andrew, was a hustler, but he didn't look at all like one. He looked, well, he looked like a gentleman. Albeit, a naked gentleman with a cock that, yes, was growing larger.

"We..." Willard paused, as if weighing his words. "We always meet for coffee, at Orphan Andy's. Sunday morning, ten o'clock. It's a regular thing. When he didn't show up, I worried... He's still asleep?" Andrew nodded. "That's unusual for him. He's always up at eight, no matter how late he stayed out. He says it's impossible for him to sleep past eight in the morning."

Andrew made no response. His amusement had faded. The look he gave Willard was more speculative, as if he were trying to reach some decision. Willard licked his lips again, looked once more around the room, as if he might have overlooked Toby the first time, shifted his weight uneasily.

"Is he all right?" he finally managed to ask.

"He's fine."

"Can I...?" He took a step in the direction of the bedroom's closed door. "I'll just peek in at him, shall I," he said, "To say hi."

He half expected Andrew to try to stop him, but in fact, Andrew stepped aside with a shrug, as if to say, go ahead.

Willard did. He opened the bedroom door. The blinds were closed tightly. He could see Toby—or, something—on the bed, but it was only a dark shape among other shapes.

“Toby?” he said tentatively. There was no answer. He took a step closer to the bed. “Toby?” He felt behind him for the light switch on the wall, flipped it on. And felt the bottom drop out of his stomach.

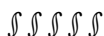
Toby was lying naked on his back, his arms stretched over his head, hands tied to the headboard; his feet were tied to the footboard, legs spread. Rows of duct tape covered Toby’s mouth, but his eyes were open wide. He stared at Willard in what could only be terror.

“What on earth?” Willard said, so astonished that for a moment he could not even move. On the bed, Toby squirmed and grunted, and his horrified eyes veered past Willard.

Willard was a moment too slow to understand, and before he could move or say anything, an arm went around him, and he saw the big kitchen knife in the stranger’s hand. The Wusthoff chef’s knife he’d given Toby for Christmas.

He saw this in one awful glance—before another arm tightened around him, pulling him backward. He was crushed against that too splendid naked body and felt, in astonishment and horror, that enormous dick pressed against him and, incongruously rigid as steel now.

Killing always gave Andrew a hard-on.



He searched Toby’s apartment at leisure. He could have done it the night before, but he’d been on the move for two nights by that time, had wanted to sleep. And, with Toby safely trussed on his bed, there had been no hurry.

There was nearly four hundred dollars in Toby’s wallet. Probably he had just been paid. Andrew pocketed it, kept Toby’s credit cards, his driver’s license, his hospital ID badge.

There were car keys on Toby's key ring, along with several other unidentifiable keys. He pocketed those too. Searched the cupboards. There wasn't much there—some canned foods, coffee, a couple of aging apples. He found a plastic bag and put the food in it. It wouldn't do to stay here too long, and he would need some supplies.

Not much in the medicine cabinet, but the Ambien would come in handy, he thought. Some Vicoden. He took them, too, and a bottle of Zoloft. Prevacid? He had to think for a moment—that was for the stomach, wasn't it? He never had indigestion. He left that.

He checked Willard's pockets too. There was another hundred or so in cash in his wallet. Andrew kept that also. He checked Willard's keys. These were obviously the keys to Toby's apartment. Those others, then, must be to his own. He looked at Willard's driver's license for the address.

He went out, walked the three blocks to Willard's address, a small cottage in the shadow of a larger apartment building. A gray Toyota sat in the garage. Toby's keys fit the ignition. Andrew checked, and saw that the gas tank was nearly full. He smiled and whistled tunelessly to himself. Everything was going his way. When you made your own luck, better luck followed.

Inside, Willard's home was not much more productive than Toby's had been, but he did find some more food, and a closet filled with women's things. Large size dresses, shoes, hats, wigs. Apparently Willard liked to dress up.

Andrew took a small suitcase from a closet shelf and began to fill it with what he thought might be useful over the next day or two. After that, he would leave the Bay Area. He found himself rather looking forward to Los Angeles. Such a gaudy, giddy city. Anyone could lose themselves in Los Angeles. Everyone there was pretending to be someone else. No one cared about anyone's real identity. He would fit right in.

First, though, he had Stanley to deal with. And, more crucially, Tom Danzel. No loose ends, was his guiding philosophy. When he left the Bay Area—soon, now—there

would be nothing behind to threaten him, to point in his new direction.

But—Stanley. For so long now, Stanley had been his, what, his Holy Grail. His love for Stanley had kept him going when all else failed him. If only he could take Stanley with him—but the mere idea was folly. Needs must where needs matter.

Love. The word rang in his mind like the clanging of a gate. All he'd ever known of love was its absence. It would be hard, though, to be absent of Stanley.

He carried the suitcase with him back to Toby's, careful to make no eye contact with anyone. He had a cap of Toby's pulled down so that the upper part of his face was in shadow, and he wore dark glasses he found at Willard's, and his jacket with the collar turned up. It was too early on Sunday morning for serious foot traffic in the Castro, where Saturday night was serious business. Most of those who passed were on their way to church, or going home from assignations, nursing hangovers. No one was likely to remember his face.

Back at the apartment, he took a blanket from a shelf and tossed it over Willard's body where it still lay on the bedroom floor. When he looked, Toby was watching him with his eyes all but popping out of his head. There was a yellow stain on the sheet beneath him.

Andrew sat on the edge of the bed. Toby squirmed, trying to get further from him, grunting through the tape on his mouth..

Andrew laid a gentle hand on Toby's shoulder. "If I take the tape off, you won't scream, will you?" he asked, his voice low and unthreatening.

Toby shook his head frantically. "Good." Andrew took hold of one end of the duct tape and peeled it carefully away. "Sorry, this always stings a bit," he said, and took the second piece off as well.

Toby did try to scream then. He cried, "Help," but it came out more of a croak. Immediately, Andrew clamped a hand over his mouth.

"Now, that wasn't nice, was it? Shall I put the tape back, then?" Again, Toby shook his head wildly. "Very well." Andrew removed his hand, but held it just an inch or so away from Toby's mouth. "Better?"

"Yes," Toby whispered.

"You see, Toby, I've kept you alive because I thought I might need your assistance. You don't want me to think that you are of no use to me, do you?"

"No. I... I'll do whatever you want. Anything."

Andrew asked, "Did you have a happy childhood, Toby?"

Toby blinked, astonished—the last thing he expected this man to ask him. "I... yes, I suppose I did."

"Really?" Disbelieving.

"No." Toby whimpered, whether from the memory of childhood taunts, or fear at his present situation, it was impossible to say. "People laughed at me, other kids. No, I don't suppose you could call it a happy childhood, not really."

"I didn't think so." Andrew looked past him thoughtfully. "I wonder, is childhood ever really happy? I think all those happy memories are just dreams." He looked back into Toby's face. "Don't you think that's so?"

"I... I don't know." Toby's voice broke in a sob. "What do you want of me? Please, tell me. I'll do anything. You can fuck me again if you'd like."

Andrew smiled in a chiding manner. "Oh, Toby, that's very sweet of you, considering, but, we've done that already. It's never the same the second time, is it? Once your cherry's gone, it's gone forever. No, what I want from you, for the moment at least, is information." He paused expectantly.

"What do you want to know?" Toby swallowed back another sob, his eyes shone with hope.

"You're a nurse, aren't you?"

Toby's head bobbed. "Yes. A nurse."

"At what hospital?"

"Saint Alonzo's."

“Good.” Andrew smiled approvingly. “Now, I want you to tell me all about Saint Alonzo’s.”

“What do you want to know?”

“I want to know about uniforms, for starters. And I particularly want to know about medical supplies. I want to know what drugs one would use for certain purposes. And, say, if a nurse, if you, or a doctor, even, wanted to get those drugs... There’s so much. We’re going to have a nice long chat. And then, if you are truly cooperative... well, I don’t really want to hurt you, you know. Do you believe that?”

Tony bobbed his head up and down, as if he did believe it, but his eyes said that he did not.

Which, Andrew thought, was sensible of him. Why would anyone be so foolish?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Danzel and Korski, Private Investigators, had gotten their first case, a referral from someone who had once worked at SFPD and had known Tom, and had since gone into private security.

"It's a high end electronics store, in one of those little mini-malls," Tom explained it to Stanley. "Stuff is disappearing, little stuff, but expensive, and they suspect one of the employees is coming back after hours and helping himself."

"And their own security can't handle it?"

"They don't have their own security, exactly. The mall does, just a uniformed guard who makes a regular patrol in the course of the night. He doesn't actually go into the individual stores as a rule, but he goes by and if there's anything suspicious, he has keys, so he could go in and check it out. There's a back door, though, it goes out from the store room in the rear, and into a parking lot. Probably that's where it's happening. They're not likely to be coming in and out through the mall. Too much chance the guard might change his patrol times and see them."

"And there's no suspects?"

"Eight of them. Every employee has keys. An accountant, a purchasing agent, six sales people. The sales people take turns opening up mornings. So, it could be any one of them."

Tom's plan was simple. There was an all night pizza place across the street from the parking lot and down about forty feet. Close enough that he could keep an eye on the store's back door, far enough away that he wouldn't be conspicuous nursing a coffee.

"A stakeout," Stanley said.

"Right."

"You want me to come with you?"

"Two people are twice as conspicuous as one, baby. Anyway, it's the most boring kind of job in the business. You sit there half the night, scratching your balls and wishing somebody would shoot somebody just to whip up a little excitement. You keep the bed warm for me. This won't likely take more than a night or two."



It left Stanley alone for the night, however. Restless, he puttered in the kitchen, thought about calling Chris, and remembered it was Chris's night in the burn ward. The television was on, more for background noise than anything. Out of the blue, he heard a man's voice say, "But you know I love you. What does it matter if I say it or not, when we both know it's true."

Annoyed, he flicked the television off. He had his own non-declarations of love to contend with. After a moment, he turned the set back on and surfed through channels, then turned it off again.

Of course, he could just stroll up to the Castro, pop into one or the other of the bars for a drink, maybe run into an old friend and chat. When he thought about that, though, he thought he was more likely to run into old tricks than old friends. He wasn't in the least tempted to step out on Tom—why would he even think about it, after the night before.

In the end, he decided just to go out for a walk—a long walk, so that when he got back to the apartment, he'd be too tired to stay awake missing Tom in bed beside him.

He started meandering, deliberately avoided Castro Street, lest the bright lights and loud music weaken his resolve and he find himself having a drink he didn't need in a place he shouldn't be.

He went up into the hills, with no particular destination. Once he found himself on Divisadero, things quieted down some—still plenty of cars, but almost no foot traffic. He turned left, climbed higher. The fog surprised him, the way it sometimes did in The City. One moment he was climbing a steep sidewalk in night's gentler darkness, and the next he was

enveloped in a cloud that obliterated everything more than a few feet from him. Even the lights in the windows of the houses he passed, windows that could not have been, some of them, more than five or six feet away, were blurred into vague glows.

For a moment, he found himself disoriented. He'd walked with no particular purpose, no goal in mind, had hardly been aware of what streets he was taking. Now, he wasn't entirely sure where he was.

He continued upward. Someone was singing in one of the houses. Balfe, *The Bohemian Girl*. A clear, sweet soprano drifted in and out of the fog. "...that you'll remember me..."

He heard footsteps in the not far distance, but he could see no one, and when he paused, the footsteps stopped as well.

"...Then you'll remember, you'll remember me..."

He started up again, and now there were no footsteps. It had only been someone going home, no doubt, cautious as he had been upon hearing footsteps. He climbed to the end of the block. Like a curtain lifting, the fog rose and he found himself at the edge of Buena Vista Park.

Here was something familiar. He crossed the street, climbed rough-hewn stone steps into the park, remembering times in the past when he'd come here. The park was a well-known cruising spot, the wooded areas proving good cover for quick assignations. Tonight, a pair of men could have been in the middle of the path just a few feet away and been hidden from curious eyes. He walked, conscious of the mist as a presence, a sound that he felt he could almost but not quite hear.

Something loomed on the path ahead of him, a darker presence in the fog that materialized into a biker type, boots, jeans, leather jacket, strolling in the opposite direction. They did not either of them stop, did not quite pause, even, but there was an inevitable slowing of steps as they neared.

Almost abreast, the biker looked him a question. He was, Stanley saw, good looking in a rough chiseled way. It wasn't unfaithful, was it, to be tempted? Stanley gave him a thanks-but-no-thanks smile in return. They passed one another by and

when Stanley looked back a few steps further along, the man had disappeared. He might, in fact, never have been there. The ghost of tricks past.

Aside from that brief encounter, though, Stanley seemed to have the place to himself. It was cool and damp. There was only the faintest hint of motor noise from below, from Haight Street, he supposed. Now and again, through the trees, he had glimpses of San Francisco's storied hills, windows casting eerie glows, the beams of headlights sometimes piercing the mist as they snaked their way up and down twisting streets. The thick blanket of fog intensified scents. He was almost preternaturally aware of the medicinal smell of eucalyptus, the sharp scent of pine, the musty odor of dead growth.

It was a lonely place tonight, but not ominously so. He felt in the mood for lonely. He found that he was missing Tom, and realized this was the first evening in weeks, since Tom had moved in with him, that they hadn't been together.

He came upon a wooden bench set against an embankment. Most of the benches had been removed, here as in the city's other parks. They had become too convenient for the homeless population. Somehow, though, the park maintenance people had missed this one, and it was easy to see why, the way it blended into its surroundings, an apologetic, demure kind of bench, as it were.

On an impulse, Stanley sat, breathing deeply of the night air. He thought of Tom, passing what were surely tedious hours in surveillance, wondered when he would be home. Unless he got lucky, spotted his man early, it would probably not be until morning. Stanley would fix him breakfast before tucking him into bed. Or, more likely, joining him in the bed. That thought produced a sympathetic response in his trousers, and he smiled in anticipation. Whatever might be missing in their relationship, it was certainly not sexual excitement.

He became aware of a rustling in the trees behind him, the peculiar rattle of eucalyptus leaves in a wind. Only gradually did it come to him that there was no wind, the cottony air motionless, seeming suspended in silence.

Probably a couple of guys, he thought, maybe even that biker, circled back by some other path, finding some quick relief in an impersonal encounter... or, maybe someone checking him out? In which case, by now there should have been a careful clearing of the throat, a discreet cough, and not this continuing silence. Who cruised without making their presence known? Presence—presents—was the point.

Another thought occurred to him then. He got to his feet, turned toward the woods. The leaves were unmoving now. He saw no one, but it was dark among the trees, and with the motionless fog impossible to see anything.

Could it be Andrew? It seemed so unlikely, in this out of the way spot, unless Andrew had followed him all the way here from the Castro. In the fog? It would have required a skilled tracker to manage that, unseen and unheard, but what did he know of Andrew's skills? He thought of those footsteps he'd heard... but what did footsteps in the dark, in the Castro, prove? There was always someone walking, any hour of the day or night.

He remembered once before staring like this into a concealing darkness among trees, at the house outside Petaluma, sure that he was being watched. This wasn't the first time, either, that he'd suspected that it was Andrew watching, that Andrew was stalking him.

"Andrew, is that you?" he asked aloud. No answer. "You don't have to be afraid. I mean you no harm."

He heard a sound off to his right, and looked in that direction. An elderly man emerged from the fog, a cocker spaniel tugging at the leash in his hand. At the sound of Stanley's voice, the man stopped, eyeing him suspiciously. No doubt it looked peculiar, a man standing alone on the path, apparently talking aloud to himself. Like one of the street crazies.

"I was just rehearsing," Stanley said with an embarrassed smile, "for a part in a play." He addressed the trees again, with a dramatic inflection and waving his hands, "Andrew, is that you?"

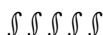
Without a comment, the stranger turned on his heel and tugged the spaniel in the opposite direction.

Stanley waited until they had vanished again into the fog, and turned back to the trees. "Andrew?" This time in little more than a whisper.

Silence.

Stanley was suddenly aware of how cold it had gotten, of how isolated he was. He'd left his cell phone at home, had taken to leaving it behind since he'd learned that it was bugged. Somehow, that had given him a sense of violation. Now, he wished he had it with him, though. There was a kind of comfort in knowing that help was only a trio of digits away.

He turned and made his way back along the path, eager to be out of the park.



Tom was already at the apartment when Stanley got there. Chris was there with him, the two of them huddled by the kitchen stove.

"I got lucky," Tom said, "caught my suspect red handed, called the store owner and the police and came home. Chris got here right behind me. He's teaching me how to make spaghetti sauce."

"I was going to fix some breakfast," Stanley said.

Tom gave him a suspicious look. "Like, what?"

"Scrambled eggs?"

Tom turned back to the stove. "Okay, so we've sautéed the onions, then what?"



It was not until later, seated at the kitchen table, watching Tom dig into a big plate of spaghetti with gusto, that Stanley remembered the odd little interlude at the park. He considered whether he should say anything to Tom about it. Maybe, when Chris had gone, he decided.

When Chris had gone, however, with Tom's thanks for the cooking lesson, and Tom and Stanley had cleaned up the dishes, Tom stretched and announced he was ready to hit the sack. The look in his eyes said that he wasn't just thinking about sleep. Stanley put Buena Vista Park aside for more enjoyable prospects.

And, really, what could he tell Tom anyway? That he'd heard a rustling in the bushes. It had been a long time since he had personally cruised Buena Vista, but now that he recalled those days, it occurred to him that it would be odder still if there weren't some rustling in the bushes there.

Anyway, in short order, they were in bed, naked, Tom holding him close. Stanley forgot everything else in the heat of the moment.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The ice having been broken with their first case, it began to look as if the detective business was on its way. They got another call the following day, this one a bit more dramatic sounding.

"Is this Mister Danzel? I need your help. Can you come to see me, as soon as possible, please?"

"The usual thing is, clients generally come here to see us, at our offices. We start with an interview, see whether we're the right ones..."

"I'm sure you are. You used to be with the police department, isn't that so? What I need is... well, I'm not entirely sure myself, maybe just someone tough looking. That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"What exactly is the nature of your problem, Mister...?"

"Halderman. Toby Halderman." There was a pause. "There's a man, someone that I had, well, relations with. And, now, he's hanging around. Just a little while ago, when I was out, he followed me to Safeway and back, and when I looked out my window, I can see he's still there, outside. He frightens me. He was kind of, oh, I don't know what, exactly. Volatile, I suppose is the word I want."

"Maybe you should call the police, Toby. This is the kind of thing..."

"Oh, I couldn't do that. It's just... well, it's awkward. The job I have, and all. I could explain it when you're here."

"What exactly is it you think I can do for you?"

"I was thinking, well, just if you talked to him. Put a little fear into him. You know?"

Tom sighed and rolled his eyes in Stanley's direction. "Where are you, exactly?" he asked. Halderman told him. It wasn't far, no more than a ten minute stroll. "Tell you what,"

Tom said, “my partner and I will come over, hear your story, take a look at this guy...”

“No, please, come alone.”

“My partner and I usually consult together on our cases.”

“I understand, but... oh, it’s embarrassing. I know your partner, sort of, and I couldn’t... well, I just couldn’t. I’d feel such a fool.”

Which, Tom thought, meant that he and Stanley had been boyfriends of some sort in the past, or had tricked together. He sighed again.

“Okay. Give me fifteen minutes. But, I’m not promising anything. If we agree to help you, Stanley will have to be told. We’re partners.”

Stanley, however, could make nothing of it. “Halderman?” He screwed up his face thoughtfully. “Of course, if he was a trick... we don’t always exchange full names. Sometimes we don’t exchange names at all. But, Toby, you don’t meet many Tobys these days, it’s more like a comic book name, isn’t it?”

“There’s that movie actor, Toby what’s his name? In Spider Man.”

“Maguire? But that’s my point, he does comic book movies. I think I should go with you, just to get a look at this guy.”

“No, I said I’d come alone, at least long enough to hear what he has to say.”

Stanley frowned. “Andrew is still out there, somewhere.”

Tom scoffed. “I’m not afraid of your brother. Besides, he isn’t interested in me, it’s you he’s obsessed with, for whatever reason. No, I’ll be okay. I’ll have my cell. If there’s anything fishy about this, I’ll call you, and tell this guy to shove it—politely, of course.”

When he was gone, though, Stanley continued to fret over the call, and the implication that he and this client knew one another. He couldn’t, of course, remember every trick he’d ever had—but you’d think a name like Toby would stick in his mind.

It was like those drawings by someone—wasn't there an artist, Toby something?

And the address Toby had given Tom rang no bells either, though that proved nothing, the man could have moved since he and Stanley met, or, suppose they had tricked, they could have gone to Stanley's or... well, he didn't as a rule trick in parked cars or city parks, though he couldn't exactly say he had never done that. Still, he could count on his fingers—and none of those occasions had involved anybody named Toby.

Maybe at a party? He tried to think of exactly what Tom had said. This Toby hadn't exactly said, if Stanley got it right, that he and Stanley were once an item. Tom might have interpolated that. What other connection could they have, though? He tried to think of places where he'd worked. Or maybe they simply had mutual friends.

When he thought about it, though, what did any of that matter, really? What if this Toby Halderman was a trick from his past, as Tom seemed to think? What on earth could he have to tell Tom that he couldn't say with Stanley there? You'd think if anything, it would be the other way round, that he'd be more comfortable talking with someone he'd known before, however briefly.

He wondered if he shouldn't just call Tom, and insist that he was coming too. Had, in fact, actually reached for the phone when it rang. Business, Stanley thought, picking up the receiver, was certainly booming all at once.

"Danzel and Korski, Private Investigators."

For a moment, there was only silence on the line, for so long a time that Stanley was about to hang up, when a voice, a voice he didn't know, said, faintly, in an uncertain tone of voice, "Stanley? Is that you?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"This is so... I never thought I'd actually hear your voice."

"I don't understand. Who...?"

The sound that elicited might have been a cough—or, even, a chuckle of delight. "But, you know, don't you?"

And, just that suddenly, just that easily, Stanley did know, the answer as clear as if it had been written on the air in flames. "Andrew," he said in astonishment.

The laughter this time was unmistakable. "I knew you would know. There's like this bond between us, this blood thing. I've always felt it. I've followed your life, you know. For years."

"Where are you?" Stanley's mind was spinning. If only Tom were here, or... or, what should he do? He thought of Hannibal. Hannibal had tapped his cell phone. Would he have tapped this one as well? That would be a logical assumption. Only, wouldn't Andrew, who had certainly proven that he was no fool where Homeland was concerned, assume that as well?

"That's why I'm calling you. I want to meet you. Just once. That's all. Please say yes."

"Let me call you back, I need..."

"No, there isn't time. I have to leave. The city. The country. They're after me, you know."

"Yes. But, Andrew, maybe you should..."

"Turn myself in?" More laughter. "It isn't true, Stanley, what they've told you about me. That's what I wanted to explain. I don't care about anyone else, there isn't anyone else to care about, really, but I want you to know the truth."

"But, that's all the more reason to turn yourself in, isn't it? Running, fleeing the country, well, that's just going to make you look all the more guilty. And, if you really are innocent, then I'll do everything that I can to help you, I promise."

"What you offer is certainly tempting, Stanley. You can't know what it means to me, your offer of assistance. For a brother you don't really know."

"Then..."

"And how easy it sounds, a simple act of atonement—confession, remittance, and the past is over. It sounds so clear cut, so easy—but every choice I've made in a lifetime, and I'm the first to admit that some of them were bad choices, seemed clear cut as well at the time I made them, if not always easy. You fret that I am outside the law. I've no doubt you could

quote religious scripture to persuade me. But, you know, prisons are built with stones of law, brothels with bricks of religion."

"Blake," Stanley said automatically.

"Yes."

Stanley was not at all surprised that his brother should know Blake. How much else, he wondered, did they have in common? He wanted to know, even knowing that it was an unreasonable wish. How could you not want to know what your brother was like? And, yes, unreasonable, because if Homeland were to catch up with Andrew, imprisonment was the least of it.

Homeland had caught up with his earlier partners, too, and they had suffered far worse than imprisonment. Hannibal and friends would surely not hesitate to kill Andrew as well.

"Think, now," Andrew was saying, as if Stanley had spoken his thoughts aloud, "this is Homeland who's after me. Do you know anything about how they work? They make their own rules. I'd be spirited away, no attorneys, no friends, no hope. They don't play fair."

Which, Stanley thought, was probably true, to some degree anyway, based on what little he knew.

"Then, maybe you should just go, while you can. What difference can it make, then, explaining things to me? If you're going to leave the country anyway?"

"Probably no difference at all. Except to me. And you too, I think. I think you want to know, Stanley, want to know the truth about me. But, if you'd rather not, I will understand. It's probably safer for you if you don't meet me. If they were to find out about it—"

"No." Stanley said it impulsively. Andrew was right, it was a risk for him, and Mister Hannibal would almost certainly find out about it. Probably knew about it in this very moment.

The wise thing to do, the safe thing to do, would be to stay where he was; let Hannibal take care of it.

How could he pass up this opportunity, though, the first ever, and almost certainly the last as well, to meet up with his

flesh and blood brother who'd vanished from his life even before his life had even begun? To answer all those questions that had nagged at him since he'd first learned of Andrew's existence. He was fascinated by the thought of Andrew; more than that, intrigued. If he didn't go... how could he bear it, knowing forever that he'd had this chance, and not taken it. Dangerous? Yes, surely it was dangerous. And yet... a ship was safer in the harbor, wasn't it; but that wasn't what a ship was for.

"I'll meet you," he said into the phone, and thought again about Hannibal. Maybe they weren't actually listening. Maybe they taped conversations, to listen to later. There might be time, if only just... "Tell me where."

"The Transbay Terminal..."

§§§§§

"The Transbay Terminal," Hannibal said into his own phone. "Fast. Seal the place tight. We've got the bastard now."

§§§§§

Outside the apartment, Stanley hesitated. Drive? Or take a taxi. It rarely took more than a couple of minutes in this neighborhood to catch a taxi, and it could take far longer than that to find a place to park downtown. It was only a few blocks to the Muni, but the weather was threatening. The sky with its curdled clouds had the look of a pointillist painting. In the distance, the Sutro Tower rode a sea of fog, like an ancient sailing ship riding the crest of Clarendon Heights.

Stanley was both anxious and elated. He felt as if he had been traveling some long road and now, at last, he could see in the distance his destination. That it was a destination that posed dangers for him, he had no doubt. He could not help being a little afraid. Still, he remembered something Tom had said to him at the beginning of their partnership: "Being afraid doesn't make you a coward. Only fools don't know when to be scared."

He patted his pocket. He'd left his cell phone in the apartment. As he had mostly been doing of late. Maybe this time he should have brought it with him. Go back for it? If

Hannibal and crew were on their way to the Transbay Terminal, time was probably critical.

He stepped to the curb, looking up and down the street for a cab. If he saw one coming, he'd take that for an omen; if not, he'd dash back upstairs. In which case, he'd run for the Muni.

It wasn't a taxi that pulled to the curb, though, but a dusty old Toyota, a large, frumpy looking woman at the wheel.

"Excuse me, young man," she called through the open window, her voice high and reedy. "Can you help me?"

Impatient to be on his way, Stanley nearly said no, but his intrinsic courtesy came to the fore. He stepped to the car, leaned down to answer.

"Get in, Stanley," the woman said, in a baritone voice before Stanley could even speak. "Quickly."

Andrew. Seen like this, at close range, Stanley could see that. Even setting eyes on him for the first time, even with the cheap wig and the badly daubed makeup, the face turned toward him was enough like the one he was used to seeing in the mirror as to make it unmistakable.

"Get in," Andrew said again, impatiently, looking quickly around at the street traffic.

Stanley opened the door and slid onto the seat with a sinking heart. He'd left Tom a note to tell him where he was going—but it did not seem likely now that this was where they were headed. Worse, without his cell phone, he couldn't call Tom to tell him where they were going—even if he knew.

"We're not going to the Transbay, are we?" he asked, fastening his seatbelt.

"I assumed Homeland would have a tap on your line," Andrew said, driving quickly away from the curb. "That was for their benefit."

"I see." Stanley patted his pockets. "Damn, I've forgotten my cell phone. Do you suppose we could just take a minute...?"

"I don't think that would be wise."

Andrew glanced over at him. At close range, his disguise was not at all convincing, but it had only been intended to be seen at a distance. Who paid attention to an elderly woman driving an old Toyota?

"You sound disappointed, brother. That we're not going to the Transbay."

"You did sort of pull a fast one on me, didn't you? It's not a very auspicious way to get to know one another."

"Not on you, on Homeland. And I assure you, if they got their hands on me, we'd have precious little opportunity to get acquainted." He paused briefly while he steered carefully in and out of traffic. They were headed toward the Mission. Surely, Stanley thought, not back to Bentham Gallery?

"We do want to get acquainted, don't we?" Andrew said after a moment of silence. "I do, certainly. I just supposed you did too. If not... I could drop you here, if you'd rather." He pulled toward the curb.

Stanley knew he should get out of the car. At the very least, he was engaged now in a criminal act. More than that, though, he did not believe that Andrew had no motive beyond getting acquainted, which surely he could have done at any number of times, in any number of ways. It occurred to him that Andrew might well mean to kill him, or, and this was more likely, use him as a hostage to win his escape.

Still... what was it Blake had said about hell: "If you please, we will commit ourselves to this void, and see whether providence is here also." Maybe there was some providence in this situation that he hadn't yet uncovered. What if he could persuade Andrew to turn himself in—what a feather that would be in his cap.

The car was actually alongside the curb now. Andrew looked straight ahead through the windshield, said nothing more. Leaving the decision entirely up to Stanley; *but*, Stanley thought, *he wouldn't do that, surely, if he meant me any harm. If he meant to harm me, he wouldn't give me the opportunity to just step out of the car and walk away.*

"No," Stanley said, "You're right. I do want the chance to talk with you. I can't promise you anything beyond that."

Andrew drove on, smiling, looking relieved. "I understand. You feel the same as I do, I'm sure of it."

It was probably true, to some degree anyway. In Stanley's heart, he knew Andrew would have to be arrested, but that could not change the fact that they were brothers, brothers who had never met. It did nothing to take away Stanley's natural curiosity. How could he resist wanting to know more? Nothing even remotely like this had ever happened to him before. All the mysteries surrounding his family, his past, seemed embodied in the man behind the wheel.

He glanced at Andrew, and saw the Bloodstone ring on his finger—the same ring he'd last seen on Daniella's finger the night of her murder, he was certain of it. And something else immediately became clear to him.

"It was you. You picked her clothes for her, didn't you? Daniella Bentham?"

Andrew flashed a smile. "The red jump suit? I knew you'd pick up on that at a glance."

"Yes. The Bronzino." He paused for a second, but he had to know. "And you killed her. Didn't you?"

"It was necessary."

"That's all you can say about it? You were her lover, weren't you? You must have had some feeling for her."

"Sometimes you have to make decisions, regardless of your feelings. You see murder differently, Stanley, because you've lived a different life. It's what your life has taught you. I see it as just another way of dealing with a problem. That was my life's lesson."

"I can't believe the only thing wrong with murder is the fact that I don't like it."

Far from being offended, however, Andrew flashed a delighted smile at him. "Isn't that remarkable, that we should both be familiar with Bertrand Russell. I mean, when you think how little our lives have had in common."

"Blood," Stanley said.

"Yes. Blood." Andrew was silent for a moment. "There was this boy I knew, a neighbor," he said finally, watching the traffic, focused on driving, "before I left..." the hesitation was so brief one might have missed it altogether, "before I left where I was living. His brother shot him. For no reason. No particular reason, anyway, you'd think. They were having a quarrel, nothing major, nothing violent. And the older brother went out of the room, and came back with a gun, and blew his brother's brains out.

"They sent him away. For three years. I saw him when he came out. He seemed unchanged, unaffected by what he had done. I was fascinated by him, I wanted often to talk to him about it, to ask him... but I didn't."

He looked sideways then at Stanley. "It was drugs, of course. They bought drugs regularly from... from this man I knew. I never did drugs. Did you?"

"Not to speak of," Stanley said. "The occasional toke, to be sociable."

"Good," Andrew said, as if they had settled something between them. He went back to driving in silence, only to interrupt his own silence a minute or two later.

"I've done things, though... if I'd had a Mother. A mother will forgive anything, won't she? I've read that."

"You're looking for forgiveness?"

It was a long moment before Andrew said, firmly, almost angrily, "No. I'm not. I just mean, if I *had* had a mother, she would have forgiven me."

This time the silence held. Stanley watched out the window. They had crossed Mission Street. In a short while, they were on Bayshore Drive. The same route he and Tom had driven only a few nights earlier, to Daniella's art show.

They weren't going to the gallery, though. Andrew went past it, drove down a long alleyway and turned a corner. He stopped for a moment, the nose of the car aimed at a huge metal door in a concrete building. Stanley looked around. The site was totally

isolated. The kind of place you could yell your head off and no one would hear. As if to emphasize the point, a gull flew overhead screaming like a soul in agony.

Andrew took a remote opener from his pocket and punched a button, and a huge metal door rolled upward, reaching the top with a clang of finality. He drove into some kind of warehouse.

"Here we are," Andrew said. "I have to move the car. Why don't you wait here for me? I'll be back in a moment."

Stanley got out. "Two minutes," Andrew said. "Three max." He backed the Toyota out of the warehouse, and drove off.

Left alone, Stanley took advantage of the opportunity to look around. There wasn't much to see; a vast, mostly empty warehouse space. One wall was stacked high with some kind of metal containers, fuel tanks of some kind, Stanley thought. Above them, metal stairs, like a fire escape, ascended to a narrow catwalk above.

The space had been used for truck storage at some time. The concrete floor was permeated with old motor smells, oil and gasoline and exhaust, and here and there stains from past leakage. The metal walls were rust streaked where rain had crept in at seams and windows, visual stalactites tapering downward, not quite reaching the floor.

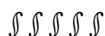
A crude sort of living quarters had been set up at the far end of the space. There was no actual kitchen, but an ancient refrigerator stood against one wall, humming noisily, and next to that stood a doorless wooden cabinet, paint chipped, with a hot plate sitting atop it. A folding screen hid one corner of the room. When Stanley took a few steps in that direction, his footsteps echoed hollowly.

Andrew had left the drive-through door open. It occurred to Stanley that there was nothing to prevent his simply walking out, but where would he go? He'd have several blocks to walk just to get out of this maze of warehouses, and it was difficult to imagine he could do so without Andrew catching up with him.

Anyway, he didn't want to go, not just yet, any more than he'd wanted to get out of the car when Andrew had offered him the opportunity. He wanted to learn more about this brother

who had come into his life so suddenly, so mysteriously. And, he thought again, that if Andrew really meant him any harm, he wouldn't have made it so easy for Stanley just to walk away.

Though he did just remember the old saw. *Curiosity killed the cat.*



Andrew drove around the block. There was another warehouse backed up to the one in which he'd left Stanley, with its entrance on the far opposite side. He drove in there, turned the car around so it was facing out. So he could drive away quickly when he left, and in the opposite direction from his hidey hole next door. He'd need to go quickly, when he went.

He left that door open, to save time later. On the walk back to Stanley, he took his cell phone out of the pocket of his skirt. Toby Halderman's cell phone. He punched a number into it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The address Toby Halderman had given Tom turned out to be above a greasy spoon not far off Castro. Tom climbed the dingy stairs, knocked at the door at the top. There was no answer.

He knocked again. The door wasn't latched, it opened slightly. Tom shoved it wide, paused on the threshold, his hand automatically going to his Sig Sauer in its shoulder holster. Something smelled rotten, and it wasn't just the greasy spoon downstairs.

"Mister Halderman?" he called through the open doorway. "Toby?"

There was no reply. He took his gun from its holster and stepped into the room, crouching, sweeping the room quickly, expertly. It was empty.

There were two open doors. A kitchen and a bathroom. One quick glance told him there was no one in either. The third door was closed. He approached it cautiously, gave it a shove inward, pivoting back against the wall on this side, in case someone was in there, someone with a gun.

Nothing happened. He counted three, crouched and pivoted again, and stepped quickly into the bedroom beyond.

"Jesus," he said, lowering the gun. There were two men in the room, but neither of them represented any kind of threat, not to him, at least. They were both dead, lying side by side on the bed, their throats cut.

His first thought was to call the police. It was a moment before he realized that the telephone on the nightstand by the bed was ringing. He hesitated, took a handkerchief from his pocket and used that to pick up the receiver.

"Mister Danzel?" a voice he remembered greeted him.

"What are you playing at, Halderman? Or, is it Halderman?"

The voice on the phone chuckled softly. "Ah, I heard you were clever. No, I'm afraid I had to deceive you. Just a little, though. Mister Halderman is there, waiting for you. He's the one with the duct tape."

"You sick bastard. I'm calling the cops."

"I wouldn't, if I were you. Not just yet. There was a point to all this, don't you see?"

"What? To set me up for some kind of frame? It won't—"

"Oh, nothing so crude as that, Tom. I just want to talk to you, is all. That's not too much to ask, is it? A little conversation."

"Tell it to the cops."

"I have someone here with me. A friend of yours."

"Who?" Tom demanded, but he knew already, everything suddenly becoming clear. The phone call with that corny story about a stalker, the insistence that Tom come alone, leaving Stanley at the office by himself...

"I'm sure you've guessed that by now."

"Stanley? Let me talk to him."

"Not now, not on the phone. You can talk to him here, if you like."

"Listen, you prick, you harm Stanley and you're dead meat. If I have to chase you to the ends of the earth..."

Andrew laughed. "To the ends of the earth? God, how melodramatic. I do wonder what Stanley sees in you. He's so artistic. He and I, for instance, have so much more in common, it's a shame—"

"Cut the crap," Tom interrupted him. "Where is he? Where are you?"

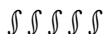
Andrew told him, gave him address and directions, and added, "And, Tom, come alone, please. Right now, Stanley's fine. I assure you, he will still be fine when you get here—if, that is, you get here alone. If I see multiple arrivals, multiple cars... well, then, that will be quite a different story, you understand."

"I'll come alone."

"Good. Shall we say, twenty minutes?"

The phone line went dead. Tom slammed the receiver back on its cradle, shoved his gun roughly back into its holster. He started from the room, and paused. What if Andrew were pulling another trick? Maybe he didn't have Stanley at all.

Without much hope, he dialed the office number, and got their answering machine. He tried Stanley's cell. No answer there, either. Grimly, he ran out of the apartment, down the stairs. His car was back at the office. Ignoring the stares he got from pedestrians on the sidewalk, he set out at fast run.



Stanley strolled about the makeshift quarters. When he turned back to the open door, he saw Andrew standing in it, watching him. His expression was fond.

"My *pied a terre*," Andrew said, indicating the primitive living arrangements. "It's a little rough but it was the best I could do in a short time. Will you have a drink with me?"

"I don't think..."

"Oh, please. Surely this is an occasion to celebrate."

Was it? Stanley wondered, but he kept that question to himself.

"My parlor," Andrew said, indicating a pair of boxes pulled up next to an old metal table. "Kitchen. Bedroom," he indicated the folding screen in the corner. "I thought you'd like some privacy."

He went to the refrigerator and opened it, contemplating its contents briefly. "Wine, do you think? Or there's iced tea. The bottled kind, I'm afraid, but it's not bad. I've doctored it a bit, to improve the taste."

"Tea, please. And, why should I want privacy? You don't mean I'm going to be sleeping here?"

Andrew poured two glasses from a large plastic pitcher, handed one to Stanley. Stanley took a tentative sip. It was tepid

and tasted strongly of mint. "Only for a short time. You mustn't be frightened. I mean you no harm."

"Then, why..."

"It's your friend. Tom, isn't it? He's seen me, you know. In all the world, he's the one person who can identify me. Put face and name together."

"Murder," Stanley said.

"Necessity."

"But I've seen you."

Andrew laughed. "Like this? How would you describe me? A tall, muscular old lady?" He snatched the wig off his head and threw it aside. His lips were crudely smeared with lipstick. He took a handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped that roughly off. "You see. I've no objections to your seeing me as I really am. I'm not afraid of you, Stanley. Nor should you be of me. We mean one another no harm, we two."

Stanley took another sip of his tea. He wasn't quite sure of either part of that equation. Andrew was a murderer, and patently dangerous. He should be arrested. But Andrew was partly right, at least. If he could have Andrew somehow removed, so that he was no longer a danger, to himself or others, why, that would be the best of all solutions. That, of course, was impossible, but in that sense, if in no other, he wished Andrew well.

"And I'm the bait to draw Tom here, is that what you mean?"

"Yes. He's the one I want."

"But, how would he find us? The note I left for him said the Transbay Terminal."

"I've given him instructions. Just now, as a matter of fact. He'll come."

Which Stanley knew to be true. Once Tom knew where he was, knew who he was with, Tom would set out to rescue him.

"Unless," Andrew said, as if reading his mind, "he's afraid of me."

"You don't know Tom."

"I know all I need to know. Will it embarrass you if I undress?"

"Not at all."

"I'm easy on the eyes," Andrew said confidently, his own eyes twinkling with boyish mischief. He reached down to the skirt of the dress he was wearing and lifted it upward, over his head. "So they tell me, at least."

He was, too, and then some. He was naked under the dress, impressively endowed, splendidly sculpted, muscles rippling. He threw the dress aside, reached for a pair of jeans hanging on a nail near the refrigerator, and paused, weighing the interest in Stanley's eyes.

"They say incest is the oldest family game," he said.

"Would it be?" Stanley wondered aloud. "Incest, I mean? We're strangers, aren't we?"

"Blood," Andrew said, but his smile was provocative, inviting.

"Yes. Blood." Stanley looked away and took a long swallow of the tea. "Aren't you cold, like that?"

Andrew laughed faintly, and quickly donned the jeans. There was a sweater lying atop one of the boxes, and he slipped that on as well. Cashmere, Stanley noted, and good cashmere, too. It seemed an odd sort of garb for a man living on the run.

"Just testing the water, establishing the ground rules, as it were," Andrew said. "We do have to get to know one another."

"Do we? What will that accomplish? You said you were leaving. Presumably, we'll never meet again."

"Probably not, after today."

"Are you going to kill me too?"

Andrew looked properly shocked. "Don't be silly. I told you why I needed you. He wouldn't come otherwise, or if he did, he would be in a dangerous state of mind, I fear. Shoot first, ask questions later, he's that sort, isn't he? But, he'll be more careful

this way. He won't want to take any risks where you're concerned."

"And after you... what? Shoot him? You think I'll just walk out and let you get away with that? I love him, you know?"

"Do you? That much, I mean? Would you really turn me in, Stanley?"

Stanley knew he should lie, and knew too that Andrew would recognize the lie. "Yes, I would."

"Really." Andrew looked genuinely surprised, but Stanley thought that he was not. Why should he have been? If Andrew knew anything at all about him and Tom, he must surely know that much. "I thought you'd be as interested in me as I am in you."

"Oh, I am. This is quite an experience, meeting you, getting to chat like this. But it doesn't change the facts. If Homeland is right, you're a terrorist. Certainly you're a murderer. And plan to be again. You've just told me you plan to murder the man I love."

"Necessity." Andrew shrugged that off as of no importance. "I've dreamed of you, you know," he said instead.

It seemed to Stanley as if Andrew were playing a game—but what kind of game? He was convincing when he said he meant Stanley himself no harm; yet patently, that couldn't be true. And why now, of all times, should he want to talk about dreams—or was he really talking about something far deeper than that?

"Have you? But, you know, the Jungians say that the only identity we can trust in our dreams is ourselves. The rest are all, well, mental hodge-podges, a bit of this, a bit of that. You see this person's face, but it morphs in an instant into someone else, or even, something else."

Andrew considered that. "I hadn't read that. What do you make of it, then, this dream hodge-podge business?"

Stanley thought in turn. "I suppose it means we should be wary of the things we think we know about people, about our knowledge of the human heart. The people in our lives are all symbols, in a way, don't you think? I mean, this person

represents love for us, and this one danger. And, our subconscious mind, I think, turns them into other symbols, maybe ones that will have more significance for us. What do you think?"

"I think of all the people I see in my dreams, people I've never known. Does our subconscious make them up for us, just to fill up our dreams? Extras in the big scene?"

"Or maybe you have known them, seen them at least, sometimes, if only in passing."

Andrew seemed to have lost interest in that subject, though. He looked around, as if he were seeing the warehouse room for the first time, as if he were surprised to find himself in it. When he looked back at Stanley, he might almost have been seeing him for the first time.

"Do you have a spiritual life, Stanley?"

"I live with Tom Danzel. We're in love. That's spiritual."

"No, that's not what I meant. I meant, something different from the day to day events."

"I suspect the day to day events are the spiritual life."

Andrew smiled, a smile both obviously genuine, and bittersweet. "Ah, Stanley. I love the way your mind works. If only things had been different. What might we have been to one another, you and I?"

"Perhaps very little. There are brothers who grow up together who aren't close at all. Some, I imagine, who actively dislike one another."

"Nonsense. That would never have happened with the two of us. You can see even in this brief little meeting that there is something special between us. I knew it before I even met you."

"You think we'd have been friends? Under different circumstances?"

"Friends? No, not that. Friends don't matter for much, do they? In the end, they all abandon you, betray you. Quarrels, envy, greed—the politics of friendship."

“Just as a matter of curiosity, what is it that you do want from me, then, if not friendship, nor forgiveness? You say you’ve followed me all my life. But, why? You disappeared before I was even born. I never knew of your existence until recently.”

“Do you know about that?” Andrew asked sharply. “How I came to disappear?”

Stanley gave his head a shake. “Nothing. As I say, I didn’t even know you existed.”

“Your parents... *our* parents... never spoke of me?”

“Not a word. Ever... only...”

Andrew looked so eager he might have actually pounced across the few feet separating them. “Only, what?”

“It was nothing, really. I was visiting my father...”

“Our father.”

Stanley finished the glass of tea. His throat felt dry. Nerves, no doubt. He was nervous, too, increasingly so. He had been willing to believe, initially at least, when he’d gotten into the car with Andrew, even as late as when they arrived here, that Andrew would not harm him; but he knew now that he had only been deluding himself. And, now that Tom had been dragged into it, Andrew’s intentions were all too clear. He meant to kill Tom, and if he killed Tom, he would have to kill Stanley too. And surely Andrew knew that, regardless of what he said.

At the same time, though, Stanley couldn’t feel as afraid as he thought he ought to be. It was surreal, having this conversation with Andrew, just as if he didn’t know Andrew meant to kill him. He thought of a movie he had watched, of a cobra, hypnotizing his intended victim, freezing the victim in place until he was ready to strike, to deliver his lethal venom. Surely that was what Andrew was doing now, wasn’t it? His eyes, wet and brown and innocent looking. His smile, his voice rich and dark and sweet, like chocolate. Stanley knew he was being gulled, knew he should be thinking of escape. Yet, he stood, chatting, unalarmed. They might have been old

acquaintances from a common past, meeting, catching up on things. Still, as Shakespeare so wisely put it, “A man may smile and smile and be a villain.”

He blinked, saw how closely Andrew was watching him, his seemingly casual chatter not so casual after all, looking for... for what? His moment to strike? He seized upon what Andrew had already told him: Tom was coming. Well, then, Tom would rescue him, rescue them. When had he ever not done so? Stanley had only to do what he was doing, stand and talk, let the time pass. Given enough time, Tom would be here.

He shook his head. Something Andrew had said... Stanley's thoughts seemed to be all muddled, as if he really had been hypnotized.

Our father... that was it.

“Yes, of course, he was your father as well as mine. It's still difficult for me to get used to that idea. All those years, I knew nothing—it's a lot to absorb.”

“You were saying? He mentioned my name?”

“Yes. I was visiting him... did you know that he had Alzheimer's? That he was in a home?”

“Home Gardens. In Petaluma. Yes, I knew of that.”

“Did you visit him?” The moment he asked the question, Stanley was sure of the answer.

Andrew ignored the question. “What did he say?”

“Nothing, really. Only your name. He looked at me as I was leaving, and he said, ‘Andrew.’”

Andrew's shoulders actually slumped. “That's all? Just my name?”

“He said it twice, I think. Not that day, but one of the nurses there, she said he spoke the name when he was dying, as if he saw you at the foot of his bed.” Andrew looked so crestfallen, though, that he felt compelled to add, “I'm sorry. His mind had gone, you know.”

“What about all those years, when you were growing up, he said nothing? She said nothing? No mention of me? No

conversation you might have overheard, maybe something that you didn't comprehend at the time?"

"If either of them did, I don't recall. I've tried to remember. But, honestly, I suspect you know more about all that old history than I do."

"Some. Enough. They gave me away, you know. As part of a drug deal. When I was a baby."

"Really?" Stanley was surprised.

"You didn't know that?"

"No. Or, well, I knew that you had disappeared. You all did, vanished. My grandmother—forgive me, *our* grandmother, it's hard to think that way—I didn't know she existed, either. My father—our father—always said he was an orphan. But this man, from Homeland Security, he came to see me..."

"Oh, yes? Homeland? What was his name?"

Stanley wondered if he ought to keep that private. But what difference could it make if Andrew knew the name or not? With any luck, Hannibal would be here soon. "Hannibal. Edward Hannibal, I think he said."

"And I suppose he was looking for me?"

Stanley actually felt embarrassed to say, "Yes. He was. That was the first I'd heard about you, you see. It seems that our grandmother reported the family missing, father, mother, baby—that would be you, the baby, not me. Years ago. There was some thought of foul play. The police there, this was in Iowa, knew they were into drugs, it seems, and naturally they suspected some kind of a drug deal gone bad."

"It did, for me," Andrew said in a bitter voice.

For a moment Stanley considered that. You were only an infant, he wanted to say, you couldn't have known; but he thought it wiser to leave Andrew's remark unchallenged. And, he was having trouble keeping his thoughts focused.

"But their investigation turned up nothing," he said instead, "and when grandmother died, it was all just dropped."

"Until this Hannibal came to see you."

"Yes."

"And said, what?"

Stanley spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "Just that they were looking for you. Your name had come up in an investigation. Some group they were looking at. But of course I could tell him nothing." He paused, said, tentatively, "He said it was a terrorist group."

Andrew made a dismissive gesture, as if that were of no consequence. "A passel of fools, is what they were. Did you bring him to the house, this Hannibal person?"

"The house? In Petaluma, you mean? No, I... but you were there that day, weren't you? The day I was there. You'd been living there."

Andrew smiled as if acknowledging some major accomplishment. "I needed a place to disappear for a while. That seemed so, I don't know, ironic, I suppose. What likelihood was there they'd think of looking there for me, in the home I'd never had? I was surprised you thought of it."

"I didn't, to be honest. I wasn't actually looking for you, I was looking for... I don't know what, exactly, I guess whatever there was there to find."

"And you very nearly found me. I'd gone into the woods, looking for some firewood, and I heard the car."

"I... I don't know, exactly, it's like, I felt you there."

Andrew ran a hand over his eyes, sniffed. The gesture, the sound, struck Stanley as melodramatic. "Oh, think about it, Stanley, it was monstrous of them, to give me away like that. You can see that, surely, can't you? Or don't you believe me?"

Stanley thought back to the parents he had known growing up, and was dismayed to think that the story was not beyond possibility. They weren't evil people, his mother and his father, but they could be cruelly selfish, unfeeling where their children were concerned.

And, yes, he could see how this must have pained his brother. What could he offer that would ease that pain? How shallow it would sound just to say, "Time will ease the pain." It

did, of course, but that was no comfort either. The real tragedy was not that one grieved, but that in time one got over one's grief; because, then, something of yourself was gone, irrevocably, some innocence that could never be gotten back.

"But, how do you know it happened like that? You were only a baby, you surely can't remember any of it."

"No." The bitterness in Andrew's voice was unmistakable. "I was told. My mother—the woman who claimed to be my mother, that is—killed herself. Her *husband*," he emphasized that, "told me, then. I think he wanted me to leave, to run away. Which I did, as soon as possible."

"How old were you?"

"Twelve. Not quite thirteen."

"Ah." Adolescence was, Stanley thought, surely the most unforgiving time of one's life, the most unbending. Everything black and white, no gradations. What gradations could there be in love, though—or, worse, in its lack? How could one ever outgrow such a betrayal, coming at such a time?

"But," he said, "would you have been happier if you hadn't known? If he hadn't told you?"

Andrew had to think about that. "No, not really. Maybe because I think I knew anyway, always had known, without knowing that I knew it. If that makes any sense."

"It does, actually. Those gut feelings. Sometimes they're more reliable than what we reason out. But you know, Andrew, they're dead, both of them. You can't live your life in bondage to the dead."

Andrew spread his hands. "Not to them, what should they matter to me? If I'm in bondage, it's to my dreams. I could have gone on fooling myself, if they'd only let me hold on to the dream. A dream can be enough. A man can live on dreams. On a single dream, if it's the right one. But, they poisoned mine, my dream of a real life, a real family, somewhere I could belong. Somewhere I was loved. How could I ever be expected to forgive them, any of them?"

"I understand. It must have been, well, horrible for you, to think of them doing that, giving you away." Stanley paused, frowned. "But, I still don't see what it is you want from me? My love? Surely that's something one earns, isn't it, over a period of time. And you've already said, we don't have the time."

"I'm not sure I know myself, to be honest, what it is I want from you." For once, Andrew did indeed sound sincere. "No, of course, you can't be expected to love me, knowing me no more than you do."

After a moment, he asked, "What about our parents, Stanley? Did you love them?"

"Yes," Stanley said without hesitation.

"Hmm." Andrew considered that. "Well, then, let me put it another way; did you trust them." That one, Stanley had to consider. "Because, that's what love really comes down to, doesn't it? A child's love, anyway. What more does a child ask, than, 'to lay our sleeping lives within their arms.'"

"I... yes, I did," Stanley said. "Then, at least. Later... she died. I don't think I ever really knew her. Maybe I never knew him, either. When he found out about me, about my being gay... it changes things, for people."

"Not for me. I don't mind at all."

"Well, but, you've never been a part of my life. How could you be disappointed in me if you'd never had hopes for me? The way they must have. The way he did, I feel sure."

"Maybe I've been more a part of your life than you've known. If circumstances had only been different..."

"But we're all victims of our circumstances, aren't we?"

"Are we? I prefer to control my circumstances."

Stanley wondered if that were really possible. Circumstances were so much bigger than we are, but he did not say so. His mind seemed all awl. He couldn't imagine where any of this was leading.

"Do you think our parents made you homosexual?" Andrew asks.

"No, of course not." He laughed. "That makes me think of a bit of graffiti, it was very popular a while back. You saw it in restrooms a lot: 'My mother made me a queer,' and someone would always write under it, 'If I buy her the wool, will she make me one too?'"

Andrew did not laugh, though, he only continued to stare at Stanley with a kind of curiosity in his eyes. Trying to make something out, it seemed to Stanley. A silence fell.

"Well, then, Andrew," Stanley said to break the silence, "what is the answer?"

"Yes," Andrew said, "that is the question."

"I suppose..." Stanley paused, put a hand to his head. The room swam briefly out of focus, and back in again. He frowned at the glass in his hand and thought of the tea and its strong mint flavor—strong enough to mask any other odd tastes.

Stanley suddenly realized what an utter fool he'd been. He had thought it was he who was stalling for time, but it had been Andrew all along, marking time with all this seemingly aimless chatter. "You've drugged me, haven't you?"

"Only a little bit. You won't sleep for long. Half an hour, maybe. An hour at the most." Andrew's voice and his expression seemed genuinely regretful, apologetic. "It was necessary, I'm sorry to say." He said it with a straight face, but Stanley thought he could detect laughter in his voice, peeking out slyly from behind it.

"Why?"

"Your boyfriend is coming. He's quite a handful. And you're very clever. I thought it safer to have one of you out of commission for a while. Why don't you let me take you to bed?"

"No, I..." Stanley tried to say, but the room was reeling now. Somehow, he wasn't aware of Andrew moving, but there he was at Stanley's side, his arm about Stanley's shoulders. It felt surprisingly comfortable to lean against him, to allow himself to be guided toward the screen in the corner. The screen that promised privacy, Andrew had said.

Privacy for what? To die, unmolested?

“Do not go into that dark place, fear it...”

He did fear it—but, helplessly, he went. Andrew was whispering to him, the words slipping in and out of the gloaming of Stanley’s consciousness: “...Are as a river, and the things of the soul as a dream, or vapor...”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Andrew's directions, though brief, had been precise. Tom followed them almost to their destination, but he parked the pickup truck just around the corner from where he was told he would find the entrance to the warehouse.

He hadn't dared call Hannibal, afraid of what Andrew might do if he saw the troops massing outside his door. Now, though, it could hardly matter. At the fastest, it would take Hannibal and his agents ten, fifteen minutes to get here, probably longer. They'd be unable to use sirens to clear the way for them. In San Francisco traffic, that would slow them.

By then, fifteen minutes from now, even ten minutes, things would be resolved between him and Andrew Korski, one way or the other. One of them, almost certainly, would be dead. He thought it would be Andrew. That was his plan, pretty much his entire plan at this stage, but, in the event that he himself was the dead man, then rescuing Stanley would be up to Hannibal. For Stanley's sake, he needed back up, and Hannibal was it. There were others he could call—SFPD, certainly—but that would require explanations. Hannibal already knew the story, and he had considerable resources at hand, probably more even than what SFPD had available.

He punched Hannibal's number into his cell phone, and when a voice answered, gave his name and said where he was and, without waiting for a reply, disconnected. By now, they were looking for him, him and Stanley. He was confident Hannibal would pick up the ball and run with it.

He had his Sig Sauer in its shoulder holster, but he had a back up gun, too, locked in the glove box, a little twenty-two. He took that out and stuffed it into the top of his left sock. It was only good for close range, but he suspected he would be at close range when he used it. If he got a chance to use it.

Then he started up the truck and drove around the corner. The warehouse door was open, as he had been promised. He drove in, stopped just inside, turned off the motor.

At first, he saw no one. After a moment, Andrew stepped from behind a partition at the far end of the long space. He held a gasoline can in his left hand, and a gun, a .45, in his right, aimed at the truck.

"Mister Danzel, how good of you to come. Perhaps you'd be so gracious as to step out of the truck. Hands aloft, please."

Tom got out of the truck and raised his hands obediently into the air, shoving the door closed with one elbow. This was only the second time he'd seen Andrew face to face, and that first time, at the funeral, had been brief, no more than a quick glance, really. He studied the face of the man in front of him, fully aware that Andrew was studying him as well, as intently.

Andrew didn't resemble Stanley as much as he remembered, Tom thought now. Or, he did, but, it was like Stanley's features... he didn't know exactly how to describe it to himself; Stanley would know, would have exactly the right words, but words weren't Tom's strong suit. It was like Stanley's face, but out of focus. Or, and this was surprising because if he remembered the story rightly, Andrew wasn't much older than Stanley. No more, he thought, than three, maybe four years.

He looked older, though, much older than that. Like his face had been worn hard.

"Satisfied?" Andrew asked, smiling.

"I will be. When I see Stanley. Where is he?"

Andrew ignored the question, said instead, "You're wearing your piece, I suppose." Tom said nothing. "Of course you are. I can see the holster. Why don't you take the gun out of it, very carefully, and toss it on the floor in front of you, in my direction. And, before you resort to any heroics... that's propane in those tanks along the wall. A lot of propane, which is highly explosive, in case you didn't know. And this is what we call the igniter."

He splashed gasoline from the can, making a trail of it over to the metal stairs, leaving a pool of it to puddle around the propane canisters.

"A single shot is all it would take to ignite the gasoline. The gasoline, when it reaches the canisters, will set off the propane. You can imagine the result."

"This place will blow sky high."

"Exactly. At the moment, Stanley is very much incapacitated. He's behind that partition over there, sleeping like a baby. Don't do anything, please, to place him in jeopardy. He'd be very unlikely to survive the resultant holocaust."

Tom wasn't entirely sure about the threat, of a gunshot setting off the gasoline, but he wasn't confident enough in his doubts to want to risk it. Andrew solved that for him by taking a handful of matches from his pocket. One match would certainly do the job.

Tom reached under his jacket with his right hand, took the Sig by its handle and drew it gingerly from its holster. He weighed it in his hand for a moment, considering, and then tossed it in Andrew's direction. It ended up midway between the two of them, only a foot or so short of the metal stairs.

Andrew smiled approvingly. "Very good," he said. "Now, let me see. You must have a back up weapon. Where would that be, I wonder?" He looked Tom up and down. "The waist of your trousers, perhaps. Take off your jacket. Turn around. Well, that's not it, then. Let me see." He puzzled for a moment. "Your leg, I suppose. Pull up your trousers. Ah, there it is. I think we'll have that, too. Carefully, now." He struck one of the matches against the metal of the stairs. The little flame came and went, tiny, but it looked altogether enormous in the warehouse gloom. Tom sucked in his breath, half expecting the gasoline to ignite, but the flame was gone in an instant.

Helplessly, Tom bent down, took the twenty-two from his sock, and tossed it after the Sig, his mind racing. Stanley was behind that partition. So near and so far. How long would it take the gasoline to set off the propane canisters? And what did

Andrew have planned, once he'd ignited the gasoline? Surely he didn't plan to stay around to die himself.

"Those stairs," he said aloud, glancing at them. "Your escape hatch? I don't imagine you're planning to stay around for the bonfire."

Andrew shrugged. "I don't see why you shouldn't know. Yes. The stairs will take me to the roof, and there's a catwalk to the warehouse next door. My car is there. When your rescuers arrive... oh, yes, I just suppose you've alerted Homeland to where we are—Mister Hannibal, isn't it? I'm sure they're on their way at this very moment, but they won't be in time, not to find me here. In another minute, I'm going up these stairs. I'll be driving off in the opposite direction even as they're rushing to the rescue."

"After you've killed me, of course."

"Yes, after that, of course. And it may surprise you to know that I regret that. I truly do. Stanley thinks so highly of you. But, I have no choice, do I? I have to kill you."

"You're going to kill Stanley, too." It was a statement, not a question.

"I love Stanley." Which skirted the issue, didn't it?

"You don't even know Stanley."

Andrew's eyes flashed, destroying the mask of calm he wore. "Fool! I know him better than you do. You only know his body. I know his blood. It's my blood, too, I run in his veins. Fuck him all you want, you'll never be in his heart the way I am."

"I'm in Stanley's heart too, in a way you'll never be."

"And he in yours? Tell me that you love him. You haven't said that yet."

Tom hesitated for a second, no more. "Stanley's heart is mine," he said.

Andrew gave a dry snort of laughter. "And Shelley's heart was Trelawney's, so he thought. I don't suppose you know that story?"

"This isn't the time—"

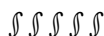
"Trelawney snatched Shelley's heart from his funeral pyre. He was fond of saying, later, that he had Shelley's heart, but Mary Shelley was just as fond of saying that Trelawney had only a dead organ, Shelley's heart was still hers."

"What are you trying to tell me? You're going to start a funeral fire for Stanley, and at the last minute, you're going to snatch his heart from it?"

Andrew smiled. "What an intriguing idea, that. I confess I hadn't thought of it. But, no, this fire will be quite a different sort, and I have places to go, things to do. I'll leave Stanley's heart to you."

"You bastard."

Andrew was saved from answering. Stanley's voice came weakly from beyond the screen in the corner, "Tom? Is that you?"



Stanley was dreaming. He was in some plague-infected city, London, perhaps, or maybe only a city of dreams. He heard the rumble of the death carts, the voice calling, "Bring out your dead..."

Then, suddenly, another voice superimposed itself, a voice that brought him back in an instant from the swirling, smothering darkness of his nightmares.

He opened his eyes, blinked. "Tom," he called, "is that you?"



Tom turned automatically, took a step in that direction—which saved his life, at least for the moment. Andrew fired his gun just as Tom turned. Andrew was a fairly good shot. If Stanley hadn't spoken, if Tom hadn't moved, Andrew would certainly have killed him with that one shot. Instead of the chest, right in the heart, the bullet caught Tom lower, off center. Tom staggered and fell, pain piercing his side where the bullet had entered. But not dead.

Andrew struck all of the matches in his hand and threw them at the trail of gasoline on the floor. He would have shot Tom again, intended to shoot him with a more careful aim, but the flames surprised him, leaped up faster, more violently than he had expected. The heat was instantly intense, growing rapidly worse and still worse. It felt as if any second his clothes might ignite spontaneously, or his hair, even.

He hesitated for only a heartbeat. Tom was wounded, perhaps mortally. In any case, it would take no more a minute at the most for the gasoline to reach the pile of propane canisters, seconds more for the tanks to explode. Wounded, there was no way Tom would escape in time.

A living dog is better than a dead lion. The instinct for self-survival that had served Andrew so well in the past came to the fore. He fired one more shot, wildly, and made his own escape while he still could, bolting upward, the metal stairs clanging as he ran.

Already, the metal was hot to the touch. He ran harder.



Tom staggered to his knees. The fire was spreading rapidly, the flames racing across the open space. When it got to the propane tanks...

"Stanley," he shouted. High above, a door opened and banged shut. Smoke blew into Tom's face, making him cough. He made it to his feet, clutching at his side. Blood seeped through his fingers. He held his hand tight over the wound and lumbered toward the wooden screen. Banged into it, knocking it over with a crash.

Stanley was sitting on the edge of a cot, shaking his head groggily. "Tom," he said. "I heard a shot. I..."

"Get up," Tom ordered him, "we've got to get out of here."

Stanley's eyes went wide, tried to focus. "You're hurt."

"Just a scratch. Come on." He got Stanley to his feet, his arm around him. "No, save your breath, we'll talk later." Staggering feebly, Tom managed to get with him to the main part of the warehouse. Already, the room was an inferno, the

flames lapping at the tanks of propane. Tom's gut was on fire, the smoke stinging his eyes and his lungs. His knees felt like jelly. Behind them, the wooden partition burst into flames with a small explosion, like a popgun going off. Tom could see the open door—a thousand miles away.

He suddenly knew he wouldn't make it. He could only hold Stanley back—and if he did, neither of them was going to escape.

"Run, Stanley," he said, shoving a hand hard at Stanley's back. "The door. Go, fast as you can. Don't worry, I'm right behind you."

For a second, Stanley hesitated. "Go," Tom bellowed, shoving harder, "God damn it, Stanley, do what I tell you. Run."

Stanley ran. The flames were a flickering curtain. He could see Tom's pickup through them, and the open door beyond that. He put his arms up over his face and ran through the blaze, past the truck, out the door... and found himself, astonishingly, in Edward Hannibal's arms.

"Easy," Hannibal said, brushing at the smoldering sleeve of Stanley's jacket, "We've got you. Take it easy."

Stanley's laugh was just short of hysterical. "My God," he said, "Did you ever see... Tom, look, it's Mister Hannibal, talk about Johnny-on-the-spot. Whoo-eee, talk about..."

He looked over his shoulder. Cars were parked everywhere, police cars and dark government sedans, and already in the distance he could hear sirens. People were milling about; it looked like an army of them, men in dark suits and men in black SFPD uniforms.

Only... he didn't see Tom among them.

The warehouse exploded suddenly, a blast so violent that it shook the ground like an earthquake. Great tongues of flame burst out the door and flung the glass from the windows, scorching the sparse grass that ran along the side of the alley, driving the people closest to it back, to take shelter behind the vehicles.

“Where’s Tom?” Stanley demanded, of no one and everyone, his voice ascending. “Tom? Where are you?”

“Take it easy,” Hannibal said again.

Stanley looked into his face, back at the fire now leaping skyward, and into Hannibal’s face again. “He didn’t make it?” Hannibal said nothing. He didn’t need to. His expression said everything.

“Let me go.” Stanley struggled with the arms that were suddenly tighter around him. “Tom’s still in there. Damn you, let me go.”

“Hold him,” Hannibal said, and all at once there were more arms, it seemed dozens of them, holding Stanley back when he would have rushed into that conflagration. Would have rushed into Hell itself if Tom were there. Didn’t they know that? Couldn’t they understand?

Stanley fought against them furiously, cursing and kicking and punching, but there were too many of them and they were too strong. His strength failed him then, and he surrendered to the arms, felt someone lifting him off the ground, carrying him away from the fire.

“Tom.” It was a scream of pain, of anguish. “Tom!”

CHAPTER TWENTY

It felt as if he were swimming in an ocean of pain. He wanted to let himself sink into it, surrender to the oblivion that threatened. But he couldn't, not yet. He had to know, first.

Tom forced his eyes open. Someone was leaning over him, adjusting a bandage. The face was familiar, but it was painful even to think, as if his brain had been burned, too. The fire was more than just in his memory, it was in his blood, he could feel his whole body still burning with it. He remembered crawling to the truck, crawling under it... and nothing after that.

He closed his eyes, fought the urge to sink into the darkness, and opened them again. He recognized the face above him then. Stanley's friend, the nurse. What was his name? Chris, that was it.

"Stanley?" It hurt to speak. He could barely get his burned lips to move. It came out a faint whisper, the merest croak of sound.

Chris heard him though, or, he understood, at least, what Tom had tried to say. "He's okay," he said. "Stanley's okay."

It hurt to smile, but Tom smiled anyway, involuntarily, and drifted downward again, into the pain, into the flames. Stanley was safe. He'd saved Stanley. Everything was fine.



He had saved himself, too, it seemed—but not the self he had been in the past. He knew, even before they changed the dressings on his face, even before he saw Chris, standing behind the doctor, wince at the sight. Knew that he would never look the same again.

"Scars?" he asked the doctor.

"Yes. But, there's so much they can do today. Hold still, now." He bent down, touched Tom's skin here and there, the lightest of touches, but still excruciating. He straightened, gave

Tom one of those hearty smiles meant to encourage and which could only make the recipient aware of how hopeless the outlook really was.

“For now, I’d say you can be grateful just to be alive. I’ll leave the nurse, here, to replace the dressings.”

Chris worked briskly, efficiently, without speaking, avoiding Tom’s eyes. Which told Tom everything he needed to know, but he asked anyway. “How bad it is? How bad will it be?”

For a moment more, Chris continued to avoid Tom’s eyes. Finally, he met them, sighed, and paused in his ministrations. “You want the hearts and flowers version, or the tough one?”

“The tough one.”

“You’re going to be a mess. For a long time. This part,” he waved the back of his hand along the left side of Tom’s face without touching it, “will look like raw hamburger. Of course, like the doctor said, they can do terrific work these days, with plastic surgery, skin grafts, all kinds of things. Special makeup, even.”

“That terrific? Will I look like I did before?”

It took Chris a long time to answer. He looked away from Tom’s demanding gaze again, and went back to dressing his burns.

“Maybe. Eventually.”

“In the meantime, I’m going to look like raw hamburger?”

“Yes.”

“For a long time?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe forever?”

“Yes. You may look like raw hamburger forever.”



It wasn’t his burns that Tom lay thinking of after Chris had gone, nor what his face was going to look like when the bandages were gone, the burns healed. He could survive that. He was a survivor. His thoughts were filled with Stanley.

Stanley, who loved poetry and music and art. Stanley, who loved beauty in all things. Tom was no fool, he knew he was good looking, had been anyway, and he knew that was a major part of what Stanley had loved about him. He understood that. He didn't blame him. That was just the way Stanley was.

He wasn't going to be good looking any more, though. Stanley might still love him with a face like raw hamburger, but it would be in a different way, wouldn't it? A very different way.

Okay, then, he had to face that possibility; what if he lost Stanley? That thought filled him with pain far beyond what he felt from the damage to his body, but it had to be looked at. Because he might lose Stanley, or, and this might be closer to the truth, maybe Stanley had lost him, already. In that fire.



"Hold it." A dark suited man got up from a chair by the door to Tom's room, motioned for Stanley, hand at the door, to stop. "I need to see some ID."

"It's okay," a familiar voice said. Edward Hannibal strode toward them down the hospital corridor. "This is Mister Korski, Mister Danzel's partner."

Stanley looked from one to the other. "What is he doing here, guarding Tom's door? Surely Tom isn't under some kind of house arrest?"

"Far from it." Hannibal smiled. Stanley didn't think he'd ever seen that happen before. "Mister Danzel is our number one priority witness. He's the only one who's seen Andrew Korski face to face, the one who can identify him."

"Apart from me, you mean."

"Yes, apart from you."

They weighed one another. "You think, what? That I wouldn't identify him if it came down to that?"

"Well, now, see, that's a different thing, isn't it? Danzel the way I look at it, he has plenty of reason to hate this guy. Plus, I'd have to be a real ass not to see that Danzel is very protective of you. He'd give your brother up in a heartbeat, if for no other

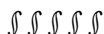
reason than to protect you. You, on the other hand... he is your brother."

"A brother I never knew until the last few days. Until he tried to kill me."

"Still... blood tells, sometimes. Would you give him up, knowing for certain that he was going to die? Because he will. You'd be killing him, giving him up. I don't see you killing anyone, frankly."

"I could. If I had to." Hannibal's smile was not quite a smirk.

"You know, I think you are an ass," Stanley said, and pushed his way into Tom's room.



"It's a good thing they didn't pat me down," Stanley said when he told Tom about the experience. "Look." He opened his jacket to reveal that he was wearing his shoulder holster, with the Beretta tucked neatly into it. "I thought, since Andrew was still on the loose... though I imagine by now he's well on his way to someplace far from here. Hannibal says..."

"Why don't you share all this with someone who gives a fuck?" Tom snapped. "Hannibal and his hotshots... they let Andrew get away scot-free, didn't they? After making me toast."

"Wow. Somebody's got his dander up." Stanley pulled a hard plastic chair over by the bed and sat in it, grinning.

Tom turned his head laboriously. All that could be seen of his face was his mouth, with blistered lips, and his eyes, glowering angrily now at Stanley.

"I talked to the doctor," Stanley said. "He says your eyebrows and your eyelashes will grow back." He leaned closer to peer at them. "Actually, I think they've already started."

"Is that so?" Tom looked away from him. "What else did the doctor tell you, Stan?"

Stanley hated being called Stan, which by this time, Tom knew. He decided to let it go, though.

"You're going to recover. You'll be fine. That's the important thing. It will just take time, but we..."

"Don't say 'we,' Stan."

Stanley thought about that briefly. "Why not?"

"Because there isn't any 'we.' Not any more. When I get out of here, it will be me. Just me. The way it always was before. The way I should have left it."

"And what about me?"

"That's your life. You do what you want with it. Just leave me out of it."

Stanley half-grinned, thinking Tom was putting him on, that this was just the build up to one of his corny gags. Only, Tom wasn't smiling. And there didn't seem to be a punch line.

"Why?"

"Why? Jesus. Look at me, wrapped up like a mummy, pumped full of pain medications. A fragment of the man I was, and that's all I'm ever going to be. And how did that happen, Stan? Why? I'll tell you why—because once again you didn't use your fucking head, is why. Tell me, why in the name of Christ would you have gotten into a car with your brother, knowing the kind of man he was? Why would you even have gone to meet him?"

"I..." Stanley was flustered. He'd asked himself the same question, over and over, and gotten no satisfactory answer. "Because..."

"Because you never think past what Stanley wants, in any precise moment. You wanted to meet your brother, you wanted to talk to him. Admit it, you thought you would, what, save his soul, I guess. Stanley the Messiah. Something like that, wasn't it?"

"I guess so. Something like that. I thought, well, I thought I could persuade him to turn himself in." Tom scoffed and looked away. "And, yes, I did want to meet him, one-on-one, to talk to him. A brother, I'd never known? All that mystery. Wouldn't you? Is that so terrible?"

For an answer, Tom lifted a bandage wrapped arm into the air. "I don't know. You tell me."

"But, that was Andrew. I didn't do that to you, Tom."

"Didn't you? Why was I even there?"

"Because that's how he'd set it up. It was you he wanted, it was you he wanted to kill."

"And it was you that he used as bait. Because he knew that I would do what I always did, I'd come after you to save your ass. You counted on that too, didn't you? When you went with him?"

"No. Well, not exactly, but..."

Tom scoffed again. "Right. Not exactly."

Chris had come into the room with a tray of meds. He paused inside the door, wondering if he could just back out without being noticed, but it was too late. Tom had looked past Stanley and seen him there.

"Ah, here's my favorite nurse," Tom said. "End of discussion."

Stanley got up from the chair in which he'd been sitting. He squared his shoulders, fought back the tears that threatened. "I'll come back later, when you're feeling better," he said.

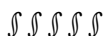
"No, don't. Don't come back. It's over, Stanley. Let it die peacefully, here and now."

The tears escaped despite Stanley's efforts, coursed down his cheeks. "Tom," he said in a miserable voice, "I love you."

"No you don't. You love my big dick. You loved the idea of getting into my pants. I was a big challenge for you, wasn't I? Well, you had your fun. Now go find it with somebody else. I'm through."

"No," Stanley said.

"Yes. Get out. And don't come back."



He'd been so sure, even though he never spoke the words, that Tom in his heart of hearts had loved him, would one day

waken to that reality. And now, Tom would never say those words to him, "Stanley, I love you." Everything was different now. The dying Buddha: it changes.

But the worst, the very worst of it was, there was some truth to the accusations that Tom had flung at him. Stanley remembered a story of some French nobleman, whose mistress had tossed a glove through the bars of a lion's cage, and challenged him to retrieve it. He had done so, but he had said afterward, "It isn't love, but vanity, that asks a proof like this of love."

He thought, not for the first time, that of all the ills Pandora had released upon the world, Hope might be the most insidious. He had gone with Andrew, knowing the danger, hoping for some different outcome.

He had gone, too, knowing full well, as Tom had said, that somehow Tom would save him—as he had done, but at what a terrible cost. Who could blame him for his anger, for what Stanley's vanity had cost him?



There was a little walled-in garden off the hospital cafeteria. Chris found him there, leaning into an alcove and crying quietly. Stanley heard Chris approach and turned to him, flinging himself into Chris' arms.

"Oh, Chris, he hates me."

To his surprise, Chris took a step back and, taking hold of Stanley's shoulders, gave him a violent shake. "Stop it," he said angrily. "What kind of fool are you? Can't you ever think of anybody but poor Stanley?"

"He told me to leave him alone, Chris," Stanley said, his voice breaking. "You heard him. He said he never wanted to see me again. And who could blame him?"

"You ninny! Stanley, your ass isn't a bonnet, why don't you get your head out of it? Did you happen to notice your boyfriend's face? Like, all those bandages on it?"

Stanley drew back a little, and sniffled loudly. "Of course I did," he said indignantly. "We talked about it. Well, we didn't,

exactly, Tom and I, but I talked to the doctor. He assured me they'd be able to fix everything. They can do all kinds of things with plastic surgery."

The look Chris gave him was openly scornful. "I've half a mind to slap you, really hard," Chris said.

"What?" Stanley blinked back his tears. "Are you saying it can't all be fixed? The doctor said..."

"Doctors say what people want to hear sometimes."

"What do you mean? What are you trying to say? That Tom will have scars?"

"I'm trying to tell you. He's going to look like some kind of sideshow freak."

"Sure. For a while, until..." He stopped. Chris was shaking his head sadly.

"You just don't get it, do you? He's going to look like that for a long time. Maybe for the rest of his life. Permanently scarred. Your handsome Tom. Only he won't be handsome anymore. That's why he sent you away, Stanley. Because he thought..." His voice broke, trailed off.

"Because he thought that I wouldn't love him anymore? Because his face..." Chris nodded. "Oh, God. That poor man. That poor, crazy fucking man. How could he think..."

"Stanley, you can be such an airhead at times. And you were so infatuated with that handsome face."

"Well, of course I was, who wouldn't be, but that doesn't mean... Oh, Chris, I've got to talk to him, I have to make him understand..."

"No." His voice sharp. "You will *not* mention this to him. He's in enough pain right now, the sort I can't give him any pills for. Let him think you don't know. Give him time to come to terms with this. There'll be time enough later. Anyway, he's sleeping now. Let him sleep."

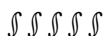
Stanley thought about Tom, about what Tom had risked, and sacrificed, to save him. He loved Tom for his bravery as much as for anything. But he knew, too—every gay man did—

that gays had something extra, some different kind of courage and strength, to keep them going, but no less real for the difference. How could they endure their lives otherwise? A courage he'd have to summon up now, to get himself—to get *them*—through the next few months. But he would. He vowed he would. Tom had never failed him, never, no matter the risk to himself. He was not going to fail Tom now, no matter what it cost him.

“Okay,” he said aloud, “I won’t say anything to him. But I’m going to go back to his room anyway. I’m going to keep an eye out. Andrew’s still on the loose. He tried to kill Tom before. He may try again.”

“There’s no need. Homeland still has an agent at his door at all times. They ID everybody going in.”

“Hannibal and his hotshots.” Stanley snorted his disdain. “They let Andrew get away didn’t they? After he’d made toast of Tom. No, I’m going to see that nobody does any more harm to the man I love. He’s my responsibility now, not Homeland’s. I’ll look after him.”



Larry Fulton, Homeland agent, was half asleep in the chair by the door to Danzel’s hospital room. It was a boring gig. He’d only been with the agency a little over a month, and he’d joined expecting action, not playing doorkeeper.

Now, a couple of the nurses... but, what chance did he have, sitting here for hours at a time. They came in and out, they smiled at him, some of them encouragingly, and then they were gone. And here he sat.

Someone approached down the corridor. Larry looked in the direction of the footsteps, hoping it was the cute little blonde nurse who had smiled at him a little while ago, but it was a doctor this time. A surgeon, he looked like, dressed in pale green scrubs, a little cap on his head, even one of those white paper masks over the lower part of his face. Germ protection, Larry supposed.

“Doc,” Larry greeted him with a nod.

“Just a routine check up,” the doctor said. He was carrying a tray with a couple of syringes on it. He had an ID badge pinned to his shirt. It was too far for Larry to read it, but clearly it identified him as one of the medical staff. Or, maybe he should check it. He glanced at the tray with the syringes.

“Antibiotics,” the doctor said. He reached for the door and paused. “Oh, I’m going to be here for a few minutes. Some tests to run. If you needed a break, this would be a good time. I’ll stay with him till you get back, just to be safe.”

Which sounded like music to Larry’s ears. Only a moment earlier he’d seen the cute little blonde nurse checking back at the station down the hall. He got to his feet, stretching. It felt like he’d been sitting for weeks. He forgot about looking more closely at the ID badge. Anyway, he could see that was what it was, with the doctor’s name and his picture on it. Which surely meant he was okay.

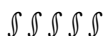
“If you’re sure,” he said, unable to help sounding eager.

The doctor nodded. “Absolutely. If the man’s not safe with his doctor, when could he be?”

Larry grinned. “You got a point,” he said. “Well, I need to see a man about a car,” he said, “and I could use a cigarette. I’ll poke my head in and let you know when I get back.”

“Fine. Do that.”

Larry started toward the nurse’s station. When he looked back, the doctor had disappeared inside the room.



Stanley was asleep. He had pulled the visitor’s chair into the far corner of Tom’s room, and turned out the light there. The room was nearly dark, just the little penlight above Tom’s bed.

Something, he wasn’t sure what, woke him up with a start. He opened one eye, to see a doctor standing by Tom’s bed. For a moment, he couldn’t think what the doctor was doing.

Stanley blinked eyes open, fully awake now. As he watched, the doctor took a syringe off a tray. He leaned over and disconnected Tom’s IV feed.

“Stop,” Stanley said, sitting bolt upright. “What are you doing?”

The doctor looked surprised over his shoulder. “Stanley. I thought you’d gone. I saw you leave.”

“I came back.” Stanley stared hard at him. The lower half of the doctor’s face was covered by a respiratory mask, but there was no mistaking the eyes that peered at him from above the mask, eyes so like his own. Andrew. His demon brother.

“Obviously.” Andrew tugged the mask down, let it dangle below his chin. He looked down at the syringe in his hand, as if embarrassed to see it there. “I... I tried to spare you this,” he said. “If I had known you were still here, I’d have waited a bit longer. Still...”

“That’s some kind of poison in the syringe, isn’t it? You’re going to kill him.”

Andrew sighed with regret. “It has to be done. He’s the only one who can identify me. He’s the only one who’s actually seen my face.”

People kept saying that. How stupid could they be? “Not quite the only one.”

Andrew actually smiled at that. “No, you’re right, of course. I haven’t forgotten that you’ve seen me too. But I wouldn’t kill you. You must know that.”

“You were going to kill me once before. Very nearly did.”

“At the warehouse? That was a mistake. An unfortunate accident, to be honest. I didn’t know the fire would burn so quickly. I thought you’d have time to get out.” His voice wasn’t convincing. “I never wanted to kill you. You must believe that. You’re blood. But, this man...”

“You almost killed him before, too, Andrew. Thanks to you he was nearly burned alive. I’m not going to let you harm him any further. You’ve done all the damage you’re ever going to do to Tom Danzel.” Stanley had taken the Beretta out of its holster earlier and laid it in his lap. He picked it up now and raised it into view. The steel glittered wickedly in the dim light.

Andrew smiled again, almost a patronizing smile. "What? You're going to shoot me? Have you ever? Killed anybody?"

"There's always a first time."

Andrew shrugged. "Well, perhaps..." He looked at the syringe again, and back at Stanley. His expression was ineffably sad. "Once you've done it... *C'est le premier pas qui coute*. It's the first time that matters. Why are you smiling?"

"Tom. Whenever I speak French, he says," lowering his voice in a poor imitation of Tom's basso, "Stanley, I only speak two languages, bad English, and worse." Despite the situation, Stanley almost giggled. It was such a Tom remark.

Andrew did not giggle, however, nor even smile. He held the syringe up as if for Stanley's approval. "It's potassium. It will be very quick. I had options, you know. A paralytic would be much slower, much more painful. I wanted to spare him that, for your sake." He looked down at Tom.

At some time during the conversation, Tom had awakened. He reached for the buzzer attached to the headboard, to summon help, but Andrew had taken it away. Tom grunted, looked wide-eyed at Stanley, and up at his would be killer. "You fuck," he managed to say, his voice little more than a rasp.

"It won't hurt," Andrew said, with a note of finality in his voice, the way one might speak to a difficult child, and brought the tip of the syringe down to the IV connection. "I promise."

The gun sounded like a cannon in the small room. Even as bad a shot as he was, it would have been impossible for Stanley to miss, and he didn't. For a long moment, Andrew stared down at the wound rapidly blossoming at the side of his chest. He looked at Stanley, seemed almost amused. The syringe fell from his hands. He swayed, and toppled backward.

But, he knew I would shoot, Stanley thought, and immediately after, *or was that the point?*

"Stanley," Tom managed to say.

Stanley leaped from his chair, crossed the room in three strides, stepping right across his dead brother, and dropped over Tom in a protective huddle.

"Tom, I killed him. I killed my brother."

"It's okay, baby."

"I had to. He was..."

"I know." Somehow Tom had managed to get his good arm about Stanley's shoulder. "Stanley, oh my Stanley..."

People were rushing into the room, doors crashing, a chorus of voices, surprised, horrified, concerned. Tom and Stanley were oblivious to them, as if they were somehow enveloped in a protective bubble, just the two of them, set apart from everything and everyone else.

"Oh, Tom, Tom," Stanley sobbed, clinging to the man on the bed. "I had to do it. I didn't want to, but I had to kill him. He was going to kill you."

"I know, baby, I know."

As much as Tom wanted to comfort Stanley, though, there was something he had to say. He'd thought about it in those seconds when it seemed, when he believed, that Andrew was going to kill him, had thought about what he hadn't gotten around to saying; and you never knew what minute was going to be your last one, when you might lose forever the chance to say what was important—maybe the most important thing he'd ever had to say in his life.

Now, it had to be said. He had wasted too many moments already, days, weeks of them, moments he could never get back. He was never again going to waste a second of his time with this man clinging to him.

"Stanley," he whispered, his voice breaking with the intensity of his feelings, "I love you."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lecturer, writing instructor and early rabble rouser for the rights and freedoms of individuals, including gay rights, civil rights, women's rights and freedom of the press, Victor J. Banis is the critically acclaimed author ("the master's touch in storytelling..." Publishers Weekly) or more than 160 published books, plus numerous shorter pieces and verse, in a career spanning nearly half a century. His most recent works include *Lola Dances* (MLR Press); *Angel Land* (Regal Crest Enterprises) and the Deadly Mystery Series from MLR Press: *Deadly Nightshade*; *Deadly Wrong*; and *Deadly Dreams*. Next up: *Deadly Slumber*. A native of Ohio and longtime California, he lives and writes now in West Virginia's beautiful Blue Ridge.

Visit Victor at his website <http://www.vjbanis.com>

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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 gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community and those questioning their sexual orientation and gender identity. It is an outgrowth of the Gay & Lesbian National Hotline, which began in 1996 and now is a primary program of The GLBT National Help Center. It offers several different programs including two national hotlines that help members of the GLBT community talk about the important issues that they are facing in their lives. It helps end the isolation that many people feel, by providing a safe environment on the phone or via the internet to discuss issues that people can’t talk about anywhere else. The GLBT National Help Center also helps other organizations build the infrastructure they need to provide strong support to our community at the local level.

National Hotline: 1-888-THE-GLNH (1-888-843-4564)

National Youth Talkline 1-800-246-PRIDE (1-800-246-7743)

On the Web: <http://www.glnh.org/>

e-mail: info@glbtnationalhelpcenter.org

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

<http://dv-8.com/resources/us/local/campus.html>

GLBT Scholarship Resources

<http://tinyurl.com/6fx9v6>

Syracuse University

<http://lgbt.syr.edu/>

Texas A&M

<http://glbt.tamu.edu/>

Tulane University

<http://www.oma.tulane.edu/LGBT/Default.htm>

University of Alaska

<http://www.uaf.edu/agla/>

University of California, Davis

<http://lgbtrc.ucdavis.edu/>

University of California, San Francisco

<http://lgbt.ucsf.edu/>

University of Colorado

<http://www.colorado.edu/glbtrc/>

University of Florida

<http://www.dso.ufl.edu/multicultural/lgbt/>

University of Hawai'i, Mānoa

<http://manoa.hawaii.edu/lgbt/>

University of Utah

<http://www.sa.utah.edu/lgbt/>

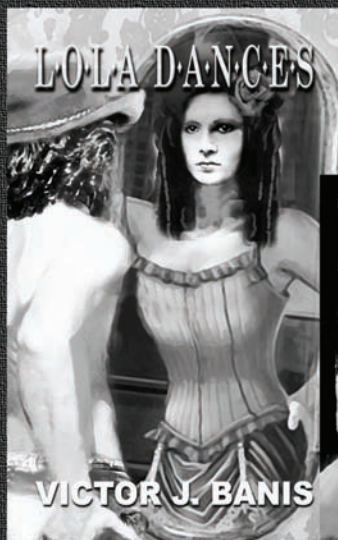
University of Virginia

<http://www.virginia.edu/deanofstudents/lgbt/>

Vanderbilt University

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lgbtqi/>

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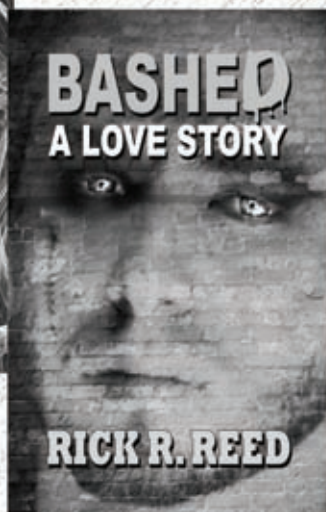
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