

THE HUNT

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THE HUNT

by

David Sherman

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for Ginny

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CHAPTER ONE

Rocks almost caught up with them at a roadside place somewhere between Arizona and Albuquerque. He thought they suspected someone was on their tail so he didn't hold too much hope of them still being at this place, but maybe. He had to take the chance, follow every lead. His heart almost jumped when he pulled into the place's side lot and saw their camper parked out back. Along with two pickups, a rust-bodied Plymouth, and a Dodge van. The van had a bit of crepe ribbon streamer in its grill and someone had tried to scrub off the "just married" soaped on its rear. A tow truck jutted its business end out from behind an out-building.

Rocks took his time getting out of his canvas-topped jeep. He looked at the pin-stripe coat and vest laying on the passenger seat and decided this wasn't an occasion he needed to dress for. He pulled his tie the rest of the way loose and dropped it on top of the vest and coat. He checked that he had everything he needed to take them fast and quiet, made sure there was a round in the chamber of his 9mm automatic and snugged on his gloves. He glanced at the CB radio laying next to his jacket and decided it didn't matter if it was still turned on. He dismounted. The mid-day sun glared off his white shirt, glinted off his polished cowboy boots, picked out the pinstriping in his trousers, made small sparks on his face where the sunblock was thickest, was shaded from his face by his broad brimmed hat. His reflecting sunglasses hid his eyes, but if seen they'd probably be as expressionless as the rest of his face. Only the dull brown holster on the back of his hip didn't show the sun. The only sounds were the occasional cooling-down pops from the jeep and the high-pitched cry of a raptor hunting in the distance. Rocks walked softly across the hard dirt of the side lot to the place's shade, past the pay phone mounted on the side wall, to the kitchen door. On the way to the kitchen door he thought about how he could do it so nobody would know who they were. If they didn't already know. No matter if they knew, nobody'd believe them -- if any survived.

The kitchen door was ajar and he eased through. A jukebox or

radio playing something Tex-Mex in the main room was all he heard from the bar. No one was in the kitchen. The door to the walk-in cooler stood half open, not a good sign. A lone fly buzzed aimlessly in the room. He brushed his hand over the sweeping mustache that covered his upper lip, a nervous habit he didn't realize he had, and knew it was too late to stop them from doing something that could attract a lot of attention. He'd have to get someone in to clean up before anybody else showed up; then all the local authorities would have was an unsolvable mystery instead of something that could lead them in the right direction.

He paused at the door to the main room and took off his wrap-around shades, figured it was too dark inside to see clearly with them on. He drew his pistol and flicked off the safety before he pushed the door open. He went through fast -- they wouldn't listen to anything like reason, not now. He was blind for a couple of seconds until his eyes adjusted to the dim light, but he wasn't deaf. A DJ spat out some rapid Spanish between songs and he almost shot the radio before he realized what the voice was. Now he heard a horde of buzzing flies under the Tex-Mex. Then he could see. A long bar that hadn't seen polish in far too long trudged the length of the room. A few round tables with chairs lined a small, sawdust covered dance floor. High-backed booths huddled at the ends of the room. A pair of longhorn horns hanging high on one end wall, sheep horns on the opposite, and a gila monster over the main door were the dominant wall trophies.

They weren't there, not now. But they'd sure as hell been there. A woman, he figured the waitress or cook from the small apron draped across her face, was sprawled on a table in the middle of the room. She was still warm but cooling fast. He took the apron from her face and laid it over her groin to cover her nakedness, then wondered why he bothered; she looked more defiled that way than with her face covered. The bartender was half in and half out of a space under the bar. His trousers were down around his knees and a beer bottle was shoved up his anus. There was no need for that, probably just to humiliate him during his last minutes for trying to hide; they were like that sometimes. The two cowboys looked like they'd tried to put up a fight. But they'd had no idea who they were fighting. One had obvious puncture wounds in his penis; Rocks thought the holes must have been made with an icepick. The honeymoon couple was pathetic. The groom's arms were bound to the tops of a booth back. He slumped toward his bride, somehow looking almost protective. Her ankles were

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propped on his shoulders in a mockery of invitation.

He walked around the room slowly, inspecting it. Articles of clothing were scattered about. Very little blood was spattered on the walls or furniture, the puddles on the floor would clean up easily enough by sweeping up the sawdust and hosing the place out. The bigger wounds on the bodies must have been inflicted after they were through with their games, after they'd killed them, after the draining. There were no other bodies. None of the furniture was broken, though a couple of pool cues were. Not too bad, he's seen a lot worse from this bunch. He went behind the bar and found the cash register open and empty of paper money. The wallets and purses of the victims were also empty of cash. Rocks nodded, this fit their method; at least if nobody got in to clean up in time, this might look like a robbery bizarrely gone wrong.

At the front door he made sure his sleeves were rolled down and his collar up. He snugged on the wrap-arounds to block direct sunlight from his eyes and adjusted his hat. He pushed the button in the middle of the door knob so it would lock behind him and prowled the packed dirt of the front and side parking lots.

It didn't take long to figure out what they'd done. And the looking confirmed that they thought someone was following. Cocky bastards, he thought, confident enough they were far enough ahead that they could take the time to hide their tracks. What they'd done was, they drove the vehicle they took in place of their own camper onto the highway, then drove the other five vehicles back and forth and around the lots to obliterate the tracks, a trick they hadn't pulled anywhere else. He couldn't tell what direction they went. Had to have been east, though. He knew they weren't in the one car he'd passed going the other direction as he was coming here. If he could take the rest of the day he'd find enough bits of track to figure out what kind of car they were in now. But he didn't have the rest of the day.

He returned to the Jeep, turned on the map, noted the GPS location. Then he went back to the kitchen door and locked it. He picked up the pay phone receiver on the side wall. He always used randomly selected hard-wired pay phones. Cellphones were too easy to accidentally intercept, and he didn't want anybody listening in.

He listened for a dial tone, then held what looked like a remote playback beeper for an answering machine to the receiver and pushed a button on its back. The beeper emitted a long series of tones. The first five tones bypassed the normal longline billing system so no voice

came on the line asking him to deposit money when the next eleven tones called a number in Milwaukee. It's not that there wouldn't be any record of the call, there's always a record. It's just nobody looking for the record in any of the expected places would find it because it was somewhere else in the system, someplace it would be found only by accident. The next set of tones told the pay phone in Milwaukee it was answered before it had a chance to ring; instructed an unauthorized chip hidden inside the phone to bypass the longline billing system there and forward the call to a particular microwave relay in Utah. There, the call was shunted to an unauthorized microwave relay terminal just over the Nevada border. Anyone trying to use the Milwaukee telephone in the next few minutes would get a dead line. The terminal in Nevada had a miniature recording device in it. The recorder didn't have an out-going message, just a beep to let him know when to start talking. A couple of times or so a day somebody came from the Utah ranch to check the tape, they'd get his message soon enough.

"They were here, all right," he said after the beep. "My best guess is they've got a fifteen, twenty minute lead on me now." He looked out the highway, toward Albuquerque. Nothing appeared moving on it as far as he could see. "They pulled a cute one with the cars in the lot, left their own and took one of the others. No way right now to know what they're driving. They left six inside. Good idea to clean it up, but they did their robbery thing, so in case we can't it might be okay." He gave the GPS coordinates. "The cops might think it was some kind of cult murder-robbery. I'm going to move on and see if I can pick up any indication of where they are." He didn't say goodbye when he hung up.

He wished he had time to obliterate his own tracks when he left, but there was no help for that. Anyway, even if they found the Jeep later on, there'd be no way to trace it to him. He headed east.

Rocks ignored the posted speed limit and floored the accelerator until the ground dropped into the valley of the Rio Grande and on to Albuquerque. He had to stop once for gas on the other side of the Sandia Mountains. The gas jockey hadn't seen a carload of people that day. They had evaded him. There was absolutely no point in one man trying to search through all of New Mexico.

He stopped once more before Texas. He drove off the highway, around behind a copse of trees where he couldn't be seen by cars passing by. He took the plastic bag-bottle from his carry-all and

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drank it empty to slake the hunger. Sated, he rolled the bottle into a tube and buried it.

Later he parked the Jeep in a fast food restaurant's parking lot in Lubbock, left the CB on the seat and the pistol under the drivers seat. He took the map when he caught a cab to the airport where he rode a hopper to Dallas-Fort Worth, then a jet home.

Home was a furnished apartment in St Louis. He sat staring out the window through an entire night and day and into the next night thinking about who they were and where they'd gone. He wondered if the five he was following had anything to do with nobody seeing Abe since he'd left on his pilgrimage to Washington. Abe. Damn. Abe, did they do something to you?

The Arch was clearly visible from his window but he didn't see it, his eyes were focused inward. He didn't sleep, he didn't need any sleep, not right now. Sleep relieves physical fatigue, so does resting. Sleep brings dreams and dreams relieve psychic fatigue. Rocks didn't need the psychic relief, he never dreamed. Not any more.

It wasn't until the hunger became too painful that he left his chair for something other than the bathroom. He took along two collapsed one gallon plastic water bottles and a cloth bag to carry them in. The bottles were full when he returned home. He siphoned them into sterile collapsible pint bottles along with a small amount of a clear fluid and refrigerated them. Later he turned on the all news radio station. The radio didn't say anything about it. The next day's Post-Dispatch didn't mention it either.

Good.

CHAPTER TWO

They hadn't gone east, they'd only gone as far as the first intersecting paved road. There they turned south, deeper into the Colorado Plateau. They didn't bother looking at the map to see where this ramshackle town was. The sign outside said, "Holmwood, Pop. 783." That was more than they needed or wanted to know. They didn't even care it was in New Mexico. It was just some backwater on the side road they found after they left that roadside place. It had people, that's all that mattered. They laughed in glee when they saw the town on the horizon; their laughter had a cackling quality. Art pressed the pedal to the metal until they were half a mile out, raised dust when he braked back to the legal limit. It wasn't that he was worried about a speeding ticket, to hell with a bunch of tickets. The good citizens of Holmwood were going to have enough of a thrill, what with two men, two women, and a teenage girl -- strangers all -- showing up in town without them having to roar in. These strangers had that effect on people. The main drag had angle parking. Art angled too sharply in front of a place with a sign reading "Cafe Eat." They boiled out of their blue Nissan and headed into the cafe. A smaller sign on the glass of the door announced it was air conditioned. That sign made them laugh again -- as if they couldn't see the window unit in the transom above the door.

Two people, an old man and an older woman, sat at opposite ends of the counter. A middle-aged counterman was behind the center of it washing dishes, ignoring his customers and their cups of coffee. He knew they were there only because of the air conditioning and bought the coffee just because it was polite to buy something when using a business place's air conditioning. Two large coffee urns, a toaster big enough to do half a loaf of bread at a time, a pot of tea water on a hot plate, and an old fashioned cream-and-institutional-green milk shake shaker were on a shelf behind the counterman. The shelf was flanked on one side by a grill and on the other by a counter for making cold sandwiches. Narrower shelves above the grill and sandwich shelf held single serving size cereal boxes, tea bag boxes,

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condiment refills, bread and rolls, packets of instant Sanka. A mirror missing large chunks of its silvering was mounted behind the coffee urns.

The quiet of Cafe Eat was rudely shattered by the entrance of the five strangers. Their shoe heels clattered on the worn linoleum as they jittered their way the length of the cafe and tumbled into the rear booth. They didn't bother taking off their sunglasses. They put their heads together over the tabletop and tittered. Art groped Mina under the tabletop. She squealed and groped him back. The counterman ignored them until the kid groped Art. Art smacked her hand and snarled at her.

"Whadaya mean, wait 'til I grow up?" she demanded loudly. "Fuck you, wait 'til I grow up. I'm past puberty."

Drake leered at Lucy.

Then the counterman was there, order pad and pen in hand. "Now, now," he said. "This is a respectable place." He looked at the girl. "Talk nice." Then to all of them, "Know what you want?" The pen was poised. He noticed their glistening, peeling skin and thought they waited too long to put on the sun block.

She gawked at him. Who did he think he was telling her to talk nice, didn't he know who she was? Then she giggled. No, he didn't know who she was. "Yes sir," she murmured, then buried her face in her hands to keep from laughing out loud at this bozo.

The bozo looked at her patiently. These were city people. He knew all about city people. His son lived in the city and he visited him there once a year. And he knew about city kids. No spunk; all you had to do was to know when a city kid was about to step over where the kid thought the line was, then slap him down. The city kid would scoot back to where you wanted him. Or her. This city kid didn't need to be slapped, not yet, just put on notice he wasn't going to take any crap from her. Then he pointed his eyes at the pad and asked again, "You ready to order?"

"Hamburgers all around," Drake ordered for them. "Two apiece. Just char them on the outside, leave them bloody inside." The kid giggled again. So did Mina. Drake ignored them.

"Black outside, pink inside," the counterman said.

"Bloody inside," Drake said.

The counterman looked at him levelly for a moment. Then he shrugged. "Bloody inside. Anything on them?"

"Tomato and lots of ketchup."

"Ketchup's on the table." He pointed with his pen.

Drake looked at the bottle near his elbow. It was three-quarters full. "Think that'll be enough?" he asked the others.

"We can get more if it's not," Mina said. She looked at the counterman. "Right?"

He nodded. "Anything else?"

"Fries." Drake looked at the bottle again. "Better bring another bottle."

"Right, another bottle of ketchup." The counterman's voice was dry, he thought the talk about ketchup was a joke that wore out its welcome too soon. "Drink?"

"Four coffees and a vanilla shake."

"I want strawberry," the kid snapped.

Drake grinned at her. The counterman saw something in the grin that made him feel nervous. "Strawberry," Drake confirmed.

The counterman headed for the safety of the counter without asking if their order was complete.

"Hey, Pop," Art shouted too loudly. "You got a john in this shithole?"

With the counter between them the man felt secure again. He gave Art a hard look before answering. "This is a clean place." Pause. "Behind you. Men's and lady's." He nodded at a doorway beyond their booth. Through it they could see two doors with small signs on them.

Art went there. "Gotta make room," he said. The others laughed.

The counterman made a face, but not until he turned his back to them.

The old woman put a quarter on the counter and left. The old man thought about it for half a minute and followed her out. He was in too much of a hurry to remember to leave a tip.

When the counterman served the food, the two women and the girl gave him what looked like very hungry looks. The looks made him so nervous he spilled into three of the saucers when he brought their coffee and dribbled a little of the shake down the side of the glass.

They poured so much ketchup on their food the meat and potatoes weren't visible through it. They dug in manically, hunched low over their plates. The ketchup dripped off the fries, spurted out of the buns, smeared their faces, coated their fingers. There was

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something perversely lascivious about the way they licked their fingers, ran their tongues around their lips. At first the counterman grimaced in disgust at their manners, then he started shivering; there was something feral about the way they ate. They kept casting glances at him, all of them. They smiled, but there seemed to be something ominous in their smiles; there was nothing friendly about the way they bared their teeth. When they finished eating they sat back and belched loudly and picked their teeth with their fingers. The ketchup still on their faces got spread farther. The glances in the counterman's direction became more steady looks. He scribbled a total on their bill. It was too low, but he didn't want to take the time to correct it. He scooted to their booth, dropped it on the table, and headed to the cash register without saying a word. The cash register was next to the door, this was the first time he'd been there since they came in. It was the strongest hint he dared make that he wanted them to leave. He wasn't thinking anymore how he knew all about city folks. Or city kids.

Art smiled lightly at the counterman and rose from the booth without taking his eyes off him. The ketchup on his face looked like blood. Just then the door opened and two people walked in. Their laughter was happy and carefree, not like the cackling laughter of the group. They were young, maybe not old enough to order a drink. He wore a faded work shirt, his jeans were frayed in spots, fringe-topped boots were on his feet. She wore a homemade peasant blouse that kept slipping off one shoulder, and a wrap-around skirt; she had on light sandals. His hair was brown and tied back into a ponytail that reached to between his shoulder blades, hers was also brown and pinned up in a not-too-neat bun that left the back of her neck bare. Art looked at them and smiled more broadly. He turned to the men's room. When he came back his face was clean.

"You look like a bunch of fucking cannibals," he told his companions. "Go wash your fucking faces." He waited for Mina to get out before he sat down. Drake and the kid went too. Lucy waited for the other woman to return. Art let Mina back in, the kid bumped her hip against his side, squeezed in next to him. That way she could watch the young couple without having to turn around.

"More coffee, Pops," Drake called out when they all had clean faces. "For the kid, too." She stuck her tongue out at him. Drake turned all the way around when he spoke, but he looked at the couple rather than the counterman. He kept looking at them until the coffee refills came. The young couple huddled over their coffee and talked in

voices too low for anyone to hear. They snickered at what they said. Then they settled back and politely sipped at their coffee and talked in restrained tones.

The young couple was so engrossed in each other they didn't seem to notice the other people in the cafe, except for the counterman when he took their order, brought their food, and delivered their bill when they were through. But everybody was very aware of them. Their presence made the counterman feel safe.

When the couple left, Drake looked at the bill and slipped a dollar between his cup and saucer. His was one of the cups that had coffee spilled into the saucer. He led the others out and paid on the way.

The kid stopped and smiled innocently at the counterman before leaving. "Keep them hanging, Pops," she said in a sweet, little-girl voice. "You get a chance to service another lady." He was too glad to see them leave to react. She laughed as she walked through the door and held it open long enough to let a blast of hot air inside.

They stood on the sidewalk and watched an ancient VW microbus head out of town. The paint job on the van looked like it was the original and hadn't been polished since the microbus was new.

"Shall we?" Lucy asked.

"Leave it to the broads to ask the dumb questions," Art said.

"Fuck you, asshole."

"Any time you want to spread them, bitch."

They piled into the Nissan and followed the microbus out a blacktop strip that could have been called two lane if anybody bothered to paint a stripe down its center. The blacktop was eroding at its sides. They followed the VW at a respectable distance as the road arrowed its way across the flat land, through cuts in low ridges, and over culvert-bridges over arroyos. Until Holmwood disappeared in the distance. Then Art sped up and they caught up with the microbus. He whipped around it and angled sharply across the road far enough ahead to give it time to stop.

*

His name was John and hers was Marie; just about the most hum-drum names you can find. She was nineteen, he twenty; that never-never age of no-longer-a-kid, not yet fully accepted as adult. His father was a CPA, hers a bank branch manager; occupations just about as unspectacular as the names they gave their kids. They were raised in stolid middle class suburbs of a couple of those middle-sized,

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middle-American cities that more people want to move away from than move into. John and Marie met at college. Their's wasn't a state college, a football factory, or a renowned institute of higher learning -- it was one of those eminently forgettable colleges where you can get a halfway decent education and that's about it. No campus radicals or wave-makers there. They were each other's first lover.

John and Marie were intelligent, their minds' questing hadn't been totally killed off by their prosaic backgrounds. Naturally they reached a crisis point. The sepia-tone existence of their families was just too drab to look forward to as their futures, so they went out and found an old VW microbus cheap and ran away. Not permanently, not by any means. They registered for fall classes before they left. John and Marie imagined themselves the direct spiritual descendants of the hippies of 20 years before. Without drugs, without totally dropping out. What happened next wasn't part of their plans.

When the blue Nissan cut in front of them, John stood on the brakes. They squealed loudly and the microbus fishtailed a bit before it came to a complete stop less than ten feet from the blue car.

John jumped out of the microbus. "Hey, what's the idea," he shouted angrily. "I almost hit you. Move so we can get by."

Mina got out of the car and walked over to him. Her hips swayed and she smiled seductively. "We did that because we wanted you to stop, sweetie," she said in the kind of voice a woman uses when she's leading a badly wanted man to her bed. "We want you to party with us." She stood cock-hipped in front of him and raised one hand to finger his shirt over his chest where the top two buttons were open. Her long, white dress had sleeves that went over the tops of her hands and a collar that went all the way up to her chin, but the way it clung and flowed she looked half naked. Mina looked to be in her mid-twenties. She was slender, of average height. Wavy black hair cascaded from the top of her head to the middle of her back. The blood red lips set in her oval face curled in a moist smile. John couldn't see through her sunglasses to know if she was looking at his face or his chest. Mina leaned closer and whispered conspiratorially.

"Hey," Marie shouted from inside the VW, she wasn't brave enough at this moment to get out for a direct confrontation, "he doesn't want to party with you." Neither John nor Marie recognized Mina from the cafe. "Get away from him."

"Move your car. Please," John said in a very uncertain voice, maybe not loudly enough for anyone in the car to hear.

The kid got out. "What is this shit," she said loudly. Here we are in the middle of goddam New Mexico with nothing to do, looking to have a little fun, and the first nice people we see are in too much of a fucking hurry to join us. That sucks." She stomped a foot, jammed her fists into her hips, pouted her lower lip.

John and Marie looked at her, shocked. They hadn't started using that kind of language until they reached college. Even now, not in front of anyone they didn't know. They didn't notice Drake get out until he was already leaning against the hood of the Nissan, ankles crossed, arms folded.

Mina kept whispering to John. He heard the words but didn't want to understand them. This whole situation was too bizarre. These people *couldn't* want what her words were saying.

Lucy got out and walked over to the passenger door of the microbus. She seemed to be the same age as Mina, but taller. She wasn't taller, just looked taller because she was less slender. Her red hair was cropped close to her head, accenting her triangular face. She opened the door, grasped Marie's arm, and yanked her out. Marie was taller and heavier than she was, but Lucy didn't seem to put any effort into pulling her out or keeping her on her feet when she stumbled. Lucy smiled and said, "We're going to party."

John finally broke the trance Mina held him in. "Hey," he shouted, "you can't do that to her." He ran to rescue Marie.

Drake was in front of John before he reached the other side of the microbus. "But she did," he said. He held up one hand and John bounced back off it, but managed to regain his balance before he fell. "She can because she did. Do you understand?" Drake finished. His smile was unsettling to look at.

"But," John said, then grew quiet.

"See?" the kid said and wrapped an arm around John's waist. "We're all friends here." She giggled so hard she bent over. The grip she kept on his waist felt strong.

Drake looked to the west. The sun was low over the horizon. "We better hurry and gather whatever we can if we're going to have a fire to roast our weenies over," he said. That set the kid to giggling harder.

Marie moaned.

It didn't occur to the others to ask John and Marie their names. Their names didn't matter.

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CHAPTER THREE

It's amazing. You take a quick look at the desert and you think there's nothing you can use for a fire. Everything's dead but the cactus and a few scraggly bushes and none of the dead stuff is wood. But if you look closely there's plenty of stuff to burn -- even some wood. Not enough for a huge bonfire, of course, not unless you're willing to spend a couple of days scrounging for that much wood and brush and stuff, but enough for a decent fire.

Drake wanted to drive the microbus but Lucy stuck her tongue in his mouth and whispered promises for later. Drake let Lucy drive the microbus. Art drove the Nissan slowly enough for him and Mina to spot fire-stuff along the way. Drake sat sideways in the microbus's passenger seat watching the young couple in the back. The kid thought the guy was cute and snuggled up against him. He wasn't going to move very far very fast, not with the grip she had on him. Marie was too scared to object to John being held by another female. She looked so scared Drake thought she might not have noticed the way the kid caressed John's chest and belly with her free hand.

They stopped several times and piled wood and brush into the back of the microbus before Art turned onto a rutted dirt track. They followed it into rougher country severely eroded by rain-wash. By the time they stopped in a broad arroyo, the microbus space not taken up by passengers was filled with fire-stuff and the sun was sinking below the horizon. Drake took charge of building the fire. With the coming of night they finally took off their sunglasses.

The fire was big enough to take off the chill that came with the dark, and there was enough extra wood and brush piled to the side to keep it going for several hours. There was a battered aluminum cooler in the microbus, Drake found a package of hot-dogs in it. "Didn't I say

we were going to have a weenie-roast?" he crowed, and tossed it to Lucy. There were also four cans of beer and six sodas in the cooler. He passed out the sodas, then gave John and Marie each a beer and said, "Chug." They drank quickly and didn't spill too much. He gave them the last two beers and told them to take their time. Lucy and Mina selected some long, slender twigs to roast the hot dogs on. When the dogs were black on the outside everybody but Marie ate one and a half; Marie was too upset, she couldn't eat.

After they ate Art started bop-bopping with his mouth, improvising a random tune. Mina stood close to the fire and swayed, tapping her hands on the fronts of her thighs, trying to find Art's rhythm. Lucy started a slow clap, Drake picked it up, Art changed his random bopping to match them. Lucy crooned a wordless tune.

The kid straddled John from behind and wrapped her arms around him. "Watch this," she whispered into his ear, "she's really good. I'm learning from her."

Mina swung her head from side to side in time with the music. Her long hair billowed out, locks whipped around her face. She tapped a foot, then again, then the other foot. Slowly at first, then faster and faster until her feet tattooed two beats to each clap. Her hips swayed wider, her arms drew arcane designs in the air, her torso gyrated. She spun around the fire, wilder and wilder, wanton and abandoned, until she was the nymph of night-dreams.

"Ain't she the sexiest thing you ever seen?" the kid whispered into her captive's ear. Her voice was husky and she pressed her body closer to his.

Sweat flew off Mina's face and hands, the white fabric of her dress turned transparent where it snugged against her until she looked naked above the waist. Her eyes rolled up in their sockets until only the blood-shot whites were visible, her lips parted and a keening came from them. The keening gradually rose in pitch and intensity until it was an orgasmic scream. She danced until she staggered and almost fell from the exertion. She dropped cross-legged and draped her forearms over her knees and panted.

"Your turn, Lucy," Art said.

Lucy shook her head. "You need long hair to do that or it just looks dumb."

The kid's eyes glistened and she chewed on her lower lip. She had long hair. And she'd been practicing when the others couldn't see her and ached to dance for them, but she wanted to be asked. She

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looked expectant, hopeful, across the fire at Art. But he looked a few feet to her side, at Marie.

"I bet if you untie that bun she's got long hair," Art said.

"No," Marie gasped, and looked manically around at the others for help, for a way out, for anything that would take Art's attention from her. There was nothing. She moaned.

"Yes," Art said slowly, it came out as a hiss.

Marie tried to scoot back out of the fire's glow, maybe if they couldn't see her clearly...

Drake was closest. Suddenly his hand was on the back of her neck, drawing her back into the circle of light. She pressed back against his hand, tried to slip from it. It was no use, she slid forward until the backs of her thighs reached her calves, then her feet slid forward with the rest of her. Drake's hand left the back of her neck and briefly touched her bun, her hair tumbled down her back. She moaned again. Drake brushed her cheek with his lips. "Dance," he said gently. "We'll be nicer to you if you dance for us." He chuckled, it wasn't a friendly chuckle.

John tried to say something, tried to break from the kid's grasp to go to Marie's aid, but she held him too tightly and put a hand over his mouth. She pressed one finger into his lips until it hurt so much he had to unclench them. She slid her finger into his mouth and gently massaged his gums, trying to tongue-kiss him with her finger. She'd never tongue-kissed anyone, but she knew about it, and knew she would figure it out as soon as she had someone to do it with. Maybe this one, tonight. You bet. She nipped his earlobe and blew into his ear.

Marie whimpered low and her eyes misted, a tear rolled out of the corner of her eye. She didn't stand. Drake put his hand back on her neck and lifted. It hurt. She scrambled to her feet.

"Dance," Drake said again. Art started bopping, Lucy and Mina clapped slowly, rhythmically. Lucy crooned, Mina keened. Drake cupped his hands and blew into them, their woodwind section. The kid couldn't get any closer to her captive, so she squeezed tighter with her arms and wrapped her legs around him. Drake and Art might ignore her, but this one couldn't.

"What, what do you want me to do?" Marie's voice broke.

"Dance. You saw Mina. Do the same thing."

Awkwardly, Marie shuffled her feet. Clumsily, she twirled her fists around each other in a move first seen in the Peppermint Twist.

Her movement was angular and stiff as she shifted her body from side to side.

Lucy reached out to her, brushed her hand over Marie's thigh. "Relax, let it come naturally," she said softly. "You'll do fine." She went back to clapping and keening.

Lucy's words and touch calmed Marie a little bit, helped her loosen up. Not a lot, just enough she didn't look like a stick doll any more, just enough to look like a marionette that had most of its joints articulated. Art urged her on. She hesitantly shuffled around the fire, her back to it, her eyes searched the blackness beyond the fire, looking for a way out. There was none.

"Hey, you want me to show you how to do it?" the kid called, hoping somebody would say yes. Nobody answered so she went back to rubbing her hands on John's chest and belly and breathing on his neck. She wanted to rub lower, but wasn't positive of what she'd find. Later on, though...

Her second time around the fire Art took hold of the wrap-around of Marie's skirt and yanked. She grabbed it while she stumbled toward him, tried to keep it closed.

John yelled and tried to break away from the kid. She clamped down on him. "Ignore her," she said. "You're mine now, I got you." He kept struggling and yelling. "Stop that or I'll bite you." He didn't stop. She pinched the skin of his neck between her teeth, hard enough to draw blood. He yelped and cursed her, but stopped struggling. He started trembling when she licked at the blood and giggled.

"Let go, bitch," Art murmured, grinning up at Marie. The cold look in his eyes made her gasp. She released her skirt and he jerked it across, popping the buttons that held it around her waist. She crouched slightly, knees locked together, hands clenched in front of her groin, panic on her face. "Put your hands above your head like you're doing flamenco and dance," Art ordered.

Marie stepped back and slowly lifted her arms. She started shuffling and twisting again. She hadn't put enough energy into her dancing to sweat, but she was sweating anyway -- nervously. The firelight made the sweat on her legs glisten, it picked out the lace pattern on her panties, exposed the small tear in the seam on the side. When the light fell on her face they could see she was crying and her nose was running. Lucy left off crooning to talk to her, told her she was pretty, told her she was among friends. She wanted to calm her down, get her dancing more. Marie closed her eyes and in two more

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turns around the fire was more fluid than before. Lucy and Mina said things to encourage her. Marie opened her eyes and saw Art dancing with her. She swallowed and tried to mirror his moves. Maybe if she cooperated they wouldn't do anything. Maybe.

Then Art stepped in closer and pulled her blouse over her head. She wasn't wearing a bra. She shrieked and wrapped her arms around her breasts, her entire body went rigid.

"They look like mine!" the kid blurted. The breasts that were briefly exposed were conical and young. "Did you know that?" she giggle-whispered to her captive. "If you like them, you'll like mine. You'll see later, mine are just like hers. Well, maybe not as big." She giggled again. "But mine are still growing." He struggled, but it was no use.

Art took Marie's wrists and pulled her arms away from her breasts. She resisted with all her strength, but he pulled her arms so easily it was as though she moved them herself. He placed her arms at her sides and let go; her arms hung limp. He traced circles around her nipples with his fingertips. She closed her eyes and bit her lip. Then Art put his hands on her hips and knelt.

Marie trembled violently and her mind spun, but in the spinning one thought came through clear: Someone had told her, she couldn't remember who or when or why, but somebody had told her the best thing to do if you're ever raped is relax and go with it. Rape isn't about sex, it's about violence. Maybe if you don't resist the rapist will lose interest and stop, probably he won't hurt you as much. She forced herself to unlock her joints and muscles, to not be so rigid. When she felt his chin nuzzle where her thighs came together she parted her legs slightly, cooperating. Then she felt the moist heat of his breath as his mouth opened against her. She felt his tongue lap between her legs and withdraw. His teeth moved toward each other, scraping against the fabric of her panties. When they were close to each other he bit down and jerked back. She screamed.

John bellowed and fought the kid again. She let go with one hand and hit him on the side of the head, hard. The blow dazed him. "I told you to ignore her," she said sharply. "I mean it, dammit."

Art sat on his heels, looking up at Marie, chuckling. His hands were still on her hips and the ruined panties dangled from his mouth. She tried to twist out of his grasp, but he held her so tightly it bruised her hips. He dug in the fingers of one hand punishingly hard and used the other to take the panties from his mouth. He held them open in his

hand and laughed at what he saw; a clump of hair where he had bitten, there was skin attached to the hair. He dropped the panties and ran a fingertip across the blood-oozing place where he'd bitten. Then he picked her up and threw her across the fire to Drake.

Drake held Marie while Lucy slashed a straight razor across her throat. The four adults jumped on her and closed their heads together on her neck and shoulders, drank her hot, flowing blood.

John screamed and fought hard enough to roll himself and the kid onto their sides, but he couldn't break her hold. She squeezed harder and something in his chest cracked. He screamed in agony and fainted from the pain of the broken ribs.

She cuffed him and shouted, "Now see what you did, goddammit. You went and hurt yourself. You're not going to have as much fun as you should have, you know, not with broken ribs, you're not." She giggled and groped him, tried to imagine what she found under her hand was going to be like when it was engorged. "I will, though." She giggled more and continued caressing, hoping he would wake up with an erection and be ready to go.

The others drank until they could hold no more, then Drake went to the Nissan and came back with two insulated jugs. They held her over one of them and let the rest of her blood drain into it. Then they threw the body aside and Mina picked up the razor from where Lucy dropped it and slit the throat of the still unconscious man.

The kid's mouth popped open and she made a small gasp. "What'd you do that for?" she squeaked. "I was gonna-- he was-- we were gonna. You should a waited, let me do that after. I mean, shit, I was even going to do it up right."

Drake laughed at her.

"What the fuck's your problem, stud!" she screamed at him. "You get ass from one of these bimbos any time you want it. I never get laid!"

All of them laughed at her.

"How come nobody wants me to get laid." Her eyes were hurt, she looked like she was about to cry. "You want me to be a virgin my whole life, don't you!"

"You're too young to get laid," Drake said.

"You keep saying that. It's not true, I'm fifteen, I'm past puberty."

"You mean you're old enough to bleed?" Art asked. That only made them laugh harder and she did cry.

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They held John over the other jar to drain, then cast his empty body aside. Mina sprinkled some granules from a box into the jugs.

CHAPTER FOUR

They moved away, far away from the crevasse where they dumped John and Marie's bodies. Away from the desert, off the high plateau, across the Rio Grande, into the prairie. There seemed to be even less fire-stuff here than in the desert. That was only an illusion, though. This was cattle country. Anyplace you have cattle you have fire-stuff. Just as long as you let the cow flops dry before you pick them up. Cow flops seem to be mostly straw anyway; they burn well. Drake had no qualms about picking up dry cow flops.

The kid turned up her nose at the cow flop fire, she thought it was just too yucky. The cow flop fire gave her another excuse to go off by herself and sulk, which was what she wanted to do ever since they wouldn't wait with John.

It's easy go off by yourself to sulk in the prairie. Especially in a prairie county where the population isn't much more than one person per square mile -- and most of them are concentrated in eight or nine small towns. As long as cows don't scare you. Or the occasional bison family. There're a lot more cows in the Pecos River Valley than there are people. Sometimes it even seems like there are more bison than people, though there aren't.

Of course unless you know exactly where you are, have adequate food and water, and the means to get where you're going, you better not go off sulking by yourself too far. You can get lost out there and maybe never be found. The kid didn't go far. This was flatland, but not totally flat; it was an area of gentle ups and downs, some spots a little higher, some a little lower. The campsite was in a down. All she had to do was go over the next up. That put her far enough away she didn't have to look at them, close enough she could hear if they started to break camp and leave. Besides, she needed food to eat, water to drink. And some of that blood.

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The first night she was surprised how cold it got and had to sneak back into the camp to huddle by the fire. She didn't speak to them or even look at them, and they ignored her. She tried not to listen to their talk of who "he" might be and where "he" was. She didn't care about "him." When Art grabbed Mina's breast and kissed her and she kissed him back and stuck her hand in his pants, she grabbed at Drake. He pushed her away and swatted her fanny. Suddenly Lucy was in Drake's arms and the two of them were leering at her.

"You're too young, kid," Drake said.

Lucy laughed at that and stuck her tongue into Drake's mouth. Then they didn't pay any more attention to her.

The kid grabbed a blanket and fled into the dark. She tried to get far enough away she couldn't hear the sounds of passion coming from around the fire. At least that's what she told herself. More likely she got far enough away that they couldn't hear her bawling.

In the morning she came back in long enough to slosh sun block on all her exposed skin, grab some food and a canteen of water, and gulp blood. Then she headed back out before the sun was over the horizon. She spent most of the day thinking about John, though she didn't know his name.

They really should have held off a little longer on him, given her some time. Hell, she would of let them watch if that's what they wanted. Prove something to that snooty Art if they did watch; show him she was too old enough. Lucy had explained to her after the laughing stopped that John would have been too upset to do anything with her anyway. That wasn't true, she knew that. A couple of the girls back at school, the school she knew she'd never see again, at least not to attend classes, were experienced and they told her boys always get boners when they're around cute girls, irregardless of what the situation is. I mean even if the girl's parents are there watching them. She knew John would have gotten a boner as soon as she turned him around and showed him her tits.

She giggled at that word, tits. It sounded so, so... She wasn't sure what it sounded like, but it made her feel more like a woman to think she had tits. The boys back at school liked her tits, she saw them staring at her chest often enough. She had something else, too. Too bad they hadn't held off on John, she really wanted to use it, find out what the fuss was all about. And really become a woman.

That night right about sunset she skulked back in and took some food and water and blood. She didn't look at them them and

ignored the looks they gave her. She wanted to be away before they started up with each other again; she hated being left out of the fun like that.

As she was heading back into the dark Lucy said, "We'll give you a holler when we're ready to go." She didn't look back at Lucy, just gave her hair a toss and stuck her nose up.

Then Art snorted and added, "If you're not back when we go, happy hunting." He and Drake almost busted a gut laughing and she ran away in tears. She barely remembered to take some more of the sun block, she was so angry at them. Mostly at Art.

She almost didn't hear Drake call out, "Don't go too far, he might be out there and catch you alone." She didn't care if "he" was out there. So what if "he" was, she could take care of him. Whoever "he" was.

Late in the afternoon of the fourth day Lucy called her in. The kid jumped up from where she was hiding and, half in a panic, started to run. They couldn't go off and leave her, not now! Then she stopped, and realized Lucy or Mina, one of them, would make Art wait for her. Drake would too. She drew herself up as tall as she could, dusted off the seat of her jeans, and walked stately to the camp with her head tipped high.

Drake shook his head and laughed when he saw her. Art pointed and laughed. Lucy and Mina thought she looked funny, too. She wouldn't let them get to her. Nosiree. She was as much a woman as Lucy or Mina. Well, almost. They couldn't treat her like a child anymore, she wouldn't stand for it. She managed to not cry or even pucker up much.

When they finished laughing at her, Mina cocked her hip and held out one of the insulated jugs, lid open, upside down. The blood John and Marie donated to their cause had kept them as high as they'd ever been on anything before the change for three whole days and nights.

"All gone," Drake said. "We need to go shopping."

"Shopping!" Art roared. "I like that. You've got a sense of humor, Drake." He laughed so hard he didn't catch his breath until he was behind the wheel of the microbus.

They all got in, Mina in the passenger seat. The kid tried to sit apart from the others in the back. But Art made the VW careen and bounce so much she had to join Lucy and Drake in holding onto each other to keep from being bounced around too much. Drake yelled at

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Art to take it easy. Art ignored him, Mina laughed. Drake hit Art hard in the back of the head and told him again. Mina laughed some more. Art snarled, but slowed down and found a less bumpy route.

"We don't have to worry about breaking the damn van," Art said, rubbing the back of his head.

"I don't give a damn about the van," Drake said, "it's us in the back I care about. Now don't drive like that."

Art didn't respond. But he did drive more carefully.

*

They spent the night sitting by the side of a road waiting for someone to come by. The idea was they'd fake car trouble and when a good Samaritan stopped he'd be theirs. But nobody came by and they went back to their campsite in the morning. This was the first time since the beginning they'd had to go without for more than a day. It didn't hurt much, not yet, though Art imagined it did. The second evening they were beginning to feel the hunger.

This time they found a lone cowboy out looking for strays before they reached the highway. When they saw his cook fire, Mina got behind the wheel and Lucy in the passenger seat. The others hid in the back. While the two women were explaining to the cowboy how they were lost and needed food and directions, Drake slipped out of the door Lucy had left open. He approached noiselessly with the straight razor in his hand. The razor flashed in the starlight, slitting the cowboy's throat. The cowboy tried to struggle, but there was nothing he could do with his throat completely open to the air. Strong hands grabbed him and held him upside down to drain his blood into the insulated containers. It only took a moment. They let his wide-eyed, screaming horse run away.

After they drank their fill they talked about the man they thought was following them. Then they decided to give him a couple more days. If they didn't see any indication by then that he was around, they could figure they'd given him the slip.

"Who do you think he is?" the kid asked. She didn't think they should run from anybody.

Drake shrugged. "Maybe somebody who knows who he's up against."

The kid stared at him. "So what? There's five of us."

Drake stared back at her. "Maybe he's not alone. Maybe he's a friend of that guy up in Washington." He paused for a long moment, looking deep into her eyes. "If he knows there's five of us and he's

alone, maybe he's somebody more dangerous than we are. Think about what he must be like if he knows who we are and is still willing to follow us all by himself."

The kid thought that was stupid, there was nobody more dangerous than they were. They could take care of anyone, even an army. She said so. Drake shrugged again and looked away. Lucy and Mina looked worried, but not terribly worried. Art did something macho, like flex his shoulders.

They took it easier with the cowboy's blood than they had with John and Marie's. It lasted two more days. Then they decided they'd lost whoever it was following them and piled back into the microbus, found US 84 and headed east. They reached Lubbock a week after Rocks passed through on his way home. They killed again before moving on.

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CHAPTER FIVE

If the phone in the furnished apartment didn't sound like it was used to ringing it was merely an aural illusion. It was true the phone didn't ring often, but telephone bells never have to clear their throats when they haven't spoken in a long time. Rocks picked it up on the third ring and held it to his head.

The disembodied phone voice said, "We found Abe. It was messy." The voice hadn't waited for Rocks to say hello and it didn't identify itself. The phone in the apartment only worked when Rocks turned it on at the phone company junction box -- he always turned it off when he went out, even if for only a few hours. If someone answered the phone, it had to be Rocks. There were very few people who could get access to this unauthorized line, Rocks knew all of their voices; "this is Joe," or whoever wasn't necessary.

"Tell me," Rocks said.

The voice didn't know all the facts. Some of the facts were known only to Abe, some only to the people Rocks lost in New Mexico. But the voice told him everything it knew. This is everything that happened:

A long time ago Abe had been a mountain man. He knew Jim Bridger and Liver Eatin' Johnson and all of them. Some who knew him considered him potentially one of the best. If he hadn't been changed he might have wound up leading one of the major expeditions over the mountains. Maybe he would have established an important fort high in the mountains, deep in Indian Country. If he hadn't been changed maybe our kids would be reading about him in their grade school history books.

But that's all moot. Abe was changed when he was still young enough he hadn't had a chance to do any of the things legends are made of. In some musty archive someplace where nobody other than scholars of the most obscure facts will ever run across it is a crabbed note that says Abe went into the Cascades in 1869 and never came out.

More than a hundred and twenty years later Abe realized he didn't have much time left; he grew nostalgic for his youthful occupation and headed for Mount Olympus. The one in Washington State, not the one in Greece. That's where he was going when he vanished in the Cascades in 1869. He was twenty-five then. Two years ago he looked like he was forty-five. Now he looked like he was fifty. He figured if he didn't finish that journey now he'd probably never have another chance. He packed his Sharps rifle, a few beaver and other traps, and his mountain gear into one of the Utah ranch's pickup trucks. It was all the exact same gear he had with him so long ago. He took off up to Idaho, across northern Oregon, into the Cascades, and turned north into Washington. There he handed the pickup over to someone who would take care of it. That someone gave him a horse and a mule in trade. He'd swap them back for the pickup on his return.

He kept out of populated areas going across Washington. He had to, the Sharps rifle in the saddle scabbard would attract too much attention, maybe even police attention. He had to avoid attention from the police; most of what he was doing on this trip was illegal. Not that he'd worried any about the legality of anything he did in a very long time. Still, it was always better to avoid the police.

Finally, more than a hundred and twenty years after he set out from Tygh Valley, Abe reached the Olympic Mountains. He entered the forest near Grisdale and climbed straight into the mountains.

For the next couple of weeks he roamed hither and yon through the forest, higher into the mountains. He never stayed more than two nights in one place. Though he went mostly east and west, always he edged north; steadily, slowly, toward Olympus. He trapped as he went. The weasels and marmots he skinned, the snowshoe rabbits he ate, chipmunks and Douglas squirrels he threw away. He spotted many black-tailed deer; once a husky bark drew his attention to a cougar. The bugling of Roosevelt elk made his blood race. But not once did he unlimber his Sharps, chamber a round. He wanted to make sure there was nobody to hear the report when he fired, and there were too damn many tourists backpacking in this area for him to take the risk of bringing down big game.

Then Olympus rose on his horizon and he stopped going east-west. He salivated at the sight of the dazzling white peak and wanted to climb it, the depth of its snows and steepness of its crags didn't dissuade him. Climbing up from the Queets River, where he'd had to

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leave the horse and mule, exhausted him. Still, it wasn't until he tried to scramble over the moraine of the Jeffers glacier that he conceded he didn't have it anymore and backed off. The next day he saw his reflection in a still pool in the river. Yes, he was aging rapidly, all of a sudden too old to go mountaineering. At first he was saddened by this inability, but the trip downriver raised his spirits until, by the time he reached Harlow Creek, he was feeling as good as when he set out. He followed the Harlow to where he had an easy climb over a low ridge to a branch of the Hoh and then down it into the rain forest.

The rain forest was like nothing he'd ever seen before. The air was a comfortable level of cool, but the fog and ground mist made it seem steamy. The air was constantly wet -- sort of like a steambath without the heat. Moss hung in sheets from the trees. Ferns and creepers grew out of the living wood, sometimes hiding the tree trunks from view. Giant trees were fallen here and there, with saplings growing in rows on them, forming colonnades. The lushness of the foliage, the thickness of the air, muffled all sounds. Only in the small meadows and clearings where a forest giant lay fallen was he able to see more than a few yards in any direction. It was there, in a small meadow caused by a fallen tree and maintained by elk feeding on seedlings, that it happened.

Abe pitched camp in a clearing next to a colonnade of Sitka spruce. The clearing was a rough rectangle, about thirty feet wide by fifty feet along the colonnade. His second day there he brought down a thousand pound elk buck. He fired one round. It had been so long since the last time he'd killed anything this big and beautiful he was trembling with excitement; he wasn't sure he was still that good a shot. The heavy .44 caliber bullet slammed through the magnificent animal's heart. The elk jumped straight up and ran a hundred yards before it slammed into a giant tree and dropped. That was why so long ago he stuck with the Sharps rather than getting one of the new repeating rifles; the Sharps was accurate, and it had range and hitting power. If he could see his target clearly, he could hit it. If he could hit it, he could knock it down. This was particularly important in some situations, like if more than one Indian was coming at him.

Abe was very proud of bringing down the elk. But half a ton was way too much for him to drag back to camp by himself. He skinned and quartered the elk. Its entrails and head he discarded -- the head because the collision with the tree broke one of its antlers off, making it useless as a trophy. He went back to his camp for the horse

and mule. Even with the head and entrails discarded and some of the larger bones cut out it was a difficult job for him to pack the meat on the two animals. He was breathing heavily by the time he finished.

It's like not being able to climb the glacier, he thought. I'm getting too old to be a mountain man.

Then something happened that told him just how much too old he really was. A person who spends enough time in isolated places develops a sort of sixth sense that tells him when someone is nearby. Abe finished strapping down the last quarter of the elk on the mule and turned around and almost pissed himself. He grabbed his Sharps and had it pointed before he realized this wasn't a Nez Perce warrior standing not fifteen feet away, it was a frightened girl in a green jumper outfit.

"You tryin' a get yourself kilt, girlie?" Abe roared as soon as he caught his breath. "Don't you *never* go sneaking up on a man like that!"

"Mister?" The girl sniveled and rubbed the back of a dirty hand across her nose, smearing the wet and tears. "I'm lost." Her face contorted and she trembled with silent crying.

Abe dropped the muzzle of his Sharps and glared heavenward. What is this, he demanded. I'm here being alone, hunting and exploring for the last time in my life, and some girl-child has to come along and bother me?

"Mister." Abe's head snapped back to the girl. She was closer and eying the meat on his mule. "I haven't had anything to eat in three days. I'm hungry."

Abe swore loudly and whipped his hat off his head and threw it to the ground. He stomped hard. *Goddam it*, it was one thing for a mountain man to have an Arapaho squaw keeping his camp sometimes and warming his bedroll while she's there, but he ain't supposed to be baby-sitting no damn teenage white girl!

"Why don't you jes' go back where you come from," he snapped at her.

"I can't," she wailed. "I've been trying to find my girl scout troop for the last three days and I can't find them." Her voice rose until it was high and sharp enough to make his horse and mule whinny and hurt his own ears.

"Shut up, girl," Abe shouted. He snorted and stomped and glared all around until he stared hard at her again. He thought, *Girlie, I kill people like you and drink your blood. And you come to me for*

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help? He shook with rage at this intrusion. Yes, he killed people like her for their blood. But, dammit, he only killed people when he had to. Her stumbling on him when she was lost wasn't a good enough reason for him to kill her. Dammit all to hell.

"Where did you come from?" he asked when he got control.

"Out there," the girl waved a hand in a way that meant somewhere, anywhere, nowhere, I don't know.

The girl looked so pitiful, dirty, lost, and hungry, Abe took pity on her. He didn't exactly welcome her, and he certainly wasn't gracious about it. "Follow me," he ordered. "I'll feed you when we get to my camp." He knew it was too late to do anything about getting the girl out of his way today but, "In the morning I'm sending you where someone can help you. But if you say one word before then I'll feed you to the wolves. You hear?"

The girl nodded rapidly, she bit her lower lip to keep from thanking him out loud. "My name is..."

"Shaddup! I don't give a goddam what your name is."

The girl flinched and more tears welled up and flowed from her eyed. But she shut up.

Abe thought black thoughts all the way back to his camp. Tomorrow, right after sending the girl downstream to where she could find a town, he was going to move his camp. His black thoughts grew red rims and almost sent him into a murderous rage when he got back to his campsite.

"Hi," a bubbly woman-voice shouted from the other end of the clearing when he walked in, leading his animals and the girl. "Are you vacationing here too?" The voice lost its bubblyness halfway through the "vacationing" when the woman saw him clearly. No, she could tell this man in the buckskins, carrying the biggest rifle she'd ever seen, and leading two horses -- she couldn't tell a horse from a mule at sight -- with huge hunks of meat on them, probably wasn't on a backpacking vacation like she and her friend were.

Her friend, right. When Abe looked he saw two of them. The bubbly one had long dark hair, the other one had short red hair. They had built up the fire he left smoldering so it would start up quickly again when he came back. He told himself to get a holt on, take a deep breath, count to ten.

The girl ran past him, threw him a frightened look, hoped he wouldn't feed her to the wolves if she talked to the two women -- and she *was* going to talk to them. She thought they would do more to help

her than this man.

"Out of my camp!" Abe bellowed. "All three of you, get out of my camp." He shook his Sharps, but didn't put his finger near the trigger or point the weapon at them.

"Can we, can we have just a corner of the clearing?" the redhead asked. She smiled a friendly smile, dipped her head and tried to look inoffensive, unthreatening. "We'll keep quiet and not bother you, I promise. Listen, the reason we stopped here was it's late in the day and time for us to set up camp for the night. I don't think there's another clearing close enough for us to find before dark."

Abe glared. Damnation. He whirled around in frustration. What the hell was going on, where did all these people come from and why did they want to bother him?

But he had to allow the women were right about it being too late for them to find another campsite before dark. "Over here," he snarled and pointed at a corner of the clearing away from his fire. "You can set up here. And don't talk to me!" He said the last in a shout.

The women looked at each other wide-eyed, then the redhead thanked him. The girl gaped and gnawed on her lip and silently followed the two women.

"You, girl. Stay there. I said I was going to feed you and I will." Abe stared at the two women. "She's lost. I found her. In the morning she goes with you. First, I feed her."

The girl sat on a log next to the fire and held her hands out to be warmed. Abe set about yanking the elk quarters off his animals and mounted three of them on high, wooden tripods to keep them out of the reach of the ground scavengers who would eat them away before he got to them if he didn't put them out of reach. For the moment there wasn't much he could do about insects and birds. He put beans in a pan and the pan on the fire to heat up for the girl. He made as much angry noise as he could in doing these chores.

"You watch it," he told the girl. "If the beans burn, you don't eat."

Abe settled himself down to cut the fourth elk quarter into strips to hang on a rack over a low, drying fire and hoped the meat could dry in this humidity. He kept up a steady stream of under-his-breath invective. He wasn't paying attention to his surroundings when the horse and mule started snorting and pulling at their tethers. He looked up and listened, but the animals didn't seem to be focusing their

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excitement in any particular direction. He saw and heard nothing himself, so he figured the smell of blood from the carcass was all that was upsetting the animals. There'd been no sign of cougar since they entered the rain forest and grizzlies didn't live in the Olympics; the smaller bears that did would probably stay away from fire and the scent of man. He swore and went back to his work.

Then both of the women screamed and he looked up again, angry at being disturbed. What he saw was very astonishing. It was also the perfect cap on what had already turned into an absolutely miserable day.

A grizzly bear, an animal everyone he talked to told him wasn't found in the Olympics, broke into the clearing. Abe gaped, he'd never before been this close to a live grizzly, not even as a young man spending months alone in the Rockies. The animal was huge. It would have been ten feet tall if it stood on its hind legs, and weighed far more than a ton. The great beast paused for several seconds, loudly snuffling the air. It seemed to be checking out the blood scent from the tripoded meat and the fear smell from the now screaming, stomping animals; the two women and the girl were all screaming hysterically and getting their share of attention from the great bear. The grizzly looked like it was deciding which to go after. It made up its mind and headed toward the meat.

The bear turned its head at a shout. Abe looked toward the shout as well. Exactly what I need, he thought wryly. Two men with heavy rifles followed the bear into the clearing.

The grizzly snorted, uninterested in the men, and turned back to the meat. But only for a few seconds. The two men raised their rifles to their shoulders and both of them shot it. The bear lifted onto its hind legs and roared. Still upright, forelegs spread wide, it rumbled toward the men. The women screamed louder.

Abe finally acted. He grabbed the Sharps, shoved a round into the chamber, pointed, and fired.

The bear bellowed at the impact of the heavy bullet and spun on him. It dropped to all fours and charged. It was too close, Abe didn't have time to reload. He dove to the side, knocking down the drying rack he was laying the meat out on. He didn't time it quite right, the bear had time to change the direction of the swipe it took at him and its claws raked deep into his hip. Blood spurted from the wounds. The grizzly whipped around to get at Abe again.

The women were shouting hysterically for somebody to do

something, the girl scout was screaming, the men were shifting from side to side, trying to find an angle from which they could shoot at the bear without hitting the man it was attacking.

The bear caught Abe. It swung with both paws; one paw hit first, its claws dug out gouges of flesh, sent blood in every direction, slammed him into the other flying paw. The grizzly's jaws crunched down, tore something off. It shook its head violently and slashed again with its claws.

The men saw there wasn't enough of Abe left in one piece to save and started pumping rounds into the bear without caring if they hit the man it was mauling. The grizzly rose up and lumbered at them, flinging blood and bits of Abe all over the place. The clearing was small enough all five people in it got splattered with the blood. The grizzly had nearly a dozen rounds in it before it staggered and slumped back down to all fours. It teetered toward its tormentors.

The men shot at its face, aiming for its eyes, hoped to put their bullets into its brain. The bear hesitated, swatted as though chasing flies off its face, then folded down and died.

In seconds the only sound in the clearing was the wailing of the teenager, the gasping of the women, and the panting of the men. None of them noticed that the horse and mule had broken their tethers and run off. The people remained frozen in that tableau for a long moment, then the woman with the short red hair dropped her pack and darted to Abe's corpse. She started examining it.

"Forget it, he's dead," one of the men said.

"You don't know that," said the redhead. "I have to try. I know what I'm doing, I went to med school for a year." She was half babbling, trying to distract her mind from the horror she was dealing with. In seconds, she had the tatters of Abe's shirt off, saw how deep the wounds were and that his chest wasn't rising and falling. "Somebody come over here and help me," she ordered without looking up. She tilted Abe's head back and fingered inside his mouth to make sure his tongue wasn't blocking his throat. She checked his neck for a pulse.

The man who hadn't spoken knelt next to her. "What?" he asked. The girl scout also ran over and knelt on Abe's other side, watching with horrified fascination.

"Put your hands on his chest and start pumping," the redhead told the man. She lowered her face to Abe's and started blowing into his mouth. The man pumped. She timed herself to blow in at every

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other pump. Blood spurted up between the man's fingers when he pressed down, into his face, onto the girl scout's face. The third time the redhead blew in she backed off abruptly, her face covered with red. She spat to the side, a mouthful of blood.

"Stop," the redhead said, almost gagging. She tried to clear her mouth of the blood but some trickled down her throat anyway. The man wiped the back of his hand across his face; some of the blood smeared into his mouth and got swallowed. The girl scout burbled, tried to suck her tears and saliva back. Some of the blood went down with the saliva.

The woman with long black hair dropped her pack and ran over. She threw her arms around the redhead, hugged her tightly, murmured comforting noises at her. Blood smeared between their faces, got into the mouth of the black-haired woman, got swallowed.

The other man casually reloaded his rifle as he ambled over. He looked dispassionately down at the corpse, noted how they were just as blood-smeared as the corpse. He bent over and probed inside the still oozing gashes. The depth of the wounds made him whistle. "I told you he was a goner," he said. He stuck the bloody finger into his mouth and sucked the blood off it. "Tastes like he cut himself shaving," he said and chuckled.

"Oh, that's gross," the girl scout said and looked away. She looked like she wanted to throw up.

"We better get out of here," the man who had pumped said. "This one's mate might be nearby." He gestured at the dead grizzly.

The others started, afraid at the thought of another grizzly coming at them. They all rose and followed him out of the clearing. None of them realized that grizzlies don't travel in pairs.

*

Half a mile away they found another clearing next to a stream.

"We better clean up," one of the men said.

By unspoken agreement the two men went in one direction, the two women and the girl in the other for privacy in bathing. Half an hour later they reassembled in the clearing. The two women were wearing clean clothes from their packs. The girl scout was wearing clothes borrowed from them, she didn't look like a girl scout anymore. The men wore their jeans wet, hung their shirts on branches to dry as much as they could in the high humidity of the rain forest.

They talked in quiet voices, introduced themselves. The women were Lucy (the redhead) and Mina. They were from back east,

were on vacation. The men were Drake (the pumper) and Art. They were locals, out of work and out poaching deer to feed their families. The girl scout was on a wilderness trip with her troop. She had a fight with her troop leader and ran away. She intended only to go away long enough to make her scout leader be sorry about the fight, but when she tried to go back she couldn't find where they had been. She wandered for the past three days without seeing anybody or even a place that looked familiar. By the time she got to, "My name is..." the men and the women were looking intently at each other and no longer paying her any attention. It happens that way sometimes: After witnessing violent death or being close enough to dying, men and women feel an overwhelming need to get close together and reaffirm life in the most basic way. The girl was only a kid anyway, the men had no interest in her. Not when there were real women around.

The girl suddenly found herself all alone; the others had coupled off and disappeared into the brush to couple properly. She hugged herself and cried. She'd been alone and frightened and lost for three days. It wasn't right that now when she was finally with people again for them to go off like that and leave her alone and frightened again.

They drifted back into the clearing after a while. Again they talked in low voices, now more because they were physically calmed than from fear of attracting the attention of a predator. What next? That was the big question. They really should report the death of the strange man in the clearing; the only problem with that was for the men; poaching is illegal and there was no way they could explain things without getting arrested. The women didn't mind that they were poachers. The kid didn't care what they did, as long as they didn't go off into the bushes and leave her alone again. Whatever they did was going to have to wait until the next day, it was almost sunset and they couldn't go tramping around the forest at night.

"I'm going back," Drake said. "We need some of that meat."

Lucy shuddered. "Don't," she said, "it's too dangerous. Anyway, we've got food." She started unpacking. So did Mina.

They cooked over Sterno that came from the packs. Drake didn't go back -- not then. That night they all got very sick. It wasn't from the food. Then Drake went back to where the grizzly killed Abe. The others followed him. They were all surprised at how well they could see in the dark.

*

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"They didn't bury him," the disembodied telephone voice said to Rocks. "Scavengers didn't eat him, of course. The insects got to him, though. He was a real mess. At least he was in an unfrequented part of the park. We were the only ones looking for a missing person in that part of the forest. Nobody found him before we got to the body. Somewhere else, a day's walk away, there was another party looking for a lost girl scout; we think she was one of the people who were with Abe, one of the five you're following." The voice faltered on the last words. There was a long pause, as though the speaker had put the phone down and walked off. Rocks knew better and just waited.

"It's what we feared, Rocks, the worst we feared," the voice finally came back. "These rogues, they didn't go over the bend. They're new people. Out there without any training, no knowledge, all alone. They don't know what happened to them, they don't understand it. Only what they can do and what they must do. They have no idea how dangerous it is for them -- how dangerous they are making it for the rest of us. They don't know we can help them. Hell, they don't even know we're here." The voice broke in saying, "They don't even know they need help." There was another long pause, then the voice finished with, "Rocks, you, more than anybody else, you know what happens when someone is changed and doesn't get the training right away. Find them. Fast. Now. We can't afford to have them out there alone."

There was a click on the line, the voice had hung up. Rocks eased the receiver back into the cradle and waited for another call, a call that would tell him where to look for them next.

He was patient, Rocks was. That's all he ever did, sit by the phone in that furnished apartment and wait for it to ring. Sometimes it didn't ring for two years or longer. Rocks didn't mind, it was what he did. Most people would think it was a monotonous existence. Waiting for the phone to ring was Rocks' entire life.

CHAPTER SIX

Drake was already up when the others awoke the morning after they met. He had carefully arranged their slumbering bodies so he was the first thing each of them would see on waking.

"Be still, don't move," he told them as their eyes opened. "Just look at me for a minute." He was quite a sight, especially to the Girl Scout, the way he sat there with one knee up, the other leg folded underneath himself. Blood was spilled on his clothes. His 30.06 was in his hands, not pointing anywhere, but it looked ready anyway. "Sit up slowly, don't make any noise. And don't say a fucking word," he said once each person's eyes were completely open.

None of them were exactly silent, none of them could resist some exclamation at what they saw when they looked around. But none screamed or yelled or ran away, and that's what was important.

They were on one side of the clearing, midway between where Abe tripoded his quartered elk and died at one end, and the dead grizzly at the other. Blood darkened and stained their clothes. At first none of them immediately understood why. Thought of the blood was driven from their minds at what they saw next; that's what made them gasp.

Several coyotes were tearing at the body of the grizzly. They were all on the far side of the carcass, they cast frequent wary glances at the five humans. At the other end, two black bears were worrying two of the elk quarters; again, from the other side, keeping watch on the people. A cougar was struggling with another quarter, trying to free it from its tripod to drag it off to its den. The quarter Abe had been cutting up was gone. Foxes, bobcats, and other small carrion eaters scampered about, darting in when they dared to steal pieces of meat from the bigger animals. They also kept the food between them and the people. They all avoided Abe's body. Most eerie of all, none of the animals growled or made any other noise.

"Let's get out of here," Drake said when they were all up. "Slowly, carefully. No noise, no sudden movements. I don't know

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why they're leaving us alone, but I want to keep it that way. Art, can you lead us back to where we cleaned up yesterday?"

Art said he could.

"Do it. Move quiet. I'll bring up the rear."

They eased themselves to their feet. Art led, then the women and the girl. Drake brought up the rear, constantly watching behind, rifle ready to use. The animals in the clearing relaxed and became more vociferous at their feeding.

*

All five of them had watches and checked the time. They couldn't believe it was only 7:00 AM. It was too bright to be so early. It was brighter than it was at any time the day before. The heavy forest canopy overhead almost completely blocked out the sun. Still, they had to shade their eyes from the light.

Back where they cleaned up the day before they separated once more to clean up again.

"What did we do last night?" Lucy whispered to Mina. She tried to keep her voice low so the teenager wouldn't overhear.

"I don't know and it scares me," Mina husked back. She shook her head fiercely. "I mean, I do know what we did, but I don't understand."

The girl scrubbed and scrubbed, she didn't listen to the older women. Wild thoughts of Lady Macbeth roiled her mind.

*

Drake and Art avoided each others eyes, neither man said anything, each was lost in his own thoughts about why they went back to that dead old man and drank all of his blood.

*

"Oh, sweet Jesus, look at me," Mina said in a voice strangled not to scream.

The women and the teenager were out of the water drying themselves. Lucy and the kid looked at Mina. Her naked body was pink all over, even the undersides of her breasts.

"What happened?" Lucy asked. "You look like you're sunburned."

"No shit," Mina said harshly. "That's what it feels like, too."

"How..?" Lucy didn't finish the question. Panic was edging into her voice. It was impossible to get sunburn in the shade. She calmed down when she realized some sun came down between the trees where they didn't quite meet over the creek. Some sun, it didn't

seem like enough sun to burn her that badly, but she told herself it was. It had to be enough.

"You're pink, too," the kid said.

Lucy looked down. She wasn't as lobster as Mina was, but her skin was definitely pink. Her skin was fairer than Mina's, she wondered for a moment why the other woman was burnt worse than she was. Mina must have bathed more toward the middle of the creek and gotten more sun.

She looked at the girl. "Oh, my god. You, too." She dumped out her pack and found a jar of Noxzema skin cream. The three dug into it greedily and coated themselves. They did each others backs.

"Save some." Lucy capped the jar. "The men might be burned, too."

"I don't think 'might be'," Mina said.

They dressed as fast as they could, including long-sleeved shirts with the sleeves rolled all the way down and collars turned up and buttoned.

"Use this on all your exposed skin," Lucy said. She held out a bottle of sun block.

*

The men were waiting for them, they looked uncomfortable in their wet clothes.

"You're sunburned," Lucy told them.

"How do you know?"

"We are too. Use this." She handed over what was left of the Noxzema.

Everybody forgot about modesty. Lucy spread it on Drake's back, Mina did Art's. The kid wanted to help but both women shouldered her out of the way. Wet clothes back on, the men used the sun block.

"I'm scared," Mina said softly. She folded herself into Art's arms.

"We all are," Lucy said, and wrapped her arms around Drake. The kid nudged herself in between the two couples where they stood side by side. Lucy turned Drake around so she could put a hand on the girl without having to free either of her arms from holding the man.

"We better find someplace with no light until dark," Drake said after a few minutes.

"Then what?" Art asked.

"I don't know. We'll play it by ear."

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*

They went downstream that night. Slippery footing forced them to go slowly. Their night vision was preternaturally sharp, their hearing also seemed better than normal. They listened half in fear, half in awe, to the animals scrambling to get out of their way. They reached a village called Sylvania just before dawn and used the rest of the sun block. The plastic bottle didn't have very much left in it and there wasn't enough to cover them completely. Just outside the village they found what looked like an abandoned house to spend the day in.

The house wasn't abandoned, merely unoccupied while its owners were away. The owners left behind canned food which the five gorged on. The owners also left clothes that more or less fit all five of them. They found more lotion and sun block in the bathroom. That evening they felt the hunger for the first time. They didn't know what it was and it frightened them. Drake took charge before panic set in.

"We need help," he said.

"Where are we going to get help?" Mina said in a voice that sounded ready to break.

"I don't know. We'll look until we find somebody, this is a town, there's bound to be a doctor nearby." He looked at his companions. Art looked overly brave, he was frightened and doing his best to hide it. Lucy's face was haunted. The kid was crying.

They didn't have to look far. The next house was a hundred yards away. Drake fingered along the doorjam for a bell-button to push, held his knuckles to rap on the door, hesitated. Then he lost his fear and tried the doorknob. It turned and the door swung quietly open. People in small towns can be like that, closed doors mean keep out and don't need to be locked -- except against outsiders. Drake slipped inside; the others followed silently.

It was a fairly small house; living room, eat-in kitchen, two bedrooms, bathroom. They didn't bother to turn on any lights, they could see well enough without them. A retired couple lived in the house. They found the old folks sleeping in one of the bedrooms. Drake looked at them for a moment, laying on the bed of the art deco bedroom set they'd probably gotten back when it was cheap because it had gone out of style. His stomach fluttered, somehow he knew what he felt like doing wasn't what he meant when he'd said they needed to find help. Then he did it anyway.

None of them gave any further thought to finding a doctor.

This was their first kill, they didn't yet know how to do it quickly. The old couple had plenty of time to live in agony from the shattered bones, bruised flesh, damaged organs, and harsh and bloody bites tendered by this untender crew. What finally killed them was the pillows held over their faces to smother their screams; the pillows smothered them as well as their screams.

Drake used his hunting knife to open the old peoples' throats. He thought, maybe I should have used that first.

They drank until they were so full they could drink no more and collapsed on the bed. The mattress was soggy with blood. There was blood all over the five of them, blood was splattered all over the walls and furniture in the room. Except for when Drake observed, "That's a lot of waste," they paid no attention to the blood left in the two bodies. They didn't speak for some time, each lost in his or her own thoughts of what they'd done, what it meant.

After a while Lucy sat up; blood dripped off her side where she'd lain on the soggy mattress. "I'm going to wash up," she said softly. Then, for the first time, she noticed the crucifix hanging on the wall above the bed, circled with its Palm Sunday fronds. Blood had splashed onto the figure hanging on the cross, gave it a defeated look, as though admitting it had no power over these people. She chuckled low and deep as she turned from it. She left bloody footprints on her way to the bathroom, shedding her wet, sticky clothes as she went.

Drake followed her. The others followed him.

The bathtub was enclosed with glass and had a shower head. It was big enough to hold all of them as long as they were friendly. They were very friendly. Their bodies rubbed against each other, flesh slid over flesh, hands caressed. Drake scrubbed the kid's back. The men and women washed each others backs, then turned to their fronts. The caressing became more serious. The kid was fascinated by the men's erections, she'd never seen one before. She touched the erections and her eyes went wide at the way they reacted. The men slapped her hand away when they realized it was her touching them. "You're too young," one of them mumbled through his mouth pressed to the mouth of one of the women. The kid glared at him.

When they were thoroughly clean, one of the women husked, "Let's go." They didn't bother to dry off before going to the unused bedroom. Art put his hand on the kid's chest and pushed her back out. "Adults only, kid," he said, and closed the door in her astonished face.

They came out an hour and then some later. They looked

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satisfied and happy from the sex, subdued and concerned from what the hell was going on. The men were wearing robes they'd found in the closet of the bedroom, the women were wearing shirts from the same closet. They found the kid sitting cross-legged in the middle of the living room floor. She was still naked. One hand was between her open legs, caressing and probing; the other at her mouth, its index finger poking at her teeth.

"What are you doing?" Mina asked.

"Why aren't they longer?" she asked. She looked at them, saw their confusion at her answer. "My teeth. We're vampires now, you know." Her eyes darted to Lucy's when the woman gasped at the word she'd avoided thinking. "Vampires are supposed to have fangs to bite with."

"So what are you doing playing with yourself," Art asked, "trying to grow hair on your palms?" He laughed at his joke.

"I don't think it works that way with girls," Drake said sotto voce.

"Sex. You know, there's supposed to be a great sexuality about vampires. I thought maybe sex would make my teeth turn to fangs like they're supposed to." She looked pointedly at where the robes closed over the men's genitals. "Maybe if I had some help."

Lucy dropped to her knees next to the girl and took her hand from her crotch, squeezed the wet fingers. "Help wouldn't do it," she said. "See?" She bared her own teeth; the canines were normal. A smell made her look down at the hand she was holding, one of the fingers looked darker than the others. She lifted the hand to her nose and sniffed; blood. She licked the finger and said, "You're not a virgin anymore, are you?"

The kid shrugged. "That's only a technicality."

Lucy smiled gently. "Did it hurt?"

"No." She hunched one bare shoulder and rubbed her jaw against it. "Not much."

Mina and Art had sat on the couch when the girl said "vampire." They sat close, clutching each others hands.

"Are we?" Mina asked. "Are we really vampires?"

"How can we be vampires?" Art asked. "We didn't commit suicide, we aren't murderers."

"Take a look in that other bedroom and say that again," Drake said and shuddered.

The kid said, "You don't have to be dead, or a suicide, or a

murderer to be a vampire." She waited until the others looked at her to continue. "I know what I'm talking about, I read a lot of vampire books. Some of the legends say if you drink the blood of one you become one yourself."

"You mean that old man was a vampire?"

"How else do you explain it?"

Mina started crying and burrowed into Art's arms.

Lucy and Drake looked hollow-eyed at each other.

"We're damned," Drake said.

"Only if you believe that," Lucy said, but her voice was so soft he couldn't hear the words.

"Hey, you guys, this is going to be fun," the kid said. She hopped up and started dancing wildly to music only she could hear. "Vampires, we're indestructible. We can do anything we want!" She gyrated to Drake and grabbed his robe, jerked it open. "Let's get it on, big boy." She grabbed for his flaccid penis, flinched when he slapped her hand away.

"Get dressed," he snarled and pulled the robe closed.

"In what?"

Disorganized, fumbling, they searched the house. The old man and woman were heavier than any of them, and shorter than any other than the kid. Their clothes didn't fit them well, they were mostly too short in the sleeves, legs, and skirts. At least they weren't too tight, they'd do until they could get better. Drake pocketed the straight razor he found in the bathroom. He also took the skin cream and eyedrops. There was some canned food in the pantry, they took that, too. The night table in the master bedroom gave up a set of keys to a ten year old Ford parked in the garage. The old lady's purse and the old man's wallet gave up less than a hundred dollars. They swore because it wasn't more, took it anyway.

By then it was dawn and the sky hurt their eyes when they looked out along the side of the blinds.

"We better stay inside until dark," Drake said.

"It's true, we're really fucking vampires," Art said, shivering.

"Not necessarily," Lucy said. "The only thing that's for sure is something happened. We need to find out what."

"And what to do about it."

They didn't want to believe what had happened to them, not yet. But every hour that passed, they believed a little more.

They slept for half of the day, talked for most of the rest of it.

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In the late afternoon the adults went into the spare bedroom and left the teenager to play with herself. She did. The adults played with each other.

Someone knocked on the front door at about dusk. A thin, old woman's voice called out, "Emily, are you in there? Emily, where are you. We expected you an hour ago. Emily! If you don't answer me right now I'm going to get the sheriff because I know something happened to you." After a moment they heard footsteps shuffling off the porch.

"We better get out of here," Drake said when the visitor was gone.

They slipped out the side door and opened the creaky garage door as quietly as possible. They got into the Ford before Drake turned on the ignition. He hoped the car would start right away. It not only started right away, it started quietly.

"The old man sure kept his car in tune," Drake said as he pulled out of the garage and headed for the highway.

They had no destination in mind, no clear idea of what to do next, only a sense of being in danger if they stayed in one place. They needed to find someone who would listen to them, someone who would believe them. Someone who had a cure. That's what they said out loud to each other. What was going on inside them was something different.

They were: two nice young women from somewhere back East, in the mountains on a backpacking vacation; two local men, out of work when Boeing had to cut back on production and laid them off, out poaching deer to put meat on the table for their families; and a girl scout -- a snotty kid, maybe, but just a kid anyway. In a thirty-six hour span they'd drunk the blood of a dead man, gotten sunburned when they shouldn't have, found they could see at night, broke into a house to steal food and clothing, broke into another house and killed its elderly occupants and drank their blood, then stole the old folks car. According to the kid they were now vampires. Them being vampires was the only thing that made sense to any of them; and even that didn't make sense.

None of this fit into their cosmology.

They couldn't go back to what they were before, not so long as they had this daily craving to drink human blood. Neither were they willing to face murder charges. So they maintained for a few days, killing strangers and drinking their blood. The more they did it, the

more they came to like killing. It gave them a feeling of irresistible power. In a short while they forgot about going back to where and what they were before, this was too much fun. They started thinking something else as well, what they thought was; later, after they knew what their limits were, how to better control people, then they could stay in one place and rule like cattle barons over a herd.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

They rampaged through western Washington State and down into Oregon, through the central part of that state. Something told them for their own survival to stay away from the cities, keep to the farmlands and small towns, keep moving, head for the mountains and forests whenever possible. Word of their ravaging didn't get big attention in the news media; the news media too often didn't hear about their kills. Neither did the police.

This is nirvana country, the Pacific Northwest. The more spiritually oriented of the societal dropouts, the ones who a generation before headed to the communes of the Colorado Plateau instead of to hedonistic San Francisco, now go to Oregon and to Washington State. Many or even most of them join the communes of Maharaj So-And-So, or Yogi Whozits, and spend their lives in Oriental meditation, spinning prayer wheels, chanting mantras, bonging gongs, working in their spiritual leader's grain and fruit fields, making tourist trinkets for the Maharaj's wayside shops. Others head into the wilderness in imitation of Siddhartha Gautama or Jesus of Nazareth and imagine themselves to be aesthetes.

Then again, this is great back-packing country, where you can pull off a really neat Frere Jacques, or Johnny Appleseed, or Daniel Boone -- and never mind that Dan'l Boone never got west of Missouri, that's not the point here.

The point is, there are plenty of people wandering around all alone up there in that Northwest corner of the country. People who wouldn't be missed for a long time. People whose bodies would be discovered only by accident. Their blood-drained corpses found only when it was too late for an autopsy to discover that they were blood-drained. Hell, some of them were so isolated their remains might not be found until some anthropologist comes across them centuries later -- or maybe some far future paleoanthropologist might discover their fossils.

The upshot of all that is the five had no reason to go to Seattle,

Tacoma, Portland, or Eugene. The hinterlands provided them all the happy hunting grounds they needed. The police weren't finding bodies scattered all over the place -- most particularly they weren't finding cruelly mangled bodies empty of blood. The news media had no notice there were lots of murders happening.

Oh sure, some bodies were found; generally days or weeks afterward, after scavengers had their way with them. Some of the bodies were so putrefied and devoured by the time they were found not even an autopsy could determine murder most foul had been committed -- or give any evidence other than dental charts and attendant wallets as to the identification of the body. As a matter of fact, only the wallets generally gave a clue that a crime had been committed; the wallets never contained any money when found. Only a very few bodies were discovered early enough to turn the stomachs of the most hardened county homicide investigators and medical examiners. On those few occasions the local cops were horrified by what they found; fully opened throats, bodies drained of blood, often signs of sexual abuse -- on men as well as on women. And when they were found that early, well...

Most of the places where the five killed were served by weekly newspapers that couldn't stay on top of the news no matter how pressing it was or how badly the reporters and editors wanted to. Also many of the local newspaper publishers had policies to not publish that kind of detail. Most of the police investigating the murders didn't want those details to get out, either. They were afraid of causing panic, or copycats -- or just didn't want their bucolic communities getting the wrong kind of reputations because of some isolated (they certainly hoped isolated) incident. Whichever way it happened, nobody in the national news media picked up on the pattern; there was too little locally published or broadcast information for anyone in the national media or big city papers to pick up on.

Still, a little bit of news did get out, that odd report of a gruesome murder in an isolated farming community. Big city people could go cluck-cluck at those reports and say snide things about the inbreeding found in rural communities and how that causes the stock to degenerate so such things happen. Those same big city people wouldn't notice any correlation between something like that and the drug dealers shooting it out on the streets of their own cities, killing or crippling uncounted innocent bystanders. One of the major weekly news journals did a brief piece on the unusually high number of

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campers and backpackers missing this year; but that report was largely ignored because it was in the most knee-jerk liberal of the news journals.

So it went unnoticed. Except... Except there are a few people trained to keep an eye out for things like that; they scrupulously read an astonishingly wide variety of newspapers every day. Those readers noticed the obscure pattern and bet it was only the surface of what was really happening in rural Washington State and Oregon. A couple of them also wondered if it had anything to do with Abe and his trip to the Olympic Mountains. There was a hurried council, then a call was placed to Rocks to be on standby. It was an unnecessary call, Rocks was always on standby.

The five killed and killed some more. They killed nearly every day. They killed people they caught alone, people they caught in pairs, people they caught in small groups. In time they were being followed. Well, not exactly followed; more like being kept track of, by some folks who were able to sometimes get to their victims before they became anthropological specimens or were found by anyone else. When that happened, those folks cleaned up the mess so nobody could ever prove anybody had died. If any law enforcement officials or agencies were monitoring the activities of the five, all they could see what the few murders they knew about were becoming more scattered and less frequent. So the missing campers and backpackers were treated as missing persons rather than as the victims of crimes. The police don't handle missing person reports the same way they do homicides, therefore nobody made the connection between the missing person reports that were beginning to mount up and the killings. Only those who were responsible for turning the murder victims into missing persons noticed the connection, and they weren't spreading the news.

They reached California before their location was narrowed down enough to call Rocks again. Rocks caught a redeye to Sacramento where he rented a car and headed north on I-5, hoping to intercept them somewhere around Shasta or Klamath.

*

"This bugs me," Lucy said. "This really bugs me."

They were in a Chrysler now. They'd found it abandoned at a look-out in the Cascades near where they left Oregon. Actually, it wasn't abandoned when they first saw it. The Chrysler was owned by a traveling salesman who stopped to stretch his legs and enjoy the view

from this look-out. His was the only car there when the Ford pulled in next to it. The salesman smiled and nodded at the newcomers. His smile broadened when two of the newcomers turned out to be quite lovely young women who, smiling back, walked over to him. His smile turned quizzical when he noticed the plastic sheet that one of them opened up when she reached him; the other lovely young woman suddenly held up a big plastic jug. The smile on his face abruptly disappeared and was replaced by a very wide smile on his throat. Most of his blood flowed into the plastic jug, most of the rest was prevented from splattering around the look-out by the plastic sheet. His body went over the side where it fell a couple hundred feet and was lost to view deep in the foliage the salesman had been enjoying when the Ford drove up. Five miles farther along the highway Drake found a seldom used one lane dirt road, and followed it another mile or so to a creek that conveniently widened into a deep pool. He drove the Ford into the pool, then walked back to the highway and rejoined the others in the Chrysler. Art liked big cars and he was driving. For that matter, they all preferred big cars; a big car was more comfortable for five people to ride in.

"What bugs you, Lucy?" Drake asked from the backseat.

Lucy was in the front seat. She held up a sealed mason jar of blood and shook it as she looked through it.

"The way the blood clots so fast." The blood in the mason jar had flowed through the veins of the salesman less than two hours before, now it was thickening in clumps and strings. Soon, this blood would be too viscous to drink. "Hospitals don't have this problem. If they did there wouldn't be any blood banks."

"They must use some sort of anticoagulant," Mina said.

"What kind?"

"How do I know? You're the one that took some premed."

"So what about anti, anti, what it was you said?" Art asked.

"We always get it fresh. We don't need to worry about what hospitals do."

"What if we don't?" Lucy asked, still shaking and looking at the mason jar.

Art quickly looked away from the road, then had to return his attention to it because of all its turns. "What do you mean, what if we don't? You have any idea how many people there are out there?" He waved a hand at the wide world beyond the car.

"Do you have any idea what'll happen if we ever get lost in the

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woods and can't find anybody?" Lucy asked. She looked at Art, then back to Drake, Mina. She ignored the kid.

"She's got a point, Art," Drake said.

*

South of Mount Bradley they turned onto an unpaved road and followed it deep into the Trinity Mountains. Several miles later they found a wide place where they could park and lock the car with reasonable expectation of finding it when they returned, and went for a walk. Around midnight they grinned at each other in the darkness; they had reached a clearing that had a small tent and a smaller pup tent. The clearing had nothing they could see that couldn't have been carried in on foot. They scattered to search the surrounding area and didn't find any sign of other people anyplace around. They reassembled during the wee hours and burst into the tents.

They were cruel. The bigger tent held a couple in their late thirties. The smaller pup tent held their children, a boy and a girl, near if not past puberty, younger than the kid who was one of them. They stripped and bound and gagged their prisoners and sat them in an inward-facing circle in the middle of the clearing.

"There you go, kiddies," Art said to the two children when the sun came up. "Isn't this what you always wanted, to see your parents naked?" He brushed his hands over the girl's budding breasts and asked her, "You think your daddy likes them?"

The mother squirmed and tried to cry out through her gag. Mina hit her a stunning blow on the side of the head. The father struggled against his bonds and was knocked unconscious by Lucy.

Art fondled the mother and asked the son if he'd like to do the same. The teenager enjoyed the spectacle. She compared herself favorably to the daughter -- "She ain't got no tits," and to the mother as well, "Mine don't sag like hers do." She looked at the father's groin with great interest.

Art laughed at the boy's tears and walked casually to him with the straight razor in his hand, around behind, bent over as if to cut his hands loose, slashed his throat open. The mother's scream was loud even through her gag.

The next day they killed the father. The kid objected, she'd been getting ideas about having sex with him. Just because Drake and Art didn't want to do anything with her didn't mean another man wouldn't. Geeze. But it was okay in the end. They let her help mutilate him before they killed him and that was fun, especially since

they let her take his members away to play with by herself.

"You're disgusting, kid," Drake said. Then he and Art laughed. Lucy and Mina laughed at the men for the nervousness in their laughter.

The day after that they killed the mother. Then they had an accident.

The campsite, which had been so neat when the five arrived, was a mess. They'd cleared everything out of the tents to give themselves more room in the tiny spaces. They'd marveled at what this family found necessary to have in the woods. One thing they thought was curious at first was a box of rat poison. They stopped thinking it was so curious once they found the various rodents, rabbits, chipmunks, squirrels, and even rats, raided unprotected foodstores, and even nibbled on the bodies. Drake and Art were much better in the woods than this family was, they knew how to properly store their food and dispose of their garbage and had never had a problem with rodents.

Mina assigned herself the job of spreading the rat poison. "Almost all gone," she announced while Drake and Art were pouring the mother's blood into a large jug for them to drink from.

"What's that?" Drake asked.

"This." Mina stepped toward him and stretched out the box at the same time Drake, holding the jug, turned toward her. They bumped and Mina dropped the box of rat poison. It bounced off the top of the jug and some of the granules fell into it.

"Ah shit, Mina," Drake swore. "Now we can't drink this damn shit. We're probably going to have to kill the girl tonight and go find somebody else before tomorrow night."

Mina was annoyed at herself and mad at Drake for the accident, she thought it was his fault, but knew she could have avoided it if she'd been paying more attention. Drake put the jug aside, thinking that not only was the blood contaminated, the jug itself probably was as well.

A couple of hours later Mina happened to glance at the jug. "Lucy," she called, "come here a minute, will you?"

"What?" Lucy asked when she joined Mina.

"It's not coagulating," Mina said, pointing at the blood.

"Son of a gun." Lucy picked up the poison box and read the fine print. "Warfarin," she said, "it's got warfarin. That's an anticoagulant." The kind of rat poison the camping family brought along increased the blood pressure of its victims, kept the blood from

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coagulating when it burst small blood vessels. It also prevented the blood from coagulating if the rat got cut. Lucy looked unfocused into the distance, then at the daughter. "I wonder," she said absently. The girl was filthy from three days of sitting naked in the dirt, and more than half mad from watching her family killed one by one and knowing she was next. But Lucy didn't care about her condition, physical or mental. "I wonder," Lucy said again. She got a glass and poured some of the blood into it.

The girl didn't cry out when Lucy undid her gag. When Lucy poured the blood into her mouth she eagerly drank it. Three days without food or water had left her so thirsty she didn't realize what she was drinking.

"More, more," the girl said when the glass was empty. At least that's what Lucy thought she said, the girl's voice was so rusty it was hard to understand her.

Two hours later the blood in the jug had developed a crust on top, but was still fluid underneath. The girl showed no ill effects from drinking the blood. Lucy gave her another glassful. The girl started drinking eagerly and had it half down by the time she finally realized what she was drinking. Then she screamed and tried to not drink anymore, but Lucy was too strong and she didn't really have any choice.

That's how they learned how to preserve blood from day to day. Oh yeah, they did kill the girl the next day and drank her blood fresh, they weren't about to trust the mother's blood after it sat out all that long. They got ice packs and insulated jugs and coolers to keep blood in after that -- and used rat poison as anticoagulant.

They stopped killing every day, one victim every third day was enough. Now they only killed more often just for kicks. And they killed people by the group only when they were in that kind of mood.

CHAPTER EIGHT

They unwittingly outwitted Rocks when they jagged west, into the Trinity Mountains. Rocks looked in the Klamath and Shasta National Forests, all the wrong places, until he was convinced they weren't there and was headed back to Sacramento to catch a flight home when he got a radio message they'd just killed someone on the Round Valley Indian Reservation. He changed course to Leggett and went south over the Coastal Ranges. He returned the rented car in San Bernardino and used stolen vehicles from there on. He'd already left enough of a paper trail, he didn't want to leave any more of one. Always, he was a day or two behind; always, they moved on before anyone saw them. Anyone other than their victims. Now nearly all of their kills were cleaned up in time to keep local officials unaware of them. The victims always just appeared to be people who went off without bothering to say goodbye to anyone.

Rocks followed them all the way down California, all the way across Arizona, halfway across New Mexico, until he almost caught up with them west of Albuquerque. And lost them and went home.

Two weeks passed with only the information about Abe to break the monotony, the monotony Rocks was so used to he didn't even notice it anymore. Then the people at the Utah ranch called to tell him they were seen in Odessa, Texas. Someone there could give him a description. And a couple of Polaroid photos of them. He flew to Midland where he was met by Clem Michaelson.

*

Clem was a big man. Not tall or fat, just big. He carried two hundred and some pounds on his five eleven frame. Little of that weight was fat. Clem was dark-skinned enough that he didn't look like he needed to use sun block, people attributed the light sheen that coated his skin to sweat. Sometimes they wondered how anyone could sweat so much in this dry climate. He didn't look like his name was Michaelson either, and that threw most people when they met him the

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first time. His dark complexion and high cheekbones were the product of his mostly Mexican and Tiwa Indian bloodlines. The Michaelson came from a gringo ancestor who briefly married an Indian woman before moving on to California. Nobody paid any attention to the dark, wrap-around sunglasses Clem habitually wore. There was one other thing that went with his appearance; he didn't talk much, and when he did he used few words.

Rocks and Clem nodded and shook hands briefly. Neither said hello, it wasn't a word that needed saying: They knew each other.

Rocks threw his carry-all into the rear of Clem's pickup, they climbed into the cab. Clem drove west on dirt tracks that avoided the Missouri Pacific railroad and US 80. A mile or so before reaching Odessa, he turned off the track he was on and followed a different one. It was a long way out of the way, but by following the network of tracks they avoided Odessa and didn't see anyone, not even oil field trash working the oil pumps. Clem didn't bother to explain why he took this round about route, and Rocks didn't need an explanation.

If Rocks had bothered to notice he would have seen there was more sky here than he'd ever seen anywhere else. He didn't bother to look. Neither did he notice the beauty of the West Texas flatland. There certainly is beauty there. If you're into monochrome landscapes: minor variations on the theme of brown. Rocks wasn't into monochrome landscapes. Brown meant no more and no less to him than any other color. But that was all right; beauty of any kind had no place in his life.

At one point they stopped and Rocks got out to open his carry-all. He took something that had the shape of a shaving cream canister and something formed like an ornate picture frame from it -- at least, canister of shaving cream and frame is what they looked like when Rocks' carry-all went through airport X-ray machines -- along with a few small tissue wrapped items. He snapped open the two big pieces. The canister revealed the slide for his 9mm pistol, the "picture frame" gave up the receiver and two loaded magazines. The small bits were the rest of the handgun. He assembled and loaded it and stuck it into a clip-on holster, got back into the cab and they continued.

West of Odessa Clem pointed off to the side and said, "First saw 'em there."

Rocks had already noticed the meteor crater Clem pointed out. He couldn't help but see it with the tourists on its rim; they were people. Even if Rocks didn't notice big skys or monochrome

landscapes, he always saw people.

Another twenty odd miles southwest they were in sand dunes. The dunes piled up and rolled, they looked for all the world like the middle of the Sahara Desert. Here Clem stopped. He leaned forward, forearms crossed on top of the steering wheel, just looked ahead for several moments. Rocks sat patiently, not looking around: His attitude seemed to be; you've see one sand dune, you seen them all.

"Followed 'em here after I cleaned up at the crater," Clem finally drawled.

"They killed a tourist?"

Clem nodded once. His gestures were as economical as his words. Then continued, "Found 'em in a burrow they dug for the day." Clem nodded at the dunes. "Went back, called. They was gone when I got back."

Rocks didn't ask why Clem hadn't done anything about them when he found their burrow. Doing something about them was his job, not Clem's.

"Left a trail. Followed it to Grandfalls, got there too late. Folks was uproared. Couldn't find a trail. Went home. Saw 'em round back of Jack's Hardware at night. They broke in, drug a woman with 'em. Came out a hour later. Followed 'em to their car. Parked in a well lit spot. Got these." He fingered two photos out of his pocket, Rocks took them.

They were instant photos, taken at night under street lighting. Neither showed a lot because of the dim lighting. Five people, two men and three women, were visible in one, getting into a red Buick. Rocks felt a jolt when he looked at the other. It showed a woman full front, stepping toward the camera. Her short hair made a cap on her head, it looked red. The photo didn't show the color of her eyes, but they seemed to blaze out of her triangular face. She wore a lightweight, loose blouse and snug jeans. Her clothes had dark splotches on them Rocks guessed were blood. Her figure stopped somewhere short of voluptuous.

Rocks had to swallow before he could say, "Did she get a good look at you?"

Clem shook his head. "Been at it longer 'n them."

Rocks thought Clem was careful enough not to be seen by them, but he had to ask anyway. He kept staring at the photo. This was the first image he had of any of them, the first clear description. Something about the photo of the redhead bothered him but he wasn't

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sure why. He wondered briefly if she reminded him of someone, then dismissed the thought.

"They went 80 toward Midlands," Clem said. "I stayed to clean up."

They had gone south as far as the Pecos River before turning back. Rocks wondered if that had any significance, turning back at the Pecos -- they'd already been on the other side of that river. Along the way they killed a tourist at the meteor crater, someone in Grandfalls, a woman in Odessa. The one in Grandfalls was found by the wrong people. They were traveling at night. They were now in a red Buick. "That was last night?"

"'Bout midnight."

Last seen headed toward Midland almost eighteen hours ago. Not much to go on. West Texas is a big place, they could be anywhere in it. Or they could have headed east into the Hill Country. Just that fast he'd lost them again. Rocks leaned his head back against the cab's rear window and sighed. At least he had the photos. And outside Albuquerque was the only time he'd been any closer. Sooner or later he was going to catch up with them, confront them.

"Let's go."

Clem shifted back into gear and followed a different set of dirt tracks past Odessa, all the way to Midland. He parked in a draw a couple of miles outside of town until sunset. While they waited they ate a box lunch and drank beer from a cooler Clem had packed before leaving home late that morning. Shortly before dark Clem hooked shielded fog lamps to his front bumper. When night fell he used them to guide along a dirt track to almost a half mile from the nearest outlying house. The fog lights were good for moving around undetected at night, but he couldn't leave them on the bumper because someone might get the idea he was a cattle rustler. Yes, there was a rustling problem; no, Clem wasn't involved.

They went on foot from there. Not to the nearest outlying house, but beyond it into a more densely built up part of town. Clem kept watch while Rocks hot-wired a late model Chevy. Rocks drove them back to the pick up and retrieved his carry-all. Clem gave him a handheld CB radio before they parted. They waved a modest farewell, went their separate ways.

Rocks liked using a radio even less than a cellphone. A cellphone call *might* be overheard -- a radio transmission *would* be overheard. But there was always a record of cellphone calls, never of

radio calls. So when he needed to communicate when he was moving, he used a radio -- and spoke in circumlocutions.

Rocks knew the people he was following had continually moved onward ever since their start in the Olympics. This Midland-Greatfalls-Midland jaunt was the first time they'd backtracked. They probably wouldn't continue to backtrack. He found I-20 and headed east. Beyond Midland was the Hill Country, that's probably where they were headed. That's where he was going. He played with the car and discovered somebody had replaced the stock engine with something that had a lot of power. A thin smile crossed his face when he realized how much potential power and speed he had under his foot. A few miles short of Sweetwater a radio call told him they did continue to backtrack. They were more than a hundred miles away right now, in Lubbock, the radio said. He turned onto US 84 and floored it. He got there in an hour. It took twenty minutes for him to find the place someone was cleaning up.

*

Rocks drove past the place without slowing down. He parked a couple of blocks away and walked back by a round about route. At some point when he was positive nobody was watching, he moved off the street into backyards. He soft-stepped through them, kept to the shadows, moved with the movement of leaves where there were trees that had leaves to move, where there were no trees he moved with shifting cloud shadow as the moon crossed the sky. He wasn't invisible, but he was a denizen of the night. No one saw him, though one dog suspected an intruder and growled low. It wasn't a strong growl meant to warn someone off or call for assistance; it was more along the line of leaving a bathroom light on when you go to bed, something to let any potential intruders know somebody was home.

The back door of a one story house that looked like it would be rambling if it wasn't so small was ajar. The stench hit Rocks' nose the instant he came through the door. He followed the smell through the small kitchen, into the small living room, right out of the living room by another door, into a small bedroom. The draperies were tightly drawn and a bedside lamp provided dim but sufficient light. Four people were already in the bedroom. Three of them were alive.

"I'm Rocks," he said to the two who were standing.

They nodded greeting but didn't give their own names.

The other two people were on the bed. They were both in their early twenties, they were both naked. The woman was gagged and

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bound spread-eagle. Dried semen was on her crotch and the sheet between her legs; blood was smeared over her face, torso, and thighs. Her terrified eyes flickered to Rocks when he came in and spoke. The man was neither bound nor gagged. His head lay on one of her outstretched arms, one leg was jammed under one of hers. His wide-open eyes stared blankly at the ceiling. His throat gaped open. His skin was pale, bloodless. The sheet between his legs was a mess where he'd voided himself when he died. Little blood was on the sheets or pillowcase, he'd been expertly drained.

"It happened about fifteen minutes after we called Utah," the standing woman said. Rocks knew it hadn't been more than half an hour from the time they called Utah until he got the radio message. Now he was only two hours behind them. "We waited for you to see this before we cleaned up."

"Thanks." They hadn't needed to save it for him, he'd seen before what they could do to people. But this was the first time they'd left a live witness.

"She saw it all," the standing man said. "We think one of them raped her before they did it, they made him watch. The other one raped her after. That accounts for the pattern of blood on her." He shook his head. "They're fucking animals."

"What way did they go from here?"

"North. I followed them as far as the city limits while Sam stayed here. They went up 87."

"What's that way?"

"Plainview. Amarillo. Oklahoma."

Rocks thought about it for a few seconds. They didn't have much more than an hour lead on him. If they stayed on the highway he had a chance to catch them. "How far to Plainview?"

"About forty miles."

If they went right through that town and kept on toward Amarillo he had a real good chance. "What kind of car were they driving?"

"A red Buick. Sorry, I didn't get the license."

"That's all right, I've seen that car." Rocks turned to leave.

"What'll we do with her?" the man asked.

Rocks looked back over his shoulder. "Finish cleaning up. No witnesses." Behind him he heard the naked young woman thrash against her bindings, he heard the thin noises she made trying to scream through the gag. He wasn't sure when he closed the back door

behind him whether it was the closing door or a sharp blade that cut off her noises.

Back on US 87, Rocks pushed it way up and kept it there, slowing down only to go through Plainview. The night air was clear. Overhead more stars than he'd seen almost anywhere else shown down. Here and there on the ground, lights of small towns seemed to gather the starlight and joyously reflect it. An irregularly spaced string of lights ahead of and behind him was the rest of the late night traffic on the highway, mostly tractor trailers carrying produce, cotton, cattle, finished goods, hither and yon. Rocks passed all of it, even the big rigs rumbling along at a highly illegal 80 mph. He wasn't afraid of being stopped by a state cop. Local authorities never scared him.

Not much more than an hour later, with the lights of Amarillo already visible, the highway dropped down into the miniature Grand Canyon called Palo Duro. Someone with normal eyes wouldn't have been able to see the unlit big truck pulled off the side of the highway on the other side of Blanca Creek, not at that distance at night. Rocks could, though not even his eyes were quite good enough to make out whether the unlit car parked in front of it was a red Buick. He suspected it was. He slowly eased back on his speed until he was coasting with the ignition turned off when he pulled up behind the truck. When he got out he clipped his holster onto the back of his belt over his right hip. They wouldn't see it from the front, but it was right where he could get to it if necessary.

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CHAPTER NINE

The kid was pouting. She had a lot to be mad about, too. First of all, she wanted to be in the front seat instead of stuck here in the back seat, stuck in the corner behind Art where she couldn't see where they were going. She had to sit in the corner because Drake and Lucy were also in the back and they were making out. They took up too much space when they made out. Mina wouldn't let her sit in the front, she said something snotty about only grown ups sitting in the front. That was another thing to be mad about, Mina being so snotty. Better yet, she thought, she should be driving. Everybody else was given a chance to drive, but they never let her drive. Why not? She could drive. She'd had a learner's permit and had been taking drivers ed in summer school. If she hadn't gone on that dumb camping trip with her Scout troop she'd already have her driver's license!

She pressed her cheek against the window and stared at the night. The zillions of stars in the sky didn't impress her. Neither did the lights of the small towns dotting the prairie. What impressed her was how flat and empty everything was; she was impressed with how boring it was. She didn't know if there were any sounds outside, the car's air conditioner was on and drowned out anything except the occasional tractor trailer truck that blasted past them. She wished Art would drive faster so those trucks wouldn't pass them like that, those roaring, blasting trucks scared her. Just a little bit.

"I'm bored," she announced somewhere beyond Plainview.

"So go to sleep," Art said. Then he snickered. She thought it was because Mina groped him. That was reinforced when he said, "Make me see heaven, baby."

"No way I'm going down on you while you're driving," Mina said and laughed a throaty laugh.

The kid snorted. She thought about it for a couple of seconds, then said hopefully, "Listen, let me drive. Then you two can sit in the back and make out like these other two." She tried to make her voice

drip with scorn when she said, "these other two," but it sounded peevish instead.

Drake reached out and poked her. "Mind your manners," he said. She made a face and stuck her tongue out at him.

"You can't drive, you don't have a license," Art said, then barked out a laugh and pounded the steering wheel. "That's rich," he said when he stopped laughing. "So fucking what if *I* don't have a driver's license. Any cop gonna get away with giving me a ticket? Or arrest me for driving a stolen car? Fuck no!" Mina laughed along with him.

They drove along in silence for another twenty miles, then the kid said, "I want to do something."

"What do you want to do? We just did something," Art said. The others were dozing now. They stirred when he started chuckling at the memory of what they'd done in Lubbock.

"You had all the fun there, not me," she snapped.

"Ahhh. Poor little girl."

"I am not a little girl, damn it. I'm grown up."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. You're old enough to bleed." Art laughed at his joke.

Lucy was awake now and listening. She giggled at it, but reached over and gently stroked the kid's arm. She flinched away from Lucy's touch.

"You never let me have any fun," she kept talking to Art. "You and this bozo over here got your jollies off on that girl back there. What'd I get?"

"Mina and I didn't get any either," Lucy said.

"So? At least they let you watch. You didn't get thrown out of the room before they did it."

"Watching a rape isn't a lot of fun," Lucy said placating. "Anyway, we let you back in when we killed him. And you had fun teasing the girl before we left."

"Some fun."

"So what do you want to do?" Mina asked. She and Drake were both fully awake now.

"I want, I want." Heather looked wildly around, not sure what she did want to do. The lights of the big trucks caught her attention. "I want a trucker."

"What are you going to do with a trucker?" Drake asked.

"Let's get me one and you'll find out. If you don't kill him too

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soon."

Art turned around in the seat and looked at her. A nasty smile crossed his face. He shifted his gaze to Drake and grinned broadly. Drake grinned back.

A loud, deep horn blasted. Art jerked back around, twisted the wheel to swerve back into his lane. The southbound tractor trailer that beeped rushed past with a roar like an avalanche.

"Jesus, watch where you're driving," Mina said breathlessly at the speeding truck.

"What'd ya want, he missed us," Art said. He tried to say it jokingly, but his voice trembled. "Anyway, a truck won't hurt us. You know, a wooden stake through the heart, and all that shit."

"We don't know that," Lucy said. She shivered.

"Art," Drake said, "if you want to find out, find out sometime when you won't be experimenting on the rest of us."

The kid was too shaken by the close call to say anything.

Farther along, the flat plain suddenly dropped down and they went into the Palo Duro. Bianca Creek cut through the bottom of the canyon. They pulled off the side when they crossed the bridge over the creek. Art cut the motor and turned off the lights and air.

"Okay, let's see you get a trucker," Art said.

The kid looked at him hard to see if he was joking, Art never let her do anything she wanted. He looked like he meant it. She looked at the others; they were looking at her, waiting to see how she was going to get herself a trucker. "All right," she said. "You wait here. Nobody messes with me while I get my trucker."

"You got it, kid," Drake said.

She stood next to the highway and wondered how she was going to get one of these huge eighteen wheelers to stop. Headlights and cab lights came toward her. She stuck out her thumb. Well, that's what people did when they wanted a ride. Three trucks, nose to taillight, rumbled past. She saw a "No Riders" sign posted in the windshield of the first truck. Uncertain, she looked back at the car to see if the others were where they were obvious to the truckers, or if they were laughing at her for not getting one of the trucks to stop. She had to look hard to see them, they'd gotten out and were hiding in a wrinkle in the ground where no passing trucker would spot them.

"Remember, when I get one, he's mine," she shouted defiantly.

"You get him, he's yours," Drake called back. The others laughed.

Heather decided maybe her mistake with those first trucks was trying to flag down one with another too close behind for it to be able to stop. She'd wait for one that didn't have a tailgater behind it. She heard the grinding of gears as a truck down shifted to descend into the deep canyon. The lone truck came along in a couple of minutes. She wagged her thumb at the truck and saw the driver wag his hand no back at her and point at his "No Riders" sign. She heard the others laughing at her.

When the next solo truck didn't stop either, Art rose from his hiding place and said, "You tried and you failed. Let's go."

The kid rushed over to him, intercepted him before he reached the car.

"I'll get one to stop, just you wait."

"How?" Art sneered at her.

How? She didn't know how, that was the problem. Then she got an idea. "This is how," she said. She grabbed the shoulder of her blouse and jerked down. The shoulder seam ripped apart and the top two buttons popped off her blouse. Its side hung down exposing her right breast; she wasn't wearing a bra.

Art smiled thinly. He reached out and tweaked her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. "You think that little thing's going to get a big, bad trucker to stop?"

She jerked at his touch and bit at her lower lip. She wanted him to do it again, no boy had ever done that to her and Art did it too fast to tell if it really felt good. Then his words sunk in. "What do you mean, little thing like that! I've seen you naked. You're not hung like a horse, you know. You wouldn't recognize a good tit if one walked up and hit you in the mouth."

Art laughed. "Lots of nice tits have hit me in the mouth, kid. I've recognized every one of them. But if you think that little thing's going to do it, go ahead and give it a try. Maybe one of these truckers is a child molester." He walked back to the others, laughing and shaking his head.

Angry, the kid stomped back to the side of the highway. Little thing like that! Who did Art think he was, anyway, saying something like that to her? She looked at her breast and brushed a hand over it. It might be small, but it looked nice. One of the experienced girls at her old high school told her that when she saw her naked taking a shower after gym class.

Soon another solo truck was coming toward her. She ran into

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the roadway, bent over slightly, one arm clutching her stomach. She raised her right arm and waved frantically at the onrushing truck. She hoped her bare breast showed well.

The trucker saw her and slammed on his breaks. He had to swerve to miss her and came to an air-blowing halt. He pulled onto the shoulder fifty yards beyond her before getting out.

She didn't wait, she ran to the cab to meet him and was on him before he even stepped out.

"What happened? Are you hurt? What happened to you?" the trucker started to say. He didn't get quite as far as the second "what" before the kid was on him, pushing him back into the cab, all the way across the seat to the opposite door. "What?" he gasped. His ribs hurt, he felt like he'd been tackled by a football player.

"You're mine," she rasped through clenched teeth. Her grin sent shivers through him.

"Oh no," he shouted and tried to push her off. Her hands were clenched onto his shoulders near the neck. His arms were longer than hers, but her grip was so tight he was only able to push as far as her arms would go. He splayed one hand across her chest to keep her away, two fingers sank into her bare breast, and let go with the other hand to fumble with the door. It sprang open and he tumbled out, she went with him. He landed on top and instinctively tried to avoid landing on the girl with his full weight. That was a mistake. She wrapped her right arm around his chest, looped her right leg over his hips, and pushed against the ground with her left arm and leg. They flipped over hard enough to knock some wind out of him. Before he could react he saw four people standing around his head, looking down, smiling.

"Hey, get her off me," he said. "I didn't do anything to her, honest. Get her off."

"Is he the one you want?" Drake asked.

"Yeah, I want this one," she said, and smiled sweetly into the trucker's face. "He feels big and strong." The man under her was barrel chested, with burly arms and legs and the beginning of a gut. "Now I get to find out what it's all about. Mister, you're going to pop my cherry."

"No, no! I'm not doing any such thing." He struggled to get out from under her. She smacked him across the face hard enough to daze him. He shook his head to clear it and rubbed his jaw where she hit. Some of his teeth felt loose and his jaw wobbled under his hand.

She sat up, straddling his groin, and tore open his shirt and undershirt. When she went for his belt he twisted violently and managed to throw her off. He bolted up and ran to the safety of his truck. He slammed the door behind himself and locked it. The keys were gone. Then he saw Mina standing on the step outside the driver's window, smiling at him. The keys dangled from her upraised hand.

"No," the trucker moaned. What did these people want? "Why me, lord?"

The sound of glass shattering spun him in his seat. He saw the girl reaching in the broken passenger window to unlock the door. The rock she broke the glass with rolled across the seat and bumped into his thigh. He screamed.

The kid dragged him outside and threw him onto the ground. "You're not going to run from me again," she snarled. She hit him on the shin with another fist-sized rock and nodded in satisfaction at the sound of bone breaking under the blow. "Now, where was I? Oh yeah." She ignored his screaming and opened his pants. The two of them struggled, with him trying to clutch his broken leg, her trying to keep him laying straight. She got his pants open and pulled down around his knees. "Come on now, you're supposed to stand up," she said, looking intently at his flaccid penis. She touched it and caressed it, took hold and waved it side to side. "Why isn't it doing anything?" she asked Lucy.

"Because he's in pain. It's like I told you with that boy in New Mexico; when a man's upset enough or in pain, he can't get it up."

"Ah shit. Wait a minute, what about this? I seen you and Mina do this." She bent over the trucker and took his penis into her mouth. It felt odd, sort of soft and rubbery, and the trucker smelled down there. She dropped it out of her mouth and looked up at the two women. "Am I supposed to do something with it when I put it in my mouth?"

They both laughed. "You're supposed to lick on it and suck it," Mina said.

Lucy nodded. "But it still won't work now," she said.

The kid put her fists on her hips and considered the penis that wouldn't get up. She looked at the trucker's terrified face. "Look, will this help?" she asked him, and pulled her blouse completely off.

The trucker whimpered and his penis stayed soft.

"How about this?" Heather stood up and stripped off the rest of her clothes. "This is something else I've seen Lucy and Mina do.

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Maybe you'll like it." She straddled his face and sat on it. "Well?" She moved back and forth on his face. His whiskers scratched and she wasn't sure if she liked the tingly feeling or not.

"Get off him," Drake said suddenly. "Get in the car. Everybody, in the car."

"What do you mean? This is just getting interesting," the kid objected.

"Yeah," Art said. "I want to see what other kind of tricks she thinks she knows."

"Get in the car," Drake repeated. He wasn't looking at any of them, he was looking south. "That's why." He reached into his hip pocket for the straight razor, but it wasn't there. "Who's got the blade?"

The others looked where Drake was looking and gasped; none of them had heard the car that now sat behind the truck.

"Where the fuck did that come from?" Art whispered.

"Who is it?" Mina asked.

"Get into the car, we're going," Drake said again.

"Oh, bullshit," the kid said. "This guy won't get it up, maybe there's a man in that car who will." She started toward the strange car, trying to swing her hips seductively.

Drake grabbed her arm and roughly shoved her toward the women. "Go."

"Wait, we need to talk," said a voice. A stranger stepped out from behind the truck. He looked confident, seemed to have no fear of them.

CHAPTER TEN

They were so engrossed with what they were doing to the trucker they didn't notice him. Rocks stood in the shadow of the back of the trailer and watched them for a long moment. The naked girl sexually teasing the trucker; the four adults standing around watching, commenting on the girl's technique. All they were doing was torturing a randomly selected victim; a needless victim. They had enough blood from the man in Lubbock, they didn't need to kill again so soon. All victims were picked randomly, of course. But always for a purpose; so that someone might live. This victim and his blood were probably going to be wasted. Rocks grimaced and stroked his mustache. He wondered whether it was better to interrupt them now or wait until they were through with the trucker. If he gave them the time to finish, someone else might stop and discover what they were doing and it would get messier. No vehicles were coming into the valley at the moment, so he thought he had a little time to study them. He got stuck when he looked carefully at the redhead, the one who was coming toward the camera in the instant photo. The feeling was stronger now that he knew her from somewhere in his past. But that wasn't possible; she was in her mid-twenties, far too young to be anybody he remembered from any time in his past.

He dwelled on her too long. One of the men spotted his car and was urging them to leave, that man acted like their leader. Rocks watched the naked teenage girl take a step in his direction and get thrown back by the leader. Rocks stepped into the open. "Wait, we need to talk."

"We don't have anything to talk about," said the man who was giving the orders.

Rocks wished he knew their names, that would make this whole business so much easier. "My name's Roskowski. They call me Rocks." He took a slow step closer, hands held empty out at his sides.

"Hey, Rocks," the girl shouted, excited, "you wanna fuck?" She ran toward him so fast an ordinary man would see little more than

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a blur. Rocks flicked up one hand and she rebounded off it, staggered, fell down. She lay curled on her side, rubbing her chest where it hit his hand, moaning.

"Don't try anything, I'm better than you are," Rocks said, menace was in his voice now.

The redhead snatched up the girl's clothes and ran to help her. Rocks had to stifle a gasp when she reached the girl. Damn, he could swear he knew her from somewhere, sometime.

Out of the corner of his eye Rocks saw the other man, the one who hadn't spoken, starting to edge to the side. Rocks didn't look at him, let him make his maneuver. Instead he tore his eyes away from the redhead and looked at the one who seemed to be the leader and said, "You're causing a lot of problems. We need to talk and straighten things out before they get worse."

Now the other man was to his side and dashed in. Rocks adroitly sidestepped the charge and used his hands to grab him and throw him into the side of the parked truck. There was a loud boom as the man banged into the truck and bounced off it and crumpled, dazed.

"I said, don't try anything. That was a lesson. Don't do it again. You," to Drake, "what's his name?"

"Art." The man swallowed. "Mine's Drake."

Rocks bent over and lifted Art. He held him off the ground by the front of his shirt. "Well, Art, now you know. You're a kindergarten going up against a PhD. You lose." He threw him toward Drake and turned to the redhead, who was shoving the girl's arms into the sleeves of her torn blouse. "What's your name?" He managed to keep his voice steady.

She looked up at him, awe in her eyes. "Lucy."

"Well, Lucy, get that child dressed and tell her if she wants to fuck with me, come back in about thirty years when she knows which end is up. If she lasts another thirty years. Move." No, he didn't remember anybody named Lucy.

Lucy helped the kid back to the others and hustled her the rest of the way into her clothes.

Rocks thought he had their attention now. "Somebody's going to stop and investigate this truck pretty soon. We need to get away from the highway," he told them. "Get into your car and follow me." He watched them pile into the Buick and speed off. He shook his head. He wasn't surprised they'd try to run. It was all right, he'd catch them soon enough. Another day or two and this job would be over

with them all safe in the Utah ranch. He turned his attention to the trucker. "I'm sorry, but we can't afford witnesses," he said softly. He pulled out his pistol and fired one round into the man's head. He shook his head again. *What a waste*, he thought. There was no chance to get someone to clean up before someone else found the body. Rocks took the dead man's wallet, it held a couple hundred dollars. Let the cops think it was a robbery; let them think what they would about the state of the man's clothing. He got back into the Chevy and went chasing the Buick's taillights out of the Palo Duro.

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"Who the fuck was that?" Art demanded. He kept shaking his head to clear the wooziness that remained from being bounced off the truck and then thrown through the air.

"How the hell do I know," Drake snapped. "Shut up." He didn't want to talk now, he tried to concentrate on what were they going to do next. He reached the top of the canyon, floored the accelerator and turned off the lights; the moon gave enough light for him to see to drive. Half a mile along he saw a small bridge over a gully that cut beneath the roadbed. He slammed on the brakes and managed to keep the car from going totally out of control when it fishtailed. Then he drove into the gully and along it until it bent out of sight from the highway. There he stopped and got out. He clambered up the side and lay where he could watch traffic. A minute later the Chevy roared past. He whistled. "Bastard must be doing a hundred," he said to Lucy who had joined him. He went back to the car. Lucy followed. "He's past us. Let's see where this goes." He drove on.

In one direction the gully eventually dropped down into the Palo Duro. They went the other way. The gully was cut by running rain water, twisted along the dry earth, some of the twists were almost too tight for the Buick to make its turns. Fortunately for them, the gully's bottom was gently curved, almost flat and didn't have much debris in it. Drake was able to bulldoze around the tighter turns. The car was going to need serious body work and most of its lights replaced later. If anybody ever found it later. The driving was slow and torturous. Drake was nervous, he knew that pretty soon that guy in the Chevy would realize what they had done and backtrack, looking for where they left the highway. Their trail wouldn't be hard for him to find. When he did he could follow faster than they could run because they already cut out the tough corners for him. Less than two miles into the gully, one vertical wall had collapsed since the last flash flood

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raced along it and made a ramp in its side. Drake drove up the ramp and sped fast as he dared along the flat plain until he came to a county road. There he took the time to go onto it and back up several times, turning a different direction each time he went onto the road, to disguise the direction he finally went in. The county road went northeast. The lights of Amarillo lit the horizon to their left.

"All right now, who the fuck was he?" Art said. He rubbed his head to emphasize who he meant.

"You want a guess? He's the same guy who started following us in California. He found us again."

"He's like us, isn't he," Mina said in a weak voice.

Drake gestured with his head toward Art in the back seat. "Who else could have done that?"

"Shouldn't we talk to him if he's like us?" Mina asked.

Drake quickly glanced at her. "About what? Didn't you hear him? He said we were causing trouble. What do you think he wants to do, invite us to tea? Bastard's probably carrying a gun with silver bullets and has a bundle of wooden stakes in the trunk of his car."

"That's werewolves," the kid said.

"Did you see the way he looked at me?" Lucy asked. She was in back with Art, holding the kid.

"No, what do you mean?"

"Like he was hungry." Lucy shivered at the memory of those eyes on her.

"Hey, aren't you listening to me?" the kid whined. "I said that's werewolves."

"What are you talking about?" Drake snapped.

"You said silver bullets. He doesn't have silver bullets. You use them to kill werewolves. Sunlight, fire, iron, and wooden stakes through the heart; that's how you kill vampires." She shrugged out of Lucy's arms and sat up. The torn panel of her blouse dropped down. She pushed it back up and made a noise when it fell again. "Oh, what the hell," she muttered. "Neither of you bozos is gonna notice anyway." She left her breast bare. "I don't think any of that shit's real anyway," she said more loudly. "You may have noticed, sunlight doesn't kill us, it just gives us a bad sunburn."

"If you stay in sunlight long enough without protection you can get sun poisoning, and that can kill you," Lucy said.

The kid made a face. "Use sun block and wear sunglasses and you don't have any problem with the sun. We don't have any problem

with any kind of metal. Mina burnt her hand on a stove and didn't get burned away."

"It was a lot worse than it should have been," Mina interjected.

The kid ignored her. "The only thing we haven't tried yet is a stake through the heart. I don't think that will do anything, either. Except for burns, if we get hurt we heal quickly." She shook her head. "Not even crosses or any religious stuff does anything to us." She reminded them of the crucifix over their first victims back in Washington.

"Do you want to be our guinea pig on wooden stakes, kiddo?" Art asked.

She snorted. "For him to do that, he'd have to hold us down," she said. "I don't think he can."

"You don't know how strong he is," Art said, rubbing his head again.

"I do too, he knocked me down. If I'd been ready for him he wouldn't have."

"Maybe," Drake said. "But none of this does us much good. We don't know for sure who he is. All we know is he's following us and it's a pretty damn good bet he doesn't mean us any good."

"Then why'd he try to talk to us back there?" Mina asked.

Drake gave her a quick look. "Because there's five of us and one of him," he said and looked back at the road. "He has to get us separated, one at a time, or gain our confidence so he can surprise us, that's why."

"We can't get away from him," Lucy said. "We lost him in New Mexico and now he's found us again."

"So let's get him before he gets us," the kid said. "Should be easy."

Art grunted and rubbed his head again.

They drove on in silence for awhile. The lights of Amarillo drifted past until they were behind them before anybody said anything more.

"The kid's right," Drake finally broke the silence. "We gotta get him first."

"How?"

Drake shook his head. "The first question is where. It has to be someplace where we've got the advantage."

"Where's that?"

"A kind of place we haven't been yet. A place where there's

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too many people for him to make a move before we're ready."

The county road intersected US 287. They followed it to Fort Worth, where they left the Buick on a street littered with stripped cars. Elsewhere they found a Lincoln.

"Let's go in style this time," Drake said, grinning.

The others grinned back at him.

They picked up I-20 and followed it as far as Shreveport. There they turned onto US 71. Eventually they reached New Orleans.

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"Goddam," Rocks swore. He was halfway from Palo Duro to Amarillo before he realized they weren't in front of him any longer. He spun across the median and headed back to the canyon as fast as he could. There, he U-turned again and drove more slowly, looking for everyplace a road or track led off the highway. He stopped at every one of them, checking tire prints. None of the tracks he saw were new enough. He pulled onto the shoulder when he reached the place he'd first turned back and thought about it for a moment. Then he remembered crossing over a few small bridges and swore again. They were slicker than he was giving them credit for. He made another circuit, this time checking the underpasses. He found the right gully and followed their tracks. Drake had been right, Rocks made better time along the dry water-course than they had. The next place he had to stop was where they turned onto the county road. It took him several minutes to figure out which was the true track among the many false ones. He headed northeast. His best guess when the road reached 287 was east and he went that way. By now the sun was up and traffic was building; he had to drop speed to match the traffic. By the time he reached Wichita Falls he'd been pushing for more than twenty-four hours and had to stop for a few hours sleep in a motel.

After checking in, before sacking out, he made a roundabout call to the ranch. He left a number they could reach him at and a time for them to call. Maybe they'd have some information by then. They did, and they didn't. He ditched the car, caught a bus to Fort Worth, flew home to St. Louis. He waited patiently for a call.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It wasn't true that Rocks didn't associate with anyone, though it did seem that way. He knew somebody or of somebody in every one of the two hundred or more cities in the country that had a population of 90,000 or more. When he traveled, as he did once every year or two, there was always somebody there to meet him and give whatever assistance he needed -- like Clem in Odessa and the couple in Lubbock. There are obvious reasons, if you pause to reflect on it, why nearly everyone Rocks knew lived in a place with a population of at least 90,000. Homicide creates interest. Nobody official pays much attention to missing persons. The bigger the population of a city, the more people can go missing without the authorities taking note of it.

In St. Louis, Rocks knew a half dozen people. Not including his landlord; his rent was paid by check via a trust fund and he had no personal contact with the agent who managed the property he lived in. He didn't know his neighbors, which was fine with him. To them he was a nice, quiet neighbor who never bothered anybody. But once they looked into his eyes they never wanted to talk to him, not even to say a friendly hello in the hallway or stairwell.

Rocks did not play the social butterfly with the few people he knew in St. Louis. He didn't even have more than a casual relationship with the one of those half dozen who was a single woman, though he did see her from time to time. Not for what one might call sexual congress; Rocks didn't have a sex life, hadn't had one in a long time. But that's a different story and will be told later on.

One of those half dozen people was a guy named Pete. Pete was, if anyone could be called that, Rocks' best friend. He owned a gym. Not a trendy spa, a gym. It had free weights and a boxing ring as well as Nautilus and a track. Rocks led a pretty sedentary life -- except for that once every year or two when he traveled. On those occasions he sometimes had to be very physical. So it was important for him to go to a gym where he could work out to maintain his speed,

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strength, and flexibility. He had to know the owner so he could use the place after hours. If Rocks worked out during regular business hours, people would notice it. Nobody would expect a man of his size to be able to press 500 pounds: he could bench press even more than that. No one is supposed to be able to run a 1:30 mile. Rocks could. And did. He also needed a sparring partner. Pete sparred with him. Both boxing and non-contact karate. They used a very high speed camera to videotape their bouts, the VHS was needed to show their movements in any detail more than a blur.

Afterward Rocks and Pete might share a beer or two, maybe even split a baggie of blood. They didn't say much, though. Rocks wasn't the kind of man to whom anybody had much to say.

Rocks spent most of his time alone in his apartment, waiting for the phone to ring. It wasn't that he didn't associate with people. It was more he didn't want to take the risk of making friends. Sooner or later, friends asked questions that couldn't be answered, or made demands that couldn't be met. One way or another, friends always went away. Rocks was way past any point in his life where he needed friends who asked questions, made demands, went away.

He hadn't always been that way though. He'd been gregarious enough as a schoolboy, but when he was in high school he had to go out and get a job to help support the family when his father lost his in 1935. He was more fortunate than so many of his classmates in a way; he got a second shift job and was able to stay in school.

Being in school and holding down a full-time job put a damper on Rocks' social life. During the week, after spending the day in school and working at night, by the time he got home it was too late to do anything even if he'd had the energy. He worked on Saturday, too. And needed Sunday for studying. About once a month he made it to a dance. He could have dredged up the energy to go dancing more often than that, but couldn't spend money any more frequently. Wages were low then, few businesses had enough profits to afford to pay workers adequately.

Rocks did have one special friend with whom he did spend a fair amount of time; Aunt Molly. Molly wasn't his real aunt, neither of his parents had brothers or sisters living nearby. Aunt Molly was a sort of neighborhood eccentric. She was Aunt Molly to all the neighborhood children. She acted gruff with them, but they loved her anyway; she told the best stories and was generous with milk and cookies. The parents looked at her askance; a long time ago it seemed

as though she reached middle-age and decided to quit aging. She had to be far into her sixties by now but still looked like late forties. Another thing that seemed suspicious was she seldom went outside during the day, only during the evening. Some of the parents whispered things like "witchcraft" when her name was mentioned. Gradually many of them stopped allowing their children to visit her. Had the parents known the truth about Aunt Molly they would have been terrified of her and done their best to kill her. But the woman was really no danger to the children, she liked them too much.

Aunt Molly liked children and wasn't going to be kept from them. So she came up with a new gimmick, she volunteered to tutor selected high schoolers who held jobs that left them too little time to study. Her few pupils thought it was a great deal. Not that they wanted to spend more time working on school stuff, mind you. They loved the stories Aunt Molly told them now that she no longer had the younger ones to tell them to. So what if they already knew her stories frontways and backward from having heard them so many times when they were the little ones? They even appreciated her milk and cookies, though they thought they were too old for that now. They all still loved her from when her milk and cookies really meant something and the stories were new to them.

Aunt Molly's favorite pupil was the gentle youth they called "Rocks." She had to smile every time she heard anyone call him that, even though that was the name she called him by herself. It was such a hard, tough name for so gentle a boy. But he liked it so that's what she called him. In a way, she was glad the mothers of the little ones didn't let their children come for her cookies and milk and stories anymore; their absence was what allowed her to have Rocks spend so much time visiting her. And he was such a good student. If only... Well, she never had done that to anyone; and Rocks had never said anything about wanting to go somewhere else, to get away from the hell of having to work full time while going to school full time. If he ever did, though...

One Sunday when he was her only pupil in attendance, young Rocks found out by accident why Aunt Molly didn't seem to age.

Aunt Molly looked at the Black Forest cuckoo clock hanging on the parlor wall and announced, "Break time. If you try to absorb any more algebra now you'll turn into an irrational integer. Go to the icebox and get out the milk bottle. Cookies are in the cupboard next to it."

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Rocks grinned and jumped to his feet without bothering to close the algebra book. "Right away, Aunt Molly. I think I'm already turning into an irreducible fraction."

When he opened the cupboard he frowned at how little was in it; just a couple cans of Campbell soup and a box of Nabisco saltines. Then he opened the icebox and thought he should take it easy on Aunt Molly's store of milk and cookies. In addition to the milk, the icebox only had a half dozen eggs, some bacon, a block of cheese, and something in a brown paper bag. Her larder was nearly empty. At least the milk was a fresh bottle, the lid hadn't been pulled out yet. That was good, there was no risk of spilling any when he shook it to mix the cream floating on top into the rest of the milk. On impulse, he looked into the bag to see what it held, maybe something from the butcher or some produce. He was surprised at what he saw.

He closed the icebox and carried the milk and cookies and two glasses -- Aunt Molly always had milk and cookies along with her guests -- and two linen napkins on a tray back into the parlor.

"Aunt Molly, where did you get tomato juice this time of year?" He thought she looked startled when he mentioned the tomato juice, but the impression was so fleeting he decided he was mistaken. He put the tray down and shook the milk to mix the cream into it.

"Tomato juice, dear? What tomato juice? You know tomatoes aren't available in the winter."

That was odd. "The two pint mason jars in the icebox. They have tomato juice." Aunt Molly stared at him with an unreadable expression for long enough to make him uncomfortable. He had to say something or start jittering. "They were in the paper bag. In mason jars. Did you preserve tomatoes last fall?"

Aunt Molly sighed and sagged on the settee. In that moment Rocks realized that over the past several months Aunt Molly was looking much older. Now he noticed her hair had white roots and a few white streaks in it. Did that mean she had been dying her hair?

"Come sit here, Rocks." Aunt Molly patted the settee next to herself.

Rocks stepped around the little table and sat next to her. Aunt Molly laid a napkin across her lap and picked up her glass. She sipped at the milk and nibbled daintily at a cookie. Rocks gulped and chomped. He wondered why she wanted him next to her, what she had to say. Why any fuss about out of season tomato juice? He tried to look open and receptive.

When Aunt Molly finished the cookie -- she only ever ate one cookie with her guests, though they were welcome to eat as many as they wanted -- she put her glass on the table and daubed the white mustache off her upper lip.

Rocks shoved the rest of his third cookie into his mouth and licked his upper lip while putting his glass down. He wanted to look attentive at what she was about to tell him.

"Do you ever wish you were in a different place, a better world?" she asked; her eyes looked into a distant noplac and her words were slow, almost dreamlike.

"Well, yes," he laughed, "who wouldn't? Look at what I'm doing, going to school and working. This is a hard life, Aunt Molly."

"You've never said anything about wanting to be in a better world."

He shrugged. "Why bother? Wishing can't change things."

She looked off again, into that distant nowhere.

"But if I could go somewhere better I'd want to take you with me." He patted her hand.

Aunt Molly took his hand in both of hers and looked deep into his eyes for a moment. Then she said, "Wait for just a minute." She left the room. A moment later he heard the bathroom door close and picked up his glass and took another cookie, then remembered the bareness of her larder and put the cookie back.

It took Aunt Molly longer than the promised minute to return, but he hadn't really expected her to come back in only a minute anyway. When she came back she had a cotton ball taped to the inside of her left elbow. He thought he saw a bulge in her apron pocket but wasn't sure because of the way she held herself, and that side of her apron was on the opposite side of her when she sat down. She took his hands in hers and started talking. Her voice was slow and somber.

"You know, Rocks, all people are different from each other. Some people are more different than others. You've seen lame people, people who have to use crutches to walk around. You've seen people missing an arm. Maybe you've even seen someone having an epileptic fit, or someone with palsy. These are people who, through no fault of their own, have something wrong with them. They have special requirements in order to live properly, not all of them can live properly. They have illnesses or injuries." She stopped talking and hung her head, her grip on his hands tightened.

Rocks nodded understanding while Aunt Molly talked. But he

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didn't understand what gimps had to do with out of season tomato juice. He waited patiently while she thought about what she was saying -- at least he thought that's what she was doing while she was quiet.

"There are some illnesses," Aunt Molly started talking again, more slowly than before, in so soft a voice he had to lower his head to hers to hear, "that can't be treated at all and the people who have them wither away and die. Tuberculosis and polio are like that. You know that, don't you?" She looked into his face and he nodded. She nodded to herself. "I thought you did. Then there are certain, well, call them medical conditions, that are not harmful as long as they are treated. Sometimes the treatments aren't commonly available, the people with those conditions have to go elsewhere to get them." She sighed deeply and let go of him with one hand and put that arm around his shoulders. "That is not tomato juice in the icebox, it's blood."

Rocks looked puzzled. He tried to say something and his mouth worked, but no words would come. What does blood in the icebox have to do with any medical condition? None that he'd ever heard of. A question he could put to words finally dawned on him. "Do you have some kind of medical condition?" He looked at her with honest concern.

"Yes." She shook her head and smiled at his expression. "No, don't worry, it's not killing me and it doesn't keep me from leading a normal life. As a matter of fact, this condition gives me greater strength than most people have and it even increases my life. As long as I get fresh blood every day."

Rocks looked first relieved, then puzzled again. "Do you get it from Mister Levy?" Mr. Levy was the kosher butcher.

"No dear, it's human blood."

He looked more puzzled. "Well, if it's human blood, when you go to the hospital to get it, why don't they inject it then? Is it safe? I've heard that very often injecting people with blood hurts them more than it helps them." Blood typing was a new science then and doctors didn't understand very well how to use transfusions to help people who needed blood.

"It isn't injected, I have to drink it; a half pint every day. What you saw in the icebox is a four day supply."

"So the hospital gives you a week's supply when you go in, or something like that?"

"Does this repulse you?"

He drew back as far as her grip would allow, he noticed that she was holding him more tightly than he expected a woman to be able to. "Repulse me? No, you're my Aunt Molly. I'm concerned that you're sick, but..."

She looked, eyes unfocused, at the wall with the cuckoo clock. "I've never done this before," she said in a way that sounded like she was talking to herself. "Everybody should do it at least once before they die. While they still have time to see to the training."

Faster than he could see, so fast it was over before he knew what was happening, Aunt Molly bent his head back, forced his mouth open, pulled a half pint bottle from her apron pocket, opened it, and poured its contents down his throat. It was so fast he wasn't even sure he really saw the fluid in the bottle was red.

"What did you do?" he demanded when she released him. He pulled away, he sputtered and wiped his mouth and grabbed his milk glass to spit into.

She grabbed the glass away from him and clamped his mouth closed. "It's too late now. Very shortly you're going to be like me."

He looked at her, horrified. What had she done? What was in that bottle? Had Aunt Molly just given him an illness?

"You just drank my blood. Now you're one of us."

He tried to struggle, but she lifted up on his head and he had to stop struggling because it hurt too much. Then she shifted the hand on his jaw and pressed on his neck with incredibly strong fingers. He lost consciousness.

When he came he was laying on her bed with his hands and feet tided to its corners and ropes tied around his chest and waist. His mouth hurt and he tried to say something. He couldn't because he was gagged. He saw a window, tightly covered with draperies.

"There, there, dear," Aunt Molly said and patted his arm. He turned his head and saw her sitting on a straight backed kitchen chair next to the bed. "I'm sorry I had to tie you up, but I thought it was for the best. Very soon now, you're going to feel very sick and you're going to be very frightened. I don't want you to hurt yourself. Just relax and I'll tell you what to expect." She leaned forward and started gently stroking his forehead. Her expression was very caring and her touch tender.

Rocks couldn't relax. He was too frightened and confused to relax. Aunt Molly started telling him about it. It was a fantastic story, one that he was just unsophisticated enough -- and just afraid enough --

to believe.

Suddenly his body was wracked violently and he started thrashing about and convulsing. Aunt Molly ripped off the gag so he could cough and spit and not swallow his tongue. The convulsions lasted about ten minutes. When they stopped he felt ill and ached all over, sweat coated his entire body. Aunt Molly towed off his face and neck, then opened his shirt and dried his chest and belly.

"You'll have to do the rest of it yourself later," she said. "Rest now. I'll be right back." She left the bedroom and was back in less than a minute. She held a tumbler of red fluid. Rocks knew what it had to be. "Drink this," she said, and lifted his shoulders with one arm.

He twisted his face away from the glass and its repulsive contents. Then he smelled the blood and eagerly turned to it. No matter how much he hated the idea of drinking human blood, his body demanded it and he tried to gulp down every drop.

There was a knock at the front door.

"That's probably the people I've been expecting," Aunt Molly said. She left the bedroom and was right back with two ordinary looking men.

"We found one who will do," one of the men was saying as they came in. "Nobody will suspect. All we need is his clothes and what he's got in his pockets."

"You'll need his school books, too," she said to him. Then to Rocks, "These men are friends, they're going to help you." She took the bag the other man handed her and left him alone with them. Glass clanked in the bag.

"Take it easy now," said the man who had the bag. "I know you're scared, but please believe me when I say we're not going to hurt you."

Quickly, the two men untied him, stripped all his clothes off, even his underwear, and wrapped a robe around him. He tried to struggle with them, to break free, but they were too fast. When they were through he was bound again.

"Too bad you fought us," one of them said. "You could have walked out on your own feet." He picked Rocks up and carried him into the kitchen. "We're ready," he said.

Aunt Molly stood up from where she was emptying the contents of the bag into her icebox: several mason jars of blood.

"Maybe I'll see you again some day," she said to Rocks. "I hope so." She kissed him on the mouth. Her lips felt dry, but were

very gentle. He saw a tear glisten in the corner of her eye as the man carried him out.

They made him lay down in the back seat of a Packard, then they both got in front.

The man on the passenger side turned around in the seat and said, "We have one stop to make, then we'll be on our way."

The stop was an abandoned warehouse a couple of blocks from his home. Rocks was able to see through the open door what they did inside. There was someone about his age and size inside the warehouse; he was laying naked, his posture was unnatural. The two men dressed him in Rocks' clothes, then methodically beat him very severely, including smashing his face until it was unrecognizable. Rocks didn't get as upset by the beating as he might have; the boy, whoever he was, was obviously already dead before the first blow. The men finished and got back into the car.

"Nobody will realize you're missing," the one on the passenger side said. "They'll think you're dead."

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CHAPTER TWELVE

They took him to the ranch in Utah. He was frightened at first and wouldn't talk to anybody or eat any of the food that was offered to him. He missed his family and his friends. And he wondered if he should hate Aunt Molly. Gradually, his long time trust of Aunt Molly, and the way the people at the ranch were so obviously well off and happy, combined to overcome his fear somewhat and he started to eat.

Then the old Mountainman, Abe, took the frightened seventeen-year-old and taught him.

"First of all, son, you got to forget all the old myths and stupidities," that was Abe's first lesson. "They ain't true, none of 'em. We ain't possessed by the devil, none of us sold our souls to him. There's nothing supernatural about it, it's a disease, just like the whooping cough. Only it don't do nothing bad to us. Not unless you figure having to kill other folks once in a while is bad. Hell, we all gotta die sometime anyways."

Rocks didn't know what else to do, so he listened to Abe. There was something else he had to do, but he didn't know it: He had to adjust to a life away from the Great Depression. That adjustment sort of snuck up on him and he wasn't aware of it until it was done.

"You know what, Abe," he said one day when the two of them were out riding the fence around the ranch, repairing it wherever it needed mending. It wasn't much of a fence, just one strand of wire from which hung occasional "no trespassing" signs. The sun beat down mercilessly from the cloudless sky. They both wore cowboy hats, shirts with the sleeves rolled all the way down and buttoned all the way up, lightweight gloves shielded their hands, a thick coating of greasy sun tan oil covered their faces and necks. They wore sunglasses.

"Probably. Which what do you have in mind?"

Rocks smiled at that, he'd come to like the Mountainman during the month they'd been companions. "Yeah, you probably do know. So I guess I don't have to tell you."

"Sure you do, boy. You don't tell me, it's goan ta fester in you, wanting ta get out and you not letting it." Abe didn't look at him, his far-reaching gaze was wandering the fence and the range.

Rocks laughed, a friendly laugh that rebounded from the mountainous landscape. "You're right, Abe, I gotta tell you. Even if you do already know."

"Talk."

"I like being here. I haven't gone to bed hungry since I got here. Never have any worries about losing my job, because my job's learning from you and you're a good enough teacher I can't fall down on that job."

Abe snorted.

"I'm not tired most of the time anymore."

"You should be, you been doing enough hard work out here for two men."

"It's not the same as the factory work I used to do. This work doesn't wear me out, it builds me up."

Abe glanced at him and nodded. "Thought you was filling out a mite." It was true, Rocks had gained five pounds, and it was all bone and muscle. "You're young, you got some growing to do yet. The good air out here will help you grow big and strong."

"Like you?"

Abe looked at him studiously. "No, not like me. Your frame's a mite too small. I was your size when I was fifteen. But you'll be right bigger and stronger than you would a been living in that city and working in that factory."

"All I have to do is drink a half pint of blood each day."

Abe nodded. "That's about how it works."

"And I'll be stronger and faster than normal people."

Abe nodded again.

"And live twice as long."

"Something like that."

Rocks stood up in the saddle and looked all around. He felt healthy and strong. He was happier than he could ever remember being. He breathed deeply of the dry air and felt it fill his lungs like an electric jolt of life. "Before, I wouldn't have wanted to live twice as long." He studied his teacher for a long moment. Abe looked to be in his mid-thirties, a man in the prime of life. "How old are you, Abe?"

Abe looked into the distance. "What year is this?"

"Nineteen thirty-six."

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Abe worked his lips in silent calculation. "I figure about ninety-two," he said at length.

Rocks whistled and shook his head. "Boy, oh boy, if I can look as good as you do when I'm 92."

Abe grunted. "How old are you now, boy?"

"Seventeen."

"You'll look a lot younger when you're 92. I was older than you are when I was changed. There's what they call a progression. You age a lot slower for a long time, then all of a sudden you get old almost overnight and die."

Rocks mulled over that. In the month he'd been at the ranch he'd seen maybe a hundred people, some lived there, others just visited for a time, but he hadn't seen anyone who looked older than Aunt Molly. "You know Aunt Molly?"

"Yep."

"How old is she?"

Abe took off his hat and wiped his sleeve across his forehead. He resettled the hat before speaking. "Don't rightly know. She was here when they brought me in back in 'seventy."

"That last day, the day she changed me, she all of a sudden looked older than I'd ever noticed."

Abe nodded. "Sounds right."

Rocks gulped and paled under the deep tan that was building on him. "You mean she might be dead by now?"

Abe shook his head. "Takes a couple years once it starts." He looked at Rocks. "You got time to go back and say goodbye." He continued to look at the boy for a while, then added. "Molly's a damn fine woman. She helped teach me and she taught a lot of other folks. Twenty-five years ago, she left the ranch, went out to live in the world. She must of really liked you; you're the first one she ever changed."

Then they found a break in the fence and had to stop talking while they repaired it.

*

After he'd been on the ranch for six months they taught him how to kill. The first one was easy. He went with Abe and another man to Denver. They found a derelict and stuffed his empty husk into a corner of an abandoned building. When the body was finally found it would be partly decomposed; nobody would bother to autopsy it, or even give it a good cleaning and examination before shoving it into a cheap coffin and sticking it in a hole in the ground of a potter's field.

Derelicts were safe kills in that they were people who'd never be missed, it wasn't necessary to make their bodies disappear permanently. In another way they weren't safe victims. They usually had a high alcohol content in their blood, and that wasn't the best way to get drunk. Sometimes they carried diseases that could make a vampire ill. Of course the virus that caused vampirism was excellent at clearing foreign bodies out of the blood system, but one could still get sick for a time. Who wants to get sick even temporarily?

After Rocks learned how to dispose of the bodies of healthy people so they would seem to be missing persons rather than murder victims, he had a question for Abe. "Why do we do that? I mean, why not just stuff them someplace like we do the derelicts?"

"Because when they're found somebody will ask questions. We can't afford to have anyone asking questions." That wasn't enough, Rocks needed a better explanation. It took a while, but eventually Abe gave him an explanation that satisfied. With the hems and haws and roundabouts cut out, this is what he said:

"Normal people consider what we do to be illegal and immoral. Most all of them probably would think it was evil -- if they knew about it. If they started finding dead bodies drained of blood, they'd start thinking there was a bunch of vampires out there somewhere and panic. Then they'd start hunting us down. You've heard about the Salem witch hunts. That's what it would be like. A lot of innocent people would get killed for no reason other than fear. We don't kill people just to kill them, we kill them so we can live. No other reason. No matter what, killing people when you don't absolutely have to is evil. We aren't evil, we don't condone killing unless it needs to be done. Along the way, a lot of us would get killed, and that's bad too. We'd have to go deep underground in order to survive. We've had to do that a few times in the past. It's in some of the diaries in the library in the main house, you can go and read up on it if you want. So we kill in a way nobody's going to notice. If a body isn't found, it's a missing person, not a murder victim. Almost no police departments keep statistics on missing persons -- except maybe in the Communist countries, or some of the other dictator countries. 'Taint many of us in places like that, it's too dangerous."

Rocks had to ask about that, why missing person records weren't kept.

"Simple. Not all missing persons are reported to the police. Most missing persons just ran away from home to think things over or

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to get away from a bad situation until things calm down -- or until they get lonely or hungry. Sometimes it even happens that a husband went off on a business trip and forgot to tell his wife, or maybe she went to visit her mother and forgot to tell him. Whatever it is, they generally come home in a week or two. And most of the time whoever reported them missing doesn't bother to tell the police they're back. If the police kept records and kept looking for missing people, they'd find themselves looking for an awful lot of people who were sitting at home and going to work at their regular jobs every day. That's a terrible waste of time and energy.

"Another thing, in this country and the others where they believe in things like right to privacy, the authorities figure if somebody wants to take off and start a new life without telling anybody from his past, that's his business, not the police. You know, that's one reason that newfangled social security number isn't a legal form of identification; there was too much concern about it being used to keep track on people.

"So that's why we dispose of bodies after we take the blood. It's also why we hunt in different places all the time and when we go into the world to live, we don't live in small towns. If one neighborhood or a small town had a lot of people disappearing, that would make people start asking questions we don't want folks to ask."

This led to another question. People who live a long time have a lot of time to think about life and what they're doing. Everyone of them came from a background that had legends of vampires, and vampires in the legends are always evil. What if someone thought about that too much and decided he was evil? "Does anybody ever go crazy or something, and go out and start killing and just leaving the bodies there?"

"Yep. Ever now and again somebody does what we call go rogue. Not often, though, onct ever two, three years."

"What happens then?"

"Somebody goes after 'em. Tries to talk 'em out of it, bring 'em back here to the ranch for a spell. Kills 'em if they can't." Abe looked at the night sky for a while, then shook himself as though coming back from a long way off, and said. "You know, you don't get changed just by accident, somebody has to do it to you. Then that someone is responsible for getting you here so you can learn. But it happens, maybe three, four times a century, somebody gets changed and don't get brought here. Probably because there's an accident happens to the

one who did the changing and the new person don't know what to do. I even heard of a couple times somebody got changed without it being deliberate, it happened purely by accident. When it does we get a rogue. Then, just like when one of us goes bad, somebody gets sent out to get 'em and bring 'em in. Or kill 'em."

"Who gets sent?"

"Somebody who thinks he can do it. Somebody the council thinks can do it."

"Did you ever do it, go after a rogue I mean?"

"Once or twice. Ain't no fun. You're going up against somebody fast and strong as you, someone who has a bloodlust. And you can't just bushwack 'em, you got ta try to talk to 'em first. Not something to do unless you think you really can." He looked at Rocks in a protective, fatherly way. "Goan ta be a long time before you're able to do it, if ever. All you got ta know about this is, you ever hear of a rogue, let the ranch know pronto.

*

Rocks learned a lot about the Society of the Changed. Each country that had enough of them also had a Council to give guidance, settle disputes, and deal with problems -- mostly problems that cropped up with normal people. There were also safe havens for those who felt like getting away from the world for a while and for training the new people. The Utah ranch was such a haven.

They had their own doctors and medical lab -- it wouldn't do for a regular MD to examine one of them and find out about the differences, or for a lab to run a test on their blood and find something that nobody had ever seen before. They also had people in key positions in the world. Some examples: There was one of them high up in the Social Security Administration. The Social Security Administration was new and not everyone had a number yet, but some day everybody would have one; they'd be required by law. When that happened, the Society would be ready. He would make sure they all had new SS numbers issued every so often so no anomalies would show up in the system. There were two of them on Wall Street, two who had access to inside information. They never passed that inside information on to others, and they never used it to the extent that the new Securities Exchange Commission would notice; but their use of it provided all of them with enough money for a modest living so they didn't need to hold down jobs if they didn't want to. Most of them did want outside jobs from time to time. A span of more than a century

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spent in the prime of life can become tedious. There were a few vampires in highly technical positions in the communications industry so they could have untraceable means of confidential communications.

There were many things the virus did to its victims, mostly beneficial. There were only a few negatives. One of those negatives was the need for frequent doses of fresh human blood. A second was highly increased sensitivity of the skin and eyes to sunlight; they had to protect themselves from its direct rays. Another was sterilization -- it didn't interfere with the sex drive, only the ability to reproduce. Nearly every changed person thought the benefits outweighed the negatives. They lived much longer and aged very slowly -- until near the end. Their immune system was strengthened so they had very little fear of illness. They healed very rapidly; to the extent that injuries that would kill normal people would only leave them incapacitated for a time. They had greater strength, energy, and speed than normal people. The same malaise that increased their eyes' sensitivity to bright light gave them sharper, almost cat-like vision. The benefits of their disease were great.

But they couldn't reproduce. Therefore, they never tried to change the rest of the population; humanity would die out within two centuries if they did. They had to change people on occasion to replace their losses. They were circumspect about it though. Not just anybody could be changed, each person who changed someone had to be sure about the convert. And a given population could only support so many vampires before becoming aware that someone was preying on them.

Theirs was a closed and close-knit society, the Society of the Changed. They did not associate much with normal people. Aunt Molly and her dealings with the neighborhood children was an exception. Some thought she did that out of a yearning for children of her own.

By and large it was a good life. Once one adjusted to the need for killing people. The virus helped with that, too. The first activity of the virus, at the same time it made its new victim violently ill, produced an enzyme that reduced inhibitions. That allowed them to start killing; killing was necessary. There was no other source of blood, and a lack of fresh blood would kill them faster than lack of food or water.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Art did most of the driving through Louisiana, Drake slept through most of it. When the raised voices of the women woke him up he saw cars flickering past. The problem with that was the flickering cars were going in the same direction they were. Lucy and Mina were demanding that Art slow down. Drake leaned over the back of the front seat to take a look at the speedometer, he couldn't believe the cars in the other lane were all standing still. They weren't, the needle pointed almost to the end of its gauge.

"Slow down, Art," Drake said.

"That's what we've been telling him," Mina complained. "He won't listen to anybody."

"He'll listen to me. Slow down."

"Nah, this is more fun," Art said. He turned his head to grin at Drake. He looked front again in time to swerve between two staggered cars.

"There's too much traffic for us to risk getting stopped by the highway patrol."

"So what? A cop stops us, we kill his ass."

"And have about ten thousand witnesses. Slow down." He clamped a hand on Art's shoulder, hard.

"Hey, leggo, that hurts," Art yelped.

"Not as much as it'll hurt if we have an accident because you didn't slow down."

"Shit, you ain't no fun."

"Never said I was."

Art eased off the accelerator. Five miles later the Lincoln was purring along at the same stately 67 MPH as the rest of the traffic.

They stopped in Baton Rouge for dinner. In a restaurant. Real food, not blood. This time. They behaved well enough that when they

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were done the staff and other diners were glad to see them leave, but not as relieved as the counterman back in Holmwood had been. Drake snatched the keys out of Art's hand when he pulled them out to push the unlock button.

"I'm driving now," Drake said. "You need some sleep." He got in and turned on the ignition.

Art glared at him for a moment, then got quietly into the back seat. The business about needing sleep took some of the sting out of having the keys taken from him.

An hour and a quarter later the roar of jets at Moisant Field, New Orleans International Airport, drowned out the roar of autos on the Interstate. Nine miles farther the highway turned right, headed toward the heart of the city. They exited where the highway turned left near the Superdome.

*

New Orleans is a rank city -- in multiple meanings of the word. It ranks in size and in miasma.

New Orleans is the 21st largest city in the country, and the 27th largest metropolitan area. It is the second largest seaport in America. Some say it's a major port of entry for illegal drugs. New Orleans ranks.

The city is bordered on the north by Lake Pontchartrain and on the east by Lake Borgne. The Mississippi River cuts the southern portion off from the rest of the city. It's a very wet place, there at the beginning of the Mississippi Delta. So wet that graves aren't dug into the ground; a heavy rain can float the coffins and corpses right out of the earth if they're buried. So graves are built above ground. The wet ground and humid air retain smells. And there are smells. It's too hot to close windows -- unless you have air conditioning -- so cooking aromas fill the air; Creole, Cajun, Italian, French, West Indian, Spanish, African. Hey, one thing you have to say about the place is it's cosmopolitan. Maybe New Orleans wasn't built in the middle of a swamp, or on marshland, but marshes and swamps are right next door. Swamps and marshes are full of stagnant water and rotting vegetation; they emit more smells than almost anybody could want. New Orleans is subtropical and has subtropical flora; wild and wanton growths, flowers by the infinity, decay underneath it all. And tourists -- don't you dare forget the biggest local industry. All that heat and humidity makes the tourists sweat. Almost nobody can take a shower or bath every hour, even the most neurotic clean-freaks have trouble

showering every hour. All that sweat makes for a healthy dose of body odor added to the other smells. New Orleans is rank.

New Orleans has another distinction: It's an average four feet below sea level. What keeps it above water? Levees, dikes, dams. And probably a huge dose of self-confidence.

*

They reveled in it. All the delicious smells. All the delicious smells of people -- people to be killed. But first Lucy and Mina wanted to be tourists. This was *Norlins*, fer pete sake. Drake and Art didn't so much care for the sight-seeing, but thought orienting themselves in this strange city before they did anything was a damn good idea. The kid went along with the women because she was mad at the men for so blatantly ignoring her so blatant sexuality.

The women went into the gift shop in the Hyatt to get the touristy stuff they needed. Lucy shoplifted a \$6.95 Frommer's guide to the city while Mina and the kid distracted the clerk by pointing to spots on a buck and a half street map and asking questions about it. The kid slipped another copy of the map into her purse under the cover of Mina refolding the map they'd asked questions about. They had money; shoplifting was more fun. Armed with the tourist stuff, they got back into the Lincoln and argued about where to start their grand tour.

"We'll start in the French Quarter," Mina announced. "Bourbon Street, Basin Street, Rampart Street, all those romantic places I've always wanted to see." She fairly gushed.

"Later," Drake said. He slid in behind the wheel. Art glared at him, wanted to say something, he wanted to drive. Drake ignored him.

"Come on, Drake," Lucy said. "We're in *Norlins*, we've got to see Al Hirt and Pete Fountain."

"Preservation Hall, too," the kid piped in.

"I said later," Drake said. "Everybody in?" He turned the ignition key.

"Come on, Art," the kid said and opened the back door next to him. She scooted to the middle of the seat. "Don't be any more of an asshole than you already are."

Mina, also in the backseat, looked at her and waved a hand. "Ooh, aren't we the smart one."

The kid crinkled her lip at her, turned back to Art and patted the seat next to her. "Come on, big boy, whadaya say." She opened her eyes wide in mock surprise. "You're not afraid I'm going to do something to you, are you?"

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Art snarled something.

Drake said, "I'm going, anybody not in stays," and shifted into drive.

Art got in and slammed the door as hard as he could.

"Ooh, tough guy," the kid said sweetly. "I like that in a man." She cuddled against him. Art pulled away and leaned against the door. She leaned with him.

"Turn right on Canal Street," Lucy said. She was studying the map. "That'll get us into the French Quarter. Or," she added in a throaty voice, "Vee-yous Car-ray, as we say it here." She didn't try to mispronounce Vieux Carre, it's just that French has all these silent consonants and odd vowel combinations. Not to mention that French as spoken in New Orleans isn't the same as is spoken in Paris.

Drake drove past the civic center and stayed on Basin Street instead of turning onto Canal.

"You missed it," Lucy said. "Take the next right."

"We're not going there."

"What do you mean," Mina demanded. "We had a vote, we're going to the French Quarter."

"Yeah," the kid said and pounded on Drake's shoulder, "Preservation Hall, and all that shit. Right, cutie?" She groped Art.

Art smacked her hand away and grunted.

"I didn't call for any vote," Drake said calmly.

"We had one anyway."

"I've got the keys. We go where I say."

Lucy and Mina demanded that Drake take the next right, they were going to the French Quarter and it didn't matter who was doing the driving -- they'd decided. The kid squealed and pounded on Drake's shoulders.

Drake shrugged off her pounding and ignored the women. He had to turn right at Louis Armstrong Park, but immediately turned left onto Rampart, heading away from the lowering sun.

"You don't have any idea where you're going," Lucy said. "I've got the map and the guidebook."

"You want to see the shows, right?"

"Yes."

"They're in nightclubs. The sun's still up, we'll go to the French Quarter tonight."

"That's right, you dumb cunts," Art sneered. "Nightclubs are only open at night. That's why they call them *nightclubs*."

Mina reached across the kid to backhand Art in the face, hard enough to sting. "You wouldn't have to talk like that if you had balls that worked," she hissed.

Art moved to hit her back, but the kid grabbed his hand. "You're right, she's just a dumb cunt. Ignore her." Art slowly relaxed and sat back, though he wasn't completely through glowering. The kid kept hold of his hand. "I'm not a dumb cunt," she said primly, then pulled his hand onto her lap. "I've got a nice cunt, wanna feel?"

Art snatched his hand away. "You're all dumb cunts, all three of you. Especially you." He glared at her until she blushed and looked away. She got mad and moved closer to Mina.

Rampart bent to the right and became St. Claude Avenue. They drove on in silence for a while.

Lucy shrugged and leafed through the guidebook. When they crossed the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal, which connects the Mississippi with Lake Pontchartrain, she went back to the map. "Any idea where you're going?" she asked.

"Just driving."

"If I don't direct you to the French Quarter, will you take the turns I say?"

"If."

"Turn left in three blocks." He did and she told him where the next left was that took them back to the west side of the canal. She directed him onto Franklin Avenue and turned to wink at Mina.

Mina looked at her oddly. She hadn't paid much attention to their turnings, but didn't think this was the way to the French Quarter. So what if Lucy said she wasn't going to take them there now; if that wasn't where they were headed, why the wink?

New Orleans sprawls -- if sprawling is the right word to use for a city sinking below sea level. At any rate, it has half again as much land area as Philadelphia or Detroit, two and a half times as much as Baltimore, four and a half times San Francisco. You almost have to get into the Great Plains to find cities with more space in them, cities less densely populated. They stayed on Franklin Avenue for five miles before it went through the University of New Orleans campus and emptied into Lakeshore Drive. Lake Pontchartrain filled the world ahead of them. It was twenty miles wide at this point, they couldn't see the other side.

"Go left," Lucy said. She turned to wink again at Mina. Drake turned. They drove toward the setting sun.

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"We're going to have to come back here during the day and scout it out," Lucy said and waved at the narrow strip of park between the drive and the lake. "Get a feel for where the people go. According to the book," she tapped the small guidebook, "it's filled with picnickers and swimmers."

"Fuck the day," Art said. "We come at night, get someone then. Tonight." He looked with hungry eyes at the scattered people visible in the park.

"We check it out during the day so we know what it looks like when we go back."

"We see good at night," the kid said. "I think Art's right. She snuggled against him again, but didn't grope him or put his hand on herself. Art let her stay.

"There's more people here than anywhere else we've been. We have to scout places out before we do anything," Lucy explained. This isn't like getting some lone cowboy out riding the range with nobody else within ten miles."

"Lucy's right," Drake said. "This is more like playing blind man's bluff in a crowded room. Every place we turn we're going to be bumping into people. We have to be more careful and know where there are isolated spots where we'll have time."

"We're too fast and too strong," Art said. "Anybody comes along before we're through, we get them, too."

The kid chimed in agreement with Art. Her hand slid onto his thigh. He moved it off before it crept upward.

"It doesn't matter how fast or how strong we are," said Drake. "If there's enough of them they can catch us. Remember Gulliver and the Lilliputians."

Lucy looked smug because Drake agreed with her. The kid had to explain the reference to Art.

The drive made a wide, sweeping turn inland around the Milneburg Light, then went along the lake side of the main university campus, past luxurious, modern houses, and across the mouth of Bayou St. John. The sun set ahead of them. Nearly two miles farther Lucy suddenly said:

"Pull over, on the left."

Art turned the wheel sharply and cut across oncoming traffic into a parking space. "What?" he snapped.

"There." Lucy pointed at a fountain. She got out of the car and strode toward it, the guidebook dangled from her fingertips. The

others followed.

A large, round fountain sat in a plaza of paving stones. Bronze plaques surrounded its base, each with the name of one of the many private clubs -- in New Orleans they call them "krewes" -- that put on parades during the eleven days of Mardi Gras. Colored lights lit up the geysers of water that spouted as high as sixty feet.

"So?" Art demanded. "What's the big deal about a fucking fountain?"

"The colors, dummy."

The fountain danced with purple, green, and gold from the spotlights.

"What about them?" Mina asked.

"They stand for justice, faith, and power."

They all looked at her for a moment, not understanding. The kid was the first one to catch on.

"Justice," she said. "We make out own justice."

Lucy smiled at her and nodded.

"We have faith," Drake murmured. "In us we trust."

Lucy nodded at him.

They grinned wickedly at each other, eyes blazing fiercely, heads bobbing in unison to an unspoken beat. All at once they shrieked, "And we've got the power!" and burst into laughter. They danced in a circle next to the fountain crying, "Justice, faith, power, they're all ours!" Then they collapsed, laughing wildly, into a standing pile; their hands roamed over each other, grasping, squeezing, prodding. The kid even managed to get her bottom under Art's roving hand and her breast in Drake's without either man objecting.

Two tourists standing nearby, retired widows from Ashtabula, sniffed at them, put their heads together, and clucked their tongues over this unseemly display. Then they noticed the unholy fire burning in those eyes and were thankful the five weren't looking at them. Without another word, not even another *tsk*, they skittered off to their rented car and hastened away to a safer place.

After a couple of minutes they pulled themselves erect and, still laughing, returned to the car.

"It's ours," Drake said between guffaws, "all ours. New Orleans belongs to us."

Lucy looked at him with hotly glowing eyes. "Let Art drive," she said. "You and me get in the back."

Mina took the map and the guidebook and directed them to the

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French Quarter. The kid did her best to ignore the grappling bodies she shared the backseat with.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"We don't need a reservation," Drake told the tuxedoed maitre d'.

The maitre d' saw that bright-toothed smile and those eyes that looked as though they could steal a man's soul and swallowed. "Everyone needs a reservation, monsieur," he said in as strong a voice as he could muster, which wasn't nearly as strong as he wished.

You'd recognize the place even if you've never been there: Wrought iron balconies on the second and third floors; beveled leaded-glass doors; parquet floors; waiters who move silently and invisibly, appearing from nowhere with your dishes or a light for your cigarette. A place full of customs, traditions handed down from generations, proprieties, decorum. The only way they could accommodate their guests was to insist on reservations. The maitre d' had all those customs, traditions, proprieties, decor to fall back on, to help him stand his ground.

"All right," Drake said in a voice that was somehow more threatening in its smoothness, "we have a reservation. It's right there." His finger tapped the top name in the reservation book that stood open at the maitre d's stand.

"No sir, that is not yours," the maitre d' said, more firmly now that he caught this strangely frightening man in an obvious lie. "That is theirs." He gestured at a party of four sitting quietly nearby.

The kid turned to them, two couples; one young, one middle-aged. She sway-hipped two steps to them. "Hey, you're kind a cute, you know that?" she said to the younger man and scratched one nail under his chin. "I could go for you in a big way."

"I beg your pardon," said the older woman. Her facial resemblance to the younger man said she was his mother.

The kid glanced at her and dismissed her with, "Nah, you're not my type." Then to the young man, "Wanna fuck?"

The younger woman gasped, and put her left hand on his forearm, displaying her engagement ring, and tried to rise, her face

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shocked indignity. Mina's hand on her shoulder kept her down. She looked up to say something sharp. All she could see was the moist, blood-red lips smiling at her and whatever it was she had to say was stillborn.

"Here now," the older man said. He stood and found himself chest to chest with Art. Art was grinning widely and his tongue showed between his teeth. The older man wondered if these people meant to do them violence and trembled.

"Sit down, Pops," Art said. He did and his wife clutched his arm.

The maitre d' made a move to break it up. Drake held up a hand and the man froze, frightened, all those generations behind him forgotten. The party of four felt totally hemmed in by the three people standing too close in front of them. A couple leaving after their dinner saw no hands fisted, heard no voices raised, saw no frowns, heard no threats. But tension and fear were palpable in the entry way and they scurried into the safety of the night.

Lucy leaned in between Art and the kid. "You decided to cancel your reservation, didn't you?" she said to the older man. "You decided because you just know you're never going to live down the fuss we're going to make if you don't."

Art roared out a laugh; several diners turned to look at him, quickly turned their eyes away. Mina and the kid snickered.

"Never live it down," the kid repeated. "That's rich." She laughed again.

The older man looked past them at the maitre d' and saw only helplessness in that direction. "Let's go," he rasped with what dignity he could. "These people can have our place." The others stepped back to give them room to get up. "In the future we'll restrict our business to establishments that cater to a better class of client," he said back over his shoulder -- but not until he had safely ushered his wife, son, and future daughter-in-law out the door.

Drake looked into the maitre d's eyes. "Seat us," he ordered.

The maitre d' daubed at his forehead with the handkerchief he took from his coat pocket. "Yes sir," he stammered. "The very next table that becomes available."

Drake looked past him, into the interior of the restaurant. "I like that table right there." He pointed at a corner table with a window where three people were being served desert.

"Yes sir, it will be about twenty minutes for that table." The

maitre d' swallowed.

Drake shook his head. "Five minutes. That should be all you need to change the table cloth."

"But..." He couldn't say more, not looking into those eyes. He swallowed again and ran a finger around the inside of his suddenly too-tight collar. "As you wish, sir." He scribbled something on a pad and tore off the written sheet. Drake looked at what he wrote. "Sir, if we must move guests before they are finished we must somehow reimburse them." Drake nodded; the note was a pass for a complimentary dinner for three.

When the maitre d' came back Drake slipped him a fifty dollar bill. "For your trouble," he said, and smiled.

In less than five minutes they were seated. This was one of those restaurants that specializes in seafood. They ordered oysters Rockefeller, trout meuniere, lump crabmeat topped with capers and lemon-butter sauce, sauteed shrimp, and blackened redfish. The kid ordered a hamburger, very rare; their waiter grimaced through his unease. And red wine, the reddest the house had to offer.

"Shrimp sauce," Art commanded. "Lots of shrimp sauce."

"And a bottle of ketchup for my hamburger," the kid added. Her tittering set the others into peals of laughter.

The waiter hastened with the order to the sanctuary of the kitchen, then did his best to serve his other tables without coming close to the one in the corner.

The maitre d' watched them for a few moments, then his hand hovered over the telephone as he tried to compose in his mind what he would tell the police; about these fearsome people who threatened without ever saying they would do anything, how the police would have to be most discrete when they came so as to not disturb anyone else, do nothing to blemish the reputation of this fine old restaurant. He saw Drake look at him and shake his head. The maitre d' removed his hand from its proximity to the telephone.

The other diners in the room looked at the raucous five with disdain, wiped their distaste off their faces immediately on seeing their eyes. Most of them hurried through the rest of their meals before beating a retreat; not all bothered with desert, some didn't finish their entrees.

"More shrimp sauce," Art ordered when their food was served. "Bring a whole damn bucket of the shit."

By the time they were through eating the table cloth was so

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spattered with red from the sauce and the kid's ketchup, and so much of that red was fiercely rubbed in, it was good only to be torn into cleaning rags.

There was a couple, a man and a woman of indeterminate age, in the dining room who weren't discomfited by the presence or manners of the five. Indeed, they seemed unaware of those people who were upsetting everyone else, though they did surreptitiously observe them and make note of their appearance. This couple ate as though there was no disturbance, as though the crowd and atmosphere in the restaurant was as it always was. When they finally departed they left a lavish tip. "Don't worry," they told the maitre d' on their way out. "Someone will take care of this matter." Only when they were out of sight of anyone in the restaurant did they hurry. To a pay phone.

The man held a device that looked like an answering machine playback beeper to the receiver and pressed a button on its back. A series of beeps emitted from the device and in a moment he was talking to a tape recorder in Nevada, near the Utah border. When he was through delivering his message he hung up. The phone never asked him to deposit money to pay for the long distance call. The two returned to a place where they could watch the entrance to the restaurant without being seen from it. They waited patiently for the rogues to come out.

*

"Hello, Rocks," she said early the next afternoon.

Rocks nodded. "Belinda."

Rocks and Belinda had never met before, they'd only heard of each other's existence and names the night before, but they had instant recognition when he exited the plane into the waiting area. It wasn't only the sunglasses, broad-brimmed hats, high-buttoned collars, and long sleeves each was wearing that did it. They weren't the only people in the terminal with shades, hats, and covered skin. There was something subtle in the set of the face and their posture that set them apart from the other passengers and greeters. They saw it in each other immediately. Others looking at them might have noticed some slight difference they couldn't put their metaphorical fingers on, just something off enough they might want to keep some slight distance from these two people.

"I'll take you to where they're staying. Howie's watching them right now. You can use my car until you leave," she said.

Rocks nodded again. They didn't bother going to the baggage claim, he had everything in a carry-on.

It was an Aspire. Rocks looked at it dubiously.

"It's good for knocking around in the city," Belinda explained. After maneuvering out of Moisant Field she said, "They caught a drunk tourist off Bourbon Street last night. They didn't bother stocking up, just got naked and slopped more of it over their bodies than they drank. It was a mess cleaning up after them." She shook her head at the memory. "It was a damn good thing we spotted them when we did. The police would have found the body first. Or someone would have, some of those places do a good job of cleaning their alleys. There were pools of blood all over the place." She shivered.

Rocks grunted thanks. He didn't care they spotted them so fast or they had such a hard time cleaning up after them. All he cared about was there was someone who knew where they were and could guide him straight there. Along the way he opened the plainly wrapped package Belinda told him to take from the glove box. He kept the Beretta he found in it under the window as he checked it out and loaded it.

The rogues were staying at the Hilton, smack between the Convention Center and the World Trade Center along the river, nearly within spitting distance of the French Quarter. Howie was in a coffee shop, seated where he could watch the entrance.

"They're not here now," Howie said after Belinda made the introductions. "I got close enough to listen when they left. They had one hell of a fight about where to go -- though they managed to keep it quiet enough I was probably the only one who heard what they were saying about cattle. That's the word they used, cattle." He grimaced, he didn't know anybody who talked about their food that way. "They finally split up; the men went to the park along the lake to scout it out, the three women went sightseeing in Vieux Carre. I followed the women. They were acting as idiotically as any other tourists in this town and I came back here to wait for you."

Rocks looked at the ultramodern hotel interior with its nine story atrium, scattering of bars and restaurants, and dense crowds. "Why'd they come here?" He thought they'd pick a more remote, less populated place.

"The redhead seems to be a jazz buff," Belinda said. "Pete Fountain had his club here. She thought it would be a spiffy place to stay."

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Rocks nodded as though that made sense. He guessed it did. "Show me where you spotted them and where they made their kill."

Howie didn't have his car, that's why he'd followed the women instead of the men. He got into the back seat of the Aspire, Rocks rode in the passenger seat.

Rocks showed no expression when they went past the restaurant, said he didn't need to go inside. He did want to stop and go into the alley where they'd killed their victim. He approved the rogues' selection of the site; it was impossible for a passer-by to realize anything was going on in there, someone would have to walk right in to discover them -- and then it would be too late for that passer-by. Belinda and Howie had done a good job of cleaning up, there was no sign of a murder there the night before. He didn't ask what they did with the body.

"Where did you last see them?" he asked Howie after examining the site.

"Let's find a parking space and I'll show you." Rocks looked a question at him and he answered, "Vieux Carre is small enough to easily cover on foot. Besides, a lot of it is closed to cars."

Belinda found a spot near the Customs House and they walked back toward Jackson Square. They didn't talk much, mostly Belinda or Howie briefly answered when Rocks asked; what's this, what's that, where does there go. Normally, when one of theirs visited their city they enjoyed showing them around this beautiful city. Rocks was one of them, but there was a coldness about this man that made them uncomfortable in his presence.

Howie stopped at a row of shops near the cathedral. "When they went into that one I went back to the hotel." He pointed at a knick-knacky place.

They were near enough and at a good enough angle they were able to see most of the interior. The people they were looking for weren't visible.

"Go inside and ask where they went," Rocks told Belinda.

She was back in a couple of minutes, her brow was furrowed, her eyes focused inward. She shook her head before Rocks asked. "There were there. And the shopkeeper said if I'm a friend of theirs she doesn't want my business either. Jesus, what did they do?"

"Probably got caught shoplifting and threatened her," Howie said. "I saw them steal a couple things in other places."

Rock agreed that was likely. "Where next?"

"This is the way they were going," Howie said. "Should we do the same?"

Rocks nodded. They went in the same direction. They were three people with heightened senses looking for three people with characteristics they'd recognize at once when they say them; and whose faces they'd all seen. It was only a matter of time. The time amounted to about three hours. The three were in a cafe on Royal Street, bags from their shopping spree were stacked on the floor around them -- they bought as well as stole.

Rocks' heart thudded when he caught sight of the redhead, Lucy he remembered was her name, through the window. He told his companions he wanted to know what kind of mood the three women were in before he confronted them; based on their reaction on the only other time he came face to face with them, he thought it could be unnecessarily attention-getting to surprise them in so public a place; there was no telling how they would react. And seeing Lucy he needed time to compose himself. The more he saw her the more he was sure he knew her from somewhere. But it had to be a somewhere from a time when she was but an infant, and that was impossible.

The three in the cafe knew his face so he sent Howie in to eavesdrop while he and Belinda took a table in another cafe across the street to keep an eye on them. Fifteen minutes later Rocks saw them put money on the table, gather their bags, and leave. They stopped in front of the cafe and talked for a few moments. Howie paid up and slowly ambled past them. He reached the other side of the street just as they split up.

"The brunette's tired and the young one's cranky," Howie reported. "They're going back to the hotel. The redhead wants to go to a jazz club."

Rocks watched Lucy walk deeper into the French Quarter for a few seconds while he thought about it. His first impulse was to follow her, get her alone and talk to her before confronting the others. He was at the same time happy she was going off by herself and, and -- and something else. Had he not known better, he would have been terrified at the prospect of seeing her alone. Part of him thought he would be better off following Mina and the girl back to the hotel and waiting to get them all together. Then he said, "Thanks. Give me your phone numbers in case I need any cleaning up. I'll let you know where I leave the car when I'm through. Maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow morning." They wouldn't get away from him this time, not like on the

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highway in Texas.

Howie had a business card. He wrote his home number on it. Belinda put her office and home numbers on the back of Howie's card and gave Rocks the keys to her car along with the card. They wished him well and took off. Rocks followed Lucy at a discrete distance. She went into a small place on Orleans Street. Rocks gave her a few minutes to settle down, then walked in after her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After the early evening brightness outside, the dark interior of the club was like a sack pulled over Rocks' head, disorienting him. He yanked his sunglasses off. Then he saw very clearly. A sax man was wailing a solo on the tiny stage in the back of the small room. A sign next to him announced the Bon Claire Trio would play next. Someone other than Rocks might have wondered how a jazz trio could fit on that tiny stage. Small, round tables, their tops little more than a foot in diameter, were dotted about the room; bentwood chairs with equally small, round seats clustered around them. Even this early in the evening there were some fifteen people in the club. Lucy was alone in a corner, looking intent on the music. Rocks started when saw her face so close in the darkness of the club; his hand almost shook when he gave the man at the door the five dollars the sign asked for. He managed to control the shaking as he walked to the corner table. The way he sat blocked her from leaving.

Jesus-god she can't be she couldn't be she isn't that was too long ago and and... he thought. This close the resemblance was so almost a match -- no, she didn't have as many freckles, concentrate on the freckles, that'll get you through this.

Lucy jerked when she saw who it was who sat next to her. She couldn't have been more startled and frightened had an empty, translucent shroud bearing a scythe sat there. She tried not to show her fear, but the ice clattering in her glass when she raised it to her lips betrayed her.

A corner of Rocks' mouth twitched in what might have been the beginning of a smile; he saw she was more afraid of this meeting than he was. "Be cool," he said. "All I want to do is talk to you and take you someplace where you'll be safe." Being this close to her with nobody else around -- nobody who counted for anything anyway -- made something inside him ache, something he hadn't felt in so long he'd forgotten it was there.

"Right safe," Lucy said, "safe for you to kill me." Her voice

rasped.

"No, no," the words were rushed and hushed. "You're in trouble, I want to help you, get you out of trouble." Rocks put his hand on her forearm in a gesture he meant to be reassuring. He couldn't keep the tremble out of his voice anymore.

Lucy didn't notice his fear through her own. Her arm shook badly enough she didn't notice his hand was also shaking. "What do you want?" she asked; her voice rose into a higher register as she spoke, but still rasped.

"I told you, I want to help. You're not alone out here, you really aren't. You're like me, I'm one of you. Come with me. We can get your friends and go someplace safe before you get caught." His eyes felt funny while he spoke; it had been too many years since the last time they pleaded with anybody, he didn't recognize the feeling -- and his eyes didn't get the expression right either, they looked bluntly threatening.

Lucy leaned back as far as the two walls would allow. She wanted to pull her arm from under his hand but was afraid of what he might do if she did. She misread his expression as a threat. "I don't believe you." Inside she was screaming, *Why did I go off alone? Why didn't I stay with the others? I can't deal with this man alone, I saw how easily he handled Art and I know I'm not strong enough alone.*

A waiter wearing chinos and a turtleneck, looking like a fifties beatnik, appeared at Rocks' side and asked for his order. Rocks looked at him sharply and the waiter went away. The sax continued its up and down sexual melody in the background; neither of them heard it.

"Lucy?" The way Rocks said the name it sounded as though he was testing the feel of it in his mouth, maybe comparing it to another word, another name. He could smell the fear in her and started as recognized his internal ache for what it was. He groaned softly. "Please, Lucy, I'm not, I'm..." He struggled for the right words. He wanted more than anything else to reassure her, but didn't want to say something that would be a promise he might not be able to keep. "I, I don't want to hurt you." He thought that was good, it was also the absolute truth. Slowly, his eyes remembered how the expression went that he was trying for -- they didn't exactly soften, but wrinkles broke out around them in a way that could be read as softer. "I'm on your side." He felt the trembling of her arm and sensed she didn't want him touching her. Reluctantly, he let go and leaned back. "We are together in this, we can be. Come with me. Please."

Lucy started to calm down. The way he was talking, the expression on his face, she didn't think he was going to do anything to her right now, maybe not even right after he got her outside. She decided the thing to do for now was play along, find out who he was, what he really wanted. Starting with something he said. "What do you mean, you're like us?"

"You know what you are. I'm the same thing. You -- you and your friends, you're doing it wrong. You're drawing attention to yourselves. One of these days people are going to catch you and kill you if you don't stop. Then they're going to start looking for the rest of us. I'm here to make you stop doing it wrong and do it the right way."

Lucy sucked in her breath and put a hand to her throat. *Make you stop doing it*, he'd said. Now she knew for sure; this man meant to kill them. She believed he was strong and wily enough to do it without anybody's help. Especially if he managed to get them one at a time; but maybe not if all of them together confronted him. She had to get away, had to warn the others.

How? It started easier than she thought it would; Rocks misinterpreted her breath and hand to the throat as hope for something different from her recent life what had been. The words poured out in a torrent as he told her about the Society, about the Utah ranch, the close network of people around the country, the investments, the people they had inside the bigger system who kept the system from noticing them. She listened intently, more intently than she had listened to the sax man before he sat down. The Bon Claire Trio came on, fitted themselves together on that tiny stage like three matching jigsaw puzzle pieces, played something that might have been Al Hirt leading Dixieland at Preservation Hall. They didn't notice.

Rocks had sat like this with a rogue thirty-five times over the past forty or so years, to talk them in. He had been successful twenty-one times, he'd had to kill the other fourteen. He knew what his chances of success with Lucy were.

A sixty percent chance of success wasn't good enough, he had to try harder. He'd never wanted so badly to bring a rogue in. Well, not in more than forty years, the first rogue he'd ever faced. He'd given it his best shot then and was going to do the same thing now. He knew he wasn't going to give up trying even if his best didn't do the job.

Lucy sensed something in this frightening, intense man. Not the truth; she didn't believe he was trying to talk her to safety, trying to

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bring her in to be integrated into this Society of his. He was probably making up all of that -- or some of it anyway. There was no reason for those people to welcome someone who was drawing attention to them, endangering them all. She paid close attention to him until she finally sensed a weakness, one she could exploit. If she was right about it, if he wasn't just shamming to get her confidence so he could lure her to someplace safe to kill her. She didn't think he'd kill her until she led him to the others. Or did he already know where the others were? How did he find her? There were too many questions and uncertainties. But she had to take the chance. A woman has power over a man if she knows how to use it. She smiled gently at the memory of the kid and her crude attempts to seduce Drake and Art. *I guess it takes time to learn*, she thought.

Rocks saw the soft smile and his heart leaped, he thought it was meant for him.

"Let's get out of here," she said. Now she had control over her voice and made it husky. Her hand took his and she smiled inwardly at the electricity she felt coursing through him. He stood stiffly, awkwardly, as though he was afraid of losing his balance. He didn't let go of her hand, though. His breath came loud, his eyes were unfocused. The Bon Claire Trio bowed off its first set and left the stage as they left the club.

They stood close together on the sidewalk, hip to hip, hands clutched where their thighs met, her breast caressed his arm. "Where are you staying?" she asked.

"I, I..." he couldn't talk.

"Rocks, what you told me is wonderful. I need to hear more about it, but we can't talk in there, not where we might be overheard. And I can't take you to where I'm staying. Not without letting the others know you're coming to help, they might get the wrong idea as soon as they see you. Let's go to your place." She squeezed his hand and meaningfully nuzzled her breast into his arm. His gasp told her he got her meaning.

"This way," he said hoarsely, and led her toward the Customs House and the Aspire.

Along the way they stopped at a pay phone. It seemed to her he let her hand go reluctantly; she thought that reluctance was because he was afraid she'd get away if he let go. He was afraid she'd get away if he let go, but not for the reason she thought. He fumbled in his pocket for Howie's card, then fumbled with the number pad on the

phone until he finally managed to reach Belinda.

"I need a place to stay," he said. His voice was thick, his words were oddly out of cadence. "No, no, nothing's wrong. I have everything under control, I just need a place to rest for a while," he said to reassure Belinda. "No, not your place, somewhere private." Pause to listen. "It has to be discrete, someplace nobody knows me." Pause again. "No, don't come there. Really, I'm fine." Pause. "I have money." Pause. He repeated the address she gave him. "Thank you." He hung up. He took Lucy's hand again, held it tightly, as though afraid if he ever let go again he'd lose something irreplaceable.

They found the car, got in. He started it but didn't put it in gear and go. After a moment he said, "I don't know my way around this city and forgot to ask directions." There was pain in his voice.

"I have a map," she said. "What's the address?"

Twenty minutes later they parked near a guest house. He picked up his carry-all with one hand and took her hand with his other. He registered them as mister and missus. He was so flustered and nervous he even used his right name. As soon as they were alone in the room she threw herself into his arms and kissed him as hard as she could. Her heart leapt with joy when he hyperventilated. This was going to work after all.

Rocks was incoherent. Absolutely, totally incoherent. His vocabulary degenerated to basic Tarzan; a dozen assorted words, grunts, and clicks. He was incapable of formulating a cogent thought. His fingers couldn't remember how to unbutton his shirt or open his pants; all they could do about her clothes was paw at them. Lucy undressed them, turned down the bed, pulled them into it, him onto her. She even had to guide him in.

"Been a long time, huh, Tiger?" she whispered into his ear. He could only gasp in reply.

It took long enough for him to find his rhythm and for the too long unused and unstimulated nerve synapses to remember what it was they were feeling that she had time to start getting interested. He surprised her, it seemed he wasn't only going for himself, but was trying to please her as well. When it all came together for him he worked with her with a passion she had seldom encountered and became passionate herself. They exploded in orgasm together. Even after he fell exhausted and limp on top of her she kept rocking for a time, enjoying the little jolts that shot through her. Eventually, she nudged his shoulder and he rolled off. He enfolded her in his arms,

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entwined a leg with hers, tucked his head on top of hers, whispered a name.

"Who?" she asked. It was too late, he was already asleep. She twisted her head to see his face. It was relaxed, its expression content. It could even be called happy. He twisted this way and that in his sleep. After a while she tried to disengage herself to get up and call a warning to the others. His arms tightened around her, she was too ensnared to get away. Well, she thought, after that he isn't likely to kill me as soon as he wakes up, there's still time. She wondered who Tanya was.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

He was a Thirties kind of guy in a Sixties kind of world. But he told himself he was flexible and was willing to try anything once. Well, almost anything. For the right reason. At fifty he was way past the don't trust anybody cut-off age of thirty. Not that his age made any difference to any of them; he still looked young enough that on those infrequent occasions when he went into a bar he usually got carded. That was no problem, he had a driver's license that said he was twenty-two. It was a real driver's license, too. That was one of the things they could do, the Society, get you real-fake documents. The far bigger problem was he still carried around the Thirties values he'd been brought up with: Hard work, thrift, seriousness; look out for tomorrow or it'll knock you for a loop.

These hippies, on the other hand, they had some different values altogether. Tune in, turn on, and drop out. Or, said more in line with words he'd use: Don't work at all, spend it while you got it, have fun, fuck tomorrow.

Normally, one would think this was incompatibility from the get-go. Normally, one would be right.

But then again, one wouldn't normally expect a Tanya to be a freckle-faced, green-eyed, redhead, either. Tanyas are supposed to be dark, with piercing, dark eyes; or maybe black hair contrasting sharply with pale white skin -- the dark eyes glowing like coals from that pale face. And they brood until when they smile it's like a gift from the gods. Tanyas slink and have throaty voices that can make men kill. Tanyas wear form-fitting black satin. I mean, it's that kind of name. Anything else is like Theda Bera being a blonde bimbo bubble-head.

This Tanya had green eyes and carrot-red hair that waved and cascaded down her back and sides until it was almost blonde where it reached her hips. Hey man, this was a Lady Godiva hairdo, can you dig it? Her complexion was pale as pale gets, except she spent so much time in the sun that her arms and shoulders and triangular face were so densely freckled that at a distance she looked deeply tanned.

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Maybe the rest of her was freckled too, because this was California and there were beaches where the pigs didn't chase you away or bust you too fast if a bunch of heads turned it into a nude beach for the day. And her dresses were lightweight and flowery and loose, they hardly hid a bit of her body.

This Tanya never brooded. She had a smile that went from here to there and kept right on going; some heads said her smile alone could bring them back from a bad trip. Slink? That's got nothing to do with her -- she was *born* dancing. No toe-shoes for this girl, she could do the best pirouettes without them. Her voice was a lullaby in wind-chimes.

Rocks had never been in love, not an Abelard and Heloise love. There'd been lusts along the way, to be sure, and friendships that were rather more than platonic, and for a few years he'd had a relationship that everybody who didn't need to know thought was a marriage. But there'd never been the kind of soul-wrenching love that tells you this person is more important to you than anything else in life -- maybe even more than life itself.

The first time he laid eyes on Tanya he knew he had to meet her. The first time he talked with her he knew a platonic friendship would never be enough. His breath speeded up and his eyes dilated when he was around her. Most of her friends didn't trust him for one minute, and only tolerated his presence because she thought he was cute. So what if he wore jerky long-sleeve shirts buttoned all the way to the neck and redneck reflecting cop shades and a cowboy hat and had army-short hair and didn't do drugs? She knew in her soul he wasn't any narc.

The first time they made love on the beach at night Rocks fell stone in love; he was wiped out, as they put it. He'd do anything she wanted. Except wear sleeveless shirts, or give up hats and sunglasses, or do drugs. He didn't tell her he didn't know how drugs would react with the virus in his bloodstream and didn't want to find out the hard way. When he explained he had this rare medical condition that made him allergic to drugs, all she said was, "Bummer." And she believed him. Hey man, Tanya'd never had anybody fall this hard for her before. She got him a really groovy Viet Cong straw hat, and polarized sunglasses, and even made him a dakshi with caped sleeves. All right, all right, she could go along with him not accepting sandals. I mean, if they really freaked him out.

Her friends started accepting this man they thought was some

kind of uptight superstraight, someone they wouldn't want shacking up with their sisters. When he quit shaving and let his hair grow long that helped them accept him.

It wasn't exactly a commune where Tanya lived. She didn't exactly live there, either. Actually, it was more a crash-pad. One of the heads inherited it when his old man and old lady died when their Corvette didn't make a turn on 101. They also left him enough money (doled out by an accountant who paid the bills and made sure he always had enough but never dipped into the principle) to keep him and a lot of friends in food, beer, and (most important for his standing in the community) dope. When she started going steady -- yes, that's the unhip way they put it -- with Rocks, the two of them were given a semi-private room on a semi-permanent basis. Semi-private meant they had a bed to call their own and they didn't have other people crashing in the same room unless all the other rooms, including the kitchen, were occupied and there was still somebody who needed a piece of floor for the night.

This was rapture for Rocks. He couldn't get enough of Tanya. He loved the quirky way her mind worked, the way it could jump from one thing to something completely unrelated and have them mesh perfectly, the way she made the incomprehensible comprehensible. He didn't think it was possible for anyone to have a body more perfect than hers. In his mind freckles became a sign of pure beauty. Sex with her was a constant revelation; he never knew whether she was going to be soft and gentle or a wildcat or something in between or some weird combination. When she was high from smoking dope her giggles were so contagious he felt like he'd smoked just as much hash as she had. Her happy babbling when she was tripping made him see the same sights she did. At the same time he wanted to never be apart from her, he understood she had to be given her head; her life was hers to run. He doted on her, would do almost anything she asked, never hemmed her in.

The longer they were together the more he came to want them to be together forever and always. Not an easy thing to accomplish when he was thirty years older than her and when she reached his age she'd be fifty and he'd still seem mid-twenties. He'd never changed anyone and didn't know how to go about doing it. Sure, he knew the mechanism, but that's not all there was to it. The new person needed to have a reason to be changed and needed to be trained. Unlike when Aunt Molly changed him, Tanya didn't have something she needed to

escape from.

Tanya was in seventh heaven. She hardly knew how to respond to this man who was so loving and giving. She knew he'd do anything for her and she never took undue advantage of that fact; she didn't want to risk burning him out and driving him away. Face it, not many women were lucky to have someone like him to take care of them. At first he was just someone different and fun. Then she became infatuated. Then something more than lust, fascination, infatuation. She fell in love, and her love was so big that it alone was enough to sustain almost any relationship -- and her love for him was less than his for her. She started thinking of a long term relationship. Maybe even marriage. She began to wonder how soon she should get off the pill and start making babies. What would he think of that?

But first there was one odd little thing about him that she had to ask about. Once he told her about that she could start talking to him about the rest of it; marriage and making babies.

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They split from the Be In early and went back to the pad. Their loving was the best it had ever been. Maybe it was. At least that's something they told each other frequently, that it was the best it ever was. And they always meant it when they said it. Being stone in love can do things like that to your perception.

She smoked some Acapulco Gold afterward, laying there in the crook of his arm, loving the feel of his naked body against hers. The only thing that could make it more perfect was if he was sharing the joint with her. When there wasn't enough left to hold in the alligator clip and take another toke she dropped the clip into the hand-crafted ceramic ashtray next to their bed, snuggled against him, and played with the hair on his chest.

"I love you," she said softly.

"I love you too," he said back and kissed her forehead.

"I love you more than I ever thought was possible."

He pulled her partway onto his chest so he could wrap both arms around her. "Me too."

"What do you do when you go out alone at night?" There, that's what it was, the one thing she needed to know. A tear flowed out of her eye onto his chest. He didn't want to tell her, she knew by the way he stiffened when she asked.

She was wrong. He didn't stiffen because he didn't want to tell her; he stiffened because he didn't know how. He turned onto his side

and slid down the mattress until their noses were touching and they could see nothing but each others eyes.

"I want us to be together always," he murmured so softly she had trouble hearing him.

"Me too," she said and sniffed. The hand that had been playing with his chest hair went around his back.

"I want you to go with me when I go out alone at night."

"I want to."

"There's something we have to do first."

"Okay." Anything to find out what it was she needed to know, to make things so they could be together for always.

"Do you trust me?"

She pulled her head back so she could focus on his face. All she could see in his expression was honesty and love. She leaned back in and kissed him. "Yes." That one word was soft, gentle, acquiescing. It changed both their lives forever.

He padded naked into the kitchen to get an aluminum tumbler, it was blue, then into the bathroom for the rest of it. She didn't notice the bandage on his wrist when he came back. He sat next to her and said, "Drink this."

She looked at him curiously. What was this dark red fluid in the glass? It looked like cherry and grape Kool-Aid mixed together, only thicker. The tumbler was warm when she held it -- he didn't let go. Was he on some drug he hadn't told her about? Was that where he went, to get it? She frowned at the thought he'd been holding out on her like that.

"Drink it all right down."

She gagged on the first mouthful and tried to spit it out. He grasped the back of her head and held the tumbler so the fluid she spat went back into it.

"Drink it all, it'll be easier if you do."

She tried to say no, tried to struggle, tried not to drink. But he was too strong, forced the lip of the tumbler between her lips, between her teeth, and poured. She swallowed without wanting to.

He tossed the tumbler aside when it was empty and clamped her mouth closed so she couldn't spit. He pulled her close to him and held tight. "It's all right, baby," he crooned. "You're like me now. Very soon it'll be all over and you'll be fine."

She tried to struggle, to break away. *Very soon it'll be all over*, he'd said. *He poisoned her!* She had to break away and throw up

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before it killed her. He was too strong.

"In a little while you're going to feel very sick, but don't worry, it won't last long. You'll feel fine."

Her eyes flooded over as she cried. She didn't want to die, not yet, not like this, not poisoned by the man she loved. He held her and caressed her and crooned to her. After a few minutes of not feeling anything she started thinking maybe she was wrong, maybe he hadn't poison her. Then the convulsions hit. Heavy sweat broke out all over her body. Her stomach roiled and she dry heaved but nothing came up. She started hacking and felt like she was coughing out her lungs. *This is it*, she thought, and tried to scream out her anguish, but she was convulsing and coughing too much and only a thin squeal came out.

It seemed to last forever, but after a time the coughing stopped, and then the convulsions ended. She huddled in his arms, trembling, feeling totally wrung out. After a few more minutes she felt strong enough to speak.

"What was that?" she asked, feeling almost totally disoriented.

"My blood. Now you're like me."

She gasped. "What's that, what are you?" Her voice was filled with fear.

"A vampire." he said it quietly, softly, he didn't want it to frighten her.

This time she did scream; a long, piercing, wordless scream of the damned.

He held her and kissed her and rocked her and whispered, "It's all right. It's not like you've heard."

"I don't believe you," she burred. She wasn't sure if she meant she didn't believe it wasn't like she'd heard, or if she didn't believe he just turned her into a vampire. Either way, she felt betrayed.

Once her trembling stopped and the sweat started drying on her body, he carried her into the shower. He used a lot of water and a lot of soap and about a half an hour bathing her. By the end of it she was recovered enough to scrub his back for him. While she brushed her teeth he changed the wet sheets on the bed. Then he lay her on the clean linen and made love to her slowly, gently.

They lay there for a long time holding each other. There was a measure of desperation in the way she held him. He talked to her in a low, calming voice. He told her about Aunt Molly, Abe, the Utah ranch, the Society. Other people who were crashing in the house made noise as they returned piecemeal from the Be In. They ignored them,

Rocks kept talking, telling her about the changes that were taking place in her. She listened. All she could think was she was dead and damned and the man she loved had done it to her.

Later, after midnight, they dressed and went to the Tenderloin where he taught her how to kill.

He rejoiced watching her drink the blood of her victim. Now they could be together forever and always. Or until he became ancient and died -- but that was far enough in the future it may as well be forever and always.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

He whispered that name again right before his eyes fluttered open; Tanya.

Lucy lay quiet and still as she felt him come awake. Much of the tension in him before was gone now. His face set into a blank expression once more, but not stone-hard and unrelenting like it had been.

He looked into her face and started to smile, saw no freckles, hardened his face.

She tried not to shiver. "How do you feel?"

"Good." He relaxed his hold on her, she could slip out of his arms if she wanted to. She sat up.

She wanted to cover herself, to dress, but she didn't dare, not yet. If he liked to look at her body, better to keep him distracted by letting him. "Who's Tanya?"

His eyes, which had gone unfocused at the ceiling when she moved away, suddenly blazed at her. "How do you know that name?"

"You said it when you were waking up." She leaned away slightly, held a defensive arm over her breasts.

His look went someplace else and became sad. "No one." He shook his head denying the words. "Someone from a long time ago. She doesn't matter anymore."

The way he said it, a long time sounded like decades. She studied him for a long moment and wondered how long ago it could be. Except for the hardness about him he looked to be about her age. To her, high school was a very long time ago. Then she remembered what her mother said about her father; how he was twenty years old when he came back from the war in Vietnam, but looked and acted many years older. But there had been no big war in a long time for Rocks to go away to and come back looking like this. How long do vampires live, she wondered. Do they stay the same age forever like the legends said?

"How old are you," she asked.

He looked back at her, momentarily as though she was a stranger who had just intruded on his privacy. Then something that may have been longing came over his face. "I was changed in 1936. I was seventeen then. Figure it out yourself."

As soon as she did her stomach tightened and she crossed her other arm over her breasts, crossed her legs tightly together, hunched over. She wanted to puke. She'd just been making love to a ninety year old man? *Oh god shit that's like fucking your grandfather.* This was something she hadn't thought of before.

"We age slowly," he said and gently touched her back. "We're as old as we look. The same thing's already happening to you, you just haven't had time to see it yet. It'll be a long time before you turn thirty."

Her shoulders bunched. There it was; *a long time before she'd turn thirty*; He meant to kill her before then. It was clear, no matter what he said or how he acted, he was making death threats. She was naked and defenseless in his room. She tried not to whimper.

He caressed her back. "Don't worry, you're safe now. I've got you."

She gulped back a sob and pulled away from his hand. He had her, that's right. She had to get away from him.

He sat up and moved close, he wrapped his arms around her and squeezed so tightly her breath couldn't come. He nuzzled behind her ear, couldn't see the trapped animal in her face. "Relax, Ta...", he said, became flustered for a second, corrected himself, "Relax, Lucy. It's all right now. It doesn't have to be like it was before." He rocked with her in his arms. The back and forth movement loosened his grip on her allowing her to breath again. He became lost in memory for long minutes, rocked back and forth, held her closely. Silent crying shuddered through him and shook her. His eyes stayed dry; it was so many years since the last time he cried his tear ducts wouldn't work. He said something, but his voice was too thick, his words weren't distinct.

She listened to his unclear voice and had to read into it to understand; what she heard him say sounded like, "I don't have to kill you at this time," and she fought down panic. She was sure he'd said *at*.

After a time one of his hands released its grip on her arm to gingerly, hesitantly, touch her breast. He softly kissed where her neck

and shoulder met. She felt his tumescence growing at the bottom of her spine. He moved against her and both of his hands caressed her breasts, her belly, her thighs, probed between them. He shifted toward the center of the bed, pulled her with him, lay her down, made slow, gentle love to her.

Lucy faked responsiveness, put her body on automatic while her mind grappled with the problem. Part of him thinks I'm someone else, she realized, someone he killed a long time ago. She understood he regretted that killing. That was the handle, that was what she would use to keep him from killing her for long enough for her to get back with the others where they could turn the tables on him.

He came long, hard, and back-arching, then collapsed his full weight on her, pinning her to the bed. At least she could still breathe lightly. After a moment he lifted most of his weight up and started moving again.

"I'll keep moving for you as long as I can," he murmured.

She suddenly remembered she'd been faking passion of her own. "No, no, it's all right," she said, scratching lightly, rapidly, up and down his back. "If it was good for you it was good for me."

"No," he shook his head, "it's not fair if it's only for me and not for you." He ground himself against her urgently.

I have to keep him happy, Lucy thought, I can't do anything that might anger him. She wrapped her legs around him and ground back, intending to fake an orgasm, keep him distracted from what he intended to do to her. She pushed and twisted under him him, harder and harder, until she started panting and gasping. She finished with a barely restrained scream. Over the next several minutes her body convulsed involuntarily a few times. The secondary orgasms felt good -- and they surprised her, she hadn't expected to really come.

Afterward, when they lay holding each other -- him holding her, her arms laying around him in the attitude of holding without her actually holding him -- he didn't engulf her in the same prison of arms and legs as he had after the first time. He didn't go to sleep this time, instead seemed content to simply touch and hold her.

When she said, "I have to go to the bathroom," he moved his arms and leg so she could get up. He watched her walk across the room, felt abandoned when she closed the bathroom door behind her. He blinked away tears that weren't going to come anyway.

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Frantically, she searched the bathroom for something someone

may have left behind, something she could use as a weapon. All she found was a complimentary razor blade in its factory sealed wrapping. That wouldn't do, it was too flimsy to do much with if he resisted, too small to cut deeply and widely enough to do enough damage even if he was asleep when she used it on him. Her hands shook as she washed him off her. Her eyes were hollow when she looked at herself in the mirror over the sink. Then she turned to the door, uncertain of what to do next, how to avoid injury from this man, unsteadily reached for the doorknob, stopped.

A full length mirror hanging on the door reflected her image. She studied it for a long moment and remembered the power a woman has over a man. This was a fine body, she knew that from the way so many men reacted to her on first sight, how the fortunate few who had reached her bedroom reacted when they saw it unclad. She smiled at her image and opened the door, confident again.

"Can I call my friends?" She asked.

Rocks looked at her standing in the doorway, her shoulder leaned against it, hips cocked, standing relaxed and natural, and the most seductive woman he'd ever seen. Or maybe only the second most seductive.

"Yes." He tried to control his voice, make it flat and neutral, make it sound as though he didn't care. He almost succeeded.

Few New Orleans guesthouses have phones in the rooms, that's one of the things that makes them cheaper than hotels. Rocks watched while Lucy dressed to go to the phone. He noticed she didn't bother putting her panties on; he thought that was a sign that she planned to return to him immediately. He was partly right; she left her panties off deliberately to make him think he'd gained her confidence. She smiled at him as she stepped through the door to the hall and closed it behind herself.

He stared at the closed door for a long moment before laying back. He hoped she would be back in the promised few minutes. With all his heart he hoped so.

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"Where the hell is she?" Drake demanded. He and Art had just gotten back from their reconnaissance of the lake front. He expected to find all three of them waiting.

"How do I know?" Mina snapped back. "She said she wanted to go to a jazz club."

"You have any idea how goddam many jazz clubs are in this

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fucking town, you dumb cunt?" Art yelled.

"Keep your stupid voice down," the kid said. "Somebody's gonna call the house dick on us."

"Good," Art snarled, leaning close to her. "A dick, that's what you want, isn't it? Maybe I should yell louder."

She turned red with anger -- and because yes, that is what she wanted.

"Everybody calm down," Drake ordered. His own voice wasn't calm, it was commanding and cut through the others voices.

They stopped and looked at him.

"We have to think about every possibility," he said almost calmly. "Most likely she's just someplace enjoying herself. There are too many jazz clubs for us to try to check out all of them. But something might have happened to her."

"What could happen?" Art demanded. "It's almost impossible for anything to happen to us."

"What about that guy in Texas?" the kid asked, pouting her lip at him.

Art rubbed his head where it hit the truck Rocks had thrown him against. "That guy's different. Anyway, we just got here yesterday. No way he could have caught up with us already."

"What if she got hit by a car and got knocked out?" Drake asked. "She could have been taken to a hospital before she came to." He gave them a few seconds for that to sink in. "Right, what are they going to find when they run tests on her? We don't know, all we know is there are things about us that are very different from other people. They could lock her into a room that's too strong for her to get out of. What happens if she doesn't get blood when she needs it? You know, that's something we don't have any idea about, what happens when we don't get blood when we need it."

They looked at each other. No, this wasn't possible, it was too much to consider. Lucy couldn't be in a hospital. She simply couldn't, that was too much.

"Let's get on the phone and check," Mina said. Her eyes were wide and she looked like she was about to hyperventilate.

"What if she tries to call us while we're on the phone to the hospitals?" the kid asked. "she won't be able to get through if we're tying up the telephone calling hospitals."

"Let's get change and use the pay phones in the lobby," Drake said.

They left the kid in the room in case Lucy called. In the lobby, Drake made Mina pull up a straight back chair and sit near him while he used a phone, he thought she was too upset to be able to make any calls herself. Art was on the next one. They had completed nine frustrating calls to hospitals that either couldn't or wouldn't give them any information about emergency admissions that evening when the kid ran up to them.

"Lucy just called," she squealed. "That guy, the one in Texas, he's got her. We gotta get upstairs, she's gonna call right back."

The phone was ringing when they got back to the room. Drake grabbed it. "Lucy, are you okay?" he asked without waiting to see that it was her calling.

"Yes, I'm okay, I'm fine," Lucy said. "Don't talk, just listen, I don't have much time, I have to get back to him right away."

"Get back to him? What do you mean, you got away and you're going back?"

"Just shut up and listen." Drake shut up and listened. Quickly, she told him about Rocks appearing at her table in the club and outlined what he said there and later that convinced her he intended to kill them all. She didn't mention their love making, she said instead that they'd spent all this time talking. "He gave me this story about he wants to take us someplace safe," she said, "but there were too many other things he said that meant someplace safe means someplace he can kill us without being interrupted. I think I managed to convince him I believe him. Get ready, I'm going to have him there in half an hour. Maybe longer, it might take longer to get him to come." She hung up.

Drake looked shocked by the time he slowly eased the receiver back into its cradle. "He found us already. She's bringing him here." The shock in his face slowly changed over to a confident grin. "Let's prepare a reception for him, kiddies. Here's what we're going to do."

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Lucy took a moment to stiffen herself before opening the door to Rocks' room. Her breath was coming fast and shallow and her face was pale, she felt light-headed. *This man wants to kill me*, she thought. *He's fucking me and making me like it and he's going to kill me as soon as he thinks it's the right time. I hate him!*

She was smiling brightly when she finally opened the door and walked in. Rocks was still laying on the bed, the sheet covered only part of his nakedness. He looked at her with obvious relief.

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"Did you think I wasn't coming back?" she asked cheerily.

"I was afraid you might not."

Her put-on smile became real. *This is turning out a lot easier than I thought it would*, she told herself. She leaned over the bed to kiss him; one hand fondled him. He started to rise under her hand and she shook her head.

"You know, I thought a man your age couldn't get it up more than a couple times a month. Here you are three times in one evening. Maybe you really are as young as you look. But we don't have time now, my friends are expecting us." She took her hand off him and brushed her lips over his forehead.

She thought about it for a moment and decided it was a good idea to put her panties back on. She didn't want any of the others to notice they were missing and ask any questions she didn't want to answer about what she'd really been doing with him. She went into the bathroom to take off her slacks. When they were off except for one foot, the door opened. Rocks stood there, still naked. "Your friends can wait for a few more minutes," he said.

She tried hard to hate him while he went in and out of her and his mouth roved so hungry over her face and neck and chest and breasts. But his caresses felt so good it was hard to hate him. She managed to hate again when she had to clean herself before getting dressed.

Afterward he got a pint of blood out of his carry-all for them to share. A smile almost formed on his lips when he looked at the other two pints and knew he'd only need one of them before going home. When Lucy's back was turned, he quickly took his pistol in its clip on holster from his carry-all and stuck it onto the back of his belt. He put his jacket on over the pistol, concealing it from view.

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Rocks stood against the wall opposite the hotel door, where he could see inside when it opened. "Tell them who it is, then step aside," he ordered.

Lucy swallowed, then rapped on the door. "It's me," she said. "Open up. He's with me." Then she stepped aside.

The door opened a crack, then wider. Rocks recognized the man standing there as Art, the one who thought he was tough.

"Push it all the way open then move so I can see everybody," Rocks said.

Art did it. Rocks saw the other three sitting on a sofa, hands on their laps, facing the entrance. Nothing seemed to be out of place or unexpected. He flicked his gaze to his sides, nobody else was in the corridor. So fast he was a blur even to the rogues, he grabbed Lucy, pushed her through the door ahead of him, then shoved her to the side, into Art. The two of them stumbled away from him into the wall. Rocks cringed inwardly at handling Lucy so roughly, but knew he had to be prepared for danger from any of them until he knew where they stood.

"Nobody move," he said. His pistol, which not even Lucy had seen before now, was in his hand. He scanned the room. Two double beds, a folding cot, two night tables, a long dresser with mirror, a coffee table, three chairs, miscellaneous lamps, three undistinguished paintings that looked like originals, and three closed doors were all that was in the room besides what he'd already seen. "What's through them?" He indicated the doors.

"The bathroom, the closet, and the room next door," Drake answered.

Rocks grunted. "You," he pointed at the kid, "open them."

She got up and opened the bathroom and closet doors wide. They looked innocent. She looked at him defiantly.

"The other one." Rocks gestured with his pistol.

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"We don't have the key to it," Drake said. "All we've got is this one room.

Rocks glanced at the beds. The cot was for the girl, he supposed, and wondered what the sleeping arrangements were for the two beds. He didn't much care for the idea of Lucy sleeping with Drake; liked less her spending her nights with Art. He didn't say any of that, instead he said, "Good." He relaxed a bit and sat in one of the chairs, the one that put the coffee table between him and the others. He lay the pistol down on the table but kept his hand on it. "You two, sit with them." He indicated Lucy and Art should crowd themselves onto the sofa. He managed to keep the hurt he felt at ordering Lucy around like from showing in his voice. "You, girl, on the floor in front of them."

The kid tossed her hair regally -- just to show him she was doing it only because she was nice, not because he ordered her to -- and sat crosslegged on the floor in front of the sofa. Her skirt rode up and showed her panties. If Rocks noticed, he gave no indication.

Lucy heard his voice as he gave his orders and believed the tone. That and the way he shoved her into Art was more proof, not that any was needed, that he was lying to her about wanting to take them someplace safe and integrate them into this Society of his -- if it really existed. She wondered what Drake and the others had planned. There had to be something, she didn't believe they were just going to let this guy walk in here and take over, do whatever he wanted with them. She noticed this was her night for not believing a lot of things. She had to be ready to do something when the others made their move.

"You got silver bullets in that, mister?" the kid asked.

Rocks looked at her incuriously. "According to the legends, silver bullets are for werewolves," he said. "Vampires need wooden stakes through the heart. I don't have wooden stakes in there either."

"See, I told you no silver bullets," she said to Drake.

Drake ignored her.

Rocks shifted his gaze to include all of them. "I'm like you, we all have the same condition. The difference is I know it and know how to act to protect myself from discovery. What I have in here," he patted the pistol, "isn't anything magic. We heal fast, regular bullets won't do much more than inconvenience one of us for a little while. If I have to shoot a rogue I want to do it with something that's going to take that person down and keep him there. This is loaded with hollow points. They make one hell of a big hole going out. Or they make a

big mess inside." He shook his head slowly to emphasize his next words. "If I shoot one of you, you won't heal fast enough not to bleed to death."

Drake cleared his throat and raised his right hand a few inches above his lap to pat the air. "We're cool, mister, don't be too fast on the trigger."

Rocks looked at him coldly. "I'm never too fast. But I am faster than you and you better believe that."

"I believe you."

Rocks didn't ask what Lucy had already told them, he just started talking about bringing them in. He told them without going into details that they weren't experiencing something supernatural, weren't damned, that they just had an incurable viral disease that was actually beneficial to them. He gave them a thumbnail history of the Society; how centuries before victims of vampirism banded together and learned to dispose of the bodies of those they killed to care for their condition so those bodies wouldn't be found and give them away, how those who had this condition were really victims until the rise of cities large enough that occasional people coming up missing without trace was nothing the authorities worried about. He sketched to them how the Society worked today. He explained what rogues were.

"Government authorities," he concluded, "have more capabilities today than ever before. If they ever, even by accident, get hold of one of us and run tests we're all in jeopardy. If word ever gets out that we exist we'll all be hunted down.

"That's where I come in, it's my job to bring the rogues in."

"With weapons?" Drake asked.

"Some rogues refuse to come in. In that case it's my job to kill them." His voice was flat, expressionless; he was stating a fact, not making a threat.

Mina blanched. "Have, have you ever killed any?"

"A few." He didn't say any more, let the silence drag waiting for what they'd say next.

Drake broke the silence. "We'd be fools if we said we wouldn't go in, wouldn't we?"

Rocks didn't answer, just looked at him coldly, levelly.

"Well, friends," Drake said and stood up, "I think we should go with the man."

Rocks stood when Drake did, he wanted to be ready in case any of them did anything; he had his pistol in his hand again, hanging at

his side.

Art stood and sidestepped so he blocked Rocks' view of Drake's right side.

The kid hopped to her feet. "Mister, are you really gonna take us someplace safe?"

Rocks took a step to his right, so he could see what Drake might be doing with his hidden hand.

The coffee table was still between Rocks and the others. Art took a step closer to it.

"Don't," Mina said, "I believe him."

"He means to kill us," Lucy said, her voice almost a growl.

Rocks flicked his eyes toward her, shocked at hearing her say that -- he thought he'd gotten through to her, that she believed he wanted to help. In that split instant his full attention was distracted from Drake and Art, the two men made their move. Drake stepped to his left and pointed a pistol he'd pulled from the back of his waistband; it went *pop*. As soon as Art heard the sound he went over the table and tackled Rocks.

Rocks felt a sudden, sharp pain in his chest; it was just unexpected enough to slow him down long enough for Art to crash into him. They crashed into the chair he had been sitting on and tumbled to the floor. Drake was on him instantly, his momentum bowled the two of them to the floor hard. Voices were raised in the background, Rocks didn't try to make out what they were saying. He struggled to get away from the two men and got one arm loose. Before he could do anything with it something heavy hit him hard on the head and dazed him. It hit him again. He didn't lose consciousness, but seemed unable to move his arms. He felt himself being rolled onto his stomach and his arms being pulled behind him. He shook his head to clear it and the heavy object crashed down again.

For a long moment he wavered in and out of consciousness. He was vaguely aware of things being done to him; his pockets emptied and his arms and legs bound. When his awareness reached a point where it was steady, even if not full, he found that he was cuffed hand and foot. A salt taste dribbled into his mouth around the gag that was held in place by a metal band that cut into the corners of his lips. A steel bicycle cable ran from the cuffs on his ankles to the cuffs on his wrists so his hands and feet were less than a foot apart, the cable continued up and looped around his neck so he couldn't bend forward, then the two ends were locked together with a combination padlock.

He couldn't move. His chest stung where he'd been shot, it felt like a rib was cracked. He was wet there, bleeding, but he could tell the bleeding was slowing down, might have already stopped. He had to breathe lightly because of the rib. He wondered what he'd been shot with, it didn't feel like a bullet.

They were all talking at once, but Rocks was able to distinguish voices and what they were saying -- at least part of what they said.

"Kill him," Lucy was saying, there was a nearly hysterical edge to her voice. "Kill him now before he can do anything to us."

Rocks shifted his eyes to her, she held some large thing in her hand, it had red on it that he realized was blood from his head.

Drake pushed her away. "No, we need to find out more first," he insisted. He held the airgun he'd shot Rocks with; the gun had been pumped up as hard as its works could stand, the .177 caliber pellet had hit with the force of a bullet. He was going through Rocks' wallet.

"We can't kill him," Mina pleaded with Lucy. "I believe him. We can go to Utah like he said."

"Fuck Utah," Art said. "You know what's in Utah? Mormons, that's what. I don't think Mormons would like us."

"Hey, slow down," the kid shouted. "I wanna try this guy. I bet he doesn't scare as easy as that truck driver." She looked at Rocks with blatant hunger on her face.

"Give me the razor, I'll do it," Lucy said. She tried to shove her hands into Drake's pockets. He pushed her away hard and she staggered back onto the sofa.

"Stay there," Drake snapped harshly.

Lucy glared at him.

"He can't get loose now, Lucy," Art said. "I tried those cuffs out myself while we were waiting for you. No way he can break them."

"Don't bet on it, sucker," Lucy said. "He's a lot stronger than you, he showed that in Texas."

"Fuck you, bitch. He caught me by surprise then, that's all."

"Shut up, all of you," Drake's voice cut through. They all stopped and looked at him. "We aren't going to kill him now. This bastard's been following us since California. We lost him at least twice and he found us again each time. We have to find out how he did it. We need to know how he found us. Shit," he shook his head fiercely, "this time he was here and caught Lucy alone the day after we hit town. We've got to know how the hell he's doing it." He was

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breathing heavily by now, and stopped to look them each in the eye, looking for argument or agreement. "There isn't a damn thing in here that tells us anything." He tossed Rocks' wallet aside. All it held was two Missouri drivers licenses and two credit cards -- one license and one card in his own name, the others in another name -- and a couple hundred dollars in bills no bigger than a twenty.

Art looked like he didn't care one way or the other. Mina nibbled on her lip but looked hopeful. Lucy glared. The kid looked at Rocks and ran her tongue over her lips.

"Not unless this tells us something." Drake held up an object that looked like a telephone answering machine playback beeper. He pushed the button on the back of it and it let out a long series of tones. He looked at the beeper oddly, playback beepers usually make only two or three tones.

"Was his phone number in his wallet?" Art asked. "Unless we know what number to call we can't use that damn beeper."

"Wait a minute," Drake said. "Listen to this." He pushed the button again.

Art cocked his head at the long series of beeps. "Part of that sounded like a phone number," he said.

Drake absently nodded agreement. He picked up the receiver of the room phone, got an outside line, and pressed the button with the beeper against the mouthpiece. He heard the buzzes and clicks of relays, followed by a second series of tones. More relay clicks, then a single beep. Then silence. "Strange," he said, "it's like it dialed a phone that dialed another phone, then nothing." He hung up.

Rocks carefully gave no indication that the rogues might have done something good for him. Some time in the next few hours somebody from the Utah ranch would cross the border into Nevada and listen to the few words Drake said before he hung up. That would alert the Ranch that someone was in trouble. He hoped they'd think of him and send help. He didn't know what kind of help they'd send, but any kind would be good right now.

"All right," Drake tossed the beeper down next to the wallet and changed the subject, "there's something else we have to do first. I don't know what's going to happen if we don't."

Art grinned at him and flexed his fingers together. "Right, we need blood. I don't think I got enough last night. I feel the hunger coming on already."

Rocks didn't think it was notable that these rogues who'd had

no training used the same term he and everyone else in the Society used. "The hunger" wasn't so much jargon as it was a descriptive term.

"We can't leave him," Lucy said. "He'll get away if we leave him. We have to kill him now, before we go."

"No, goddam it! No. Can't you get it through your thick head? He knows things we need to find out."

Lucy cringed back from the force in Drake's voice. "We can't leave him alone," she repeated, but very softly and looked neither at Drake nor at Rocks. "Shit," she suddenly swore. "The bastard had blood in his carry-all, he gave me some of it. We should have brought it when we came here instead of leaving it at the guest house."

The kid grinned wickedly at her. "In his room in the guest house. Wow, what'd the two of you do there, huh? Is he a good fuck?"

"Shut up, you little bitch!" Lucy slapped at her but she was ready and easily dodged it.

She put a hand over her face and giggled.

"Knock it off, both of you," Drake ordered.

The kid's face contorted as she tried to keep her giggles in. Lucy's chest heaved, she looked closer than ever to hysteria.

Drake looked at her, puzzled and concerned. "What *did* he do to you?" he asked. He didn't wait for an answer, that didn't matter right now. To all of them he said, "It may take a while to find out what we need, so before we start questioning him we should get some blood. Anybody disagree?"

They shook their heads, except for Lucy.

"All right then," he looked at his watch. It was going on midnight. "Let's go find somebody."

"Drake, I think Lucy has a point," Art said. "Maybe it's not a good idea to let him stay here alone."

"I thought you said the cuffs were too strong for him to break loose."

Art nodded. "They are. But that doesn't mean he can't attract somebody's attention while we're gone and get freed that way."

Drake gave that a couple seconds thought. "You may be right," he said, looking hard at Rocks. "Okay, somebody stays here and we'll bring blood back."

"I'll stay," Lucy said immediately. "I already had blood today, I'm okay."

"Bullshit you," Drake said. "The way you're acting, if we leave

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you alone with him we'll come back and find him dead. Either that or you'll screw up somehow and he'll get away."

"Lemme stay," the kid said. The tip of her tongue flitted between her teeth. It was a strain, but she managed not to look at the dresser top.

Art grinned. "Yeah, let the kid stay. Maybe she can figure it out if she doesn't have an audience."

She stuck her tongue out at him and he laughed.

Drake chuckled, then said, "All right, kid, you stay and keep him from escaping." He patted his pocket to make sure he had the keys to the handcuffs. It didn't matter what the kid did with Rocks while they were gone, as long as he had the keys in his own pocket, Rocks wasn't getting away. He picked up Rocks' pistol and stuck both it and the air pistol inside the jacket he put on. "You," sternly to Lucy, "are coming with us."

Lucy nodded numbly. The four adult rogues left the room. the kid watched Rocks for several minutes, smiling what she thought was a Mona Lisa smile, before sliding off the sofa and kneeling at his side.

Rocks lay bent backward on his side, it seemed the only thing he could move was his eyes. He did move them, watching the girl as she observed him, followed her as she moved toward him. His muscles flexed hard under his clothes as he tested his bonds. He wasn't testing as hard as he wanted, he couldn't while she was watching. Art was probably right, the cuffs and cable felt like they were too strong for him to break. He only tested the gag once, the metal strap cut deeper into the corners of his lips.

"I'm a virgin," the girl said pertly; her hands were folded primly on her lap. "Did you know that? Of course not, nobody's told you. I hear all men want virgins, that they think there's something special about popping a virgin's cherry. Would you like to pop mine for me? I'm old enough to bleed, you know." She giggled at repeating Art's hoary joke. "How about it?" She put her hand on his groin and started rubbing.

Rocks tried to pull back, but all that accomplished was to tighten the cable around his neck, cutting his breath. Three times in one day was a lot for anybody but a very young man, a man who was as young as Rocks looked, but not a man as old as he actually was. It was even more for a man who hadn't in he didn't want to remember how many years -- he was tender from the unaccustomed use and it hurt when she touched him. He hadn't even masturbated in years.

She knelt back, jammed her fists into her hips, made a moue at him. "Well," she said huffily, "that's hardly the way to react to a lady's advances, now is it? Oh, you men are all the same; all talk, no action." She dipped her head to stare at him in mock exasperation. "What am I going to do with you? This really is a big deal you know. Popping my cherry certainly is for me. Doing that is supposed to be a really big thing for guys too." She leaned way forward until her face was only inches from his, she had to put her hands on the floor to support herself. "We *are* going to do this. I hope you understand that. I can't go the next hundred years still a virgin, I'd rather die than be some kind of dried up old maid. We *are* going to do this." She shifted her weight so one hand could go back to his groin. He didn't flinch away this time. She bent over the rest of the way and closed her eyes while she kissed him gently on the mouth.

"Oo," she said, straightening up again. Her hand went to her mouth and rubbed. It came away smeared with red. She looked at him with more concern. "You can't kiss me with that thing in your mouth, either, can you?"

Rocks managed to shake his head without cutting off his wind. He also got a muffled *uh uh* out through the gag.

She muttered something about how long were they going to be gone, then bent over him again. "Lemme know if this hurts," she said, and fussed with the fastening of the strap on the back of his neck.

The strap cut some more from being fiddled with and it hurt, but he couldn't say so with the gag in his mouth. But it didn't hurt for long, the fastening was a simple clasp that she merely had to lever and it came free. It nicked him again in the upper lip coming out. She daintily fished two fingers inside his mouth to pull out the handkerchief.

"Ugh," she said as she dropped it arm's length away. She looked at him all perky. "Can you kiss now?"

Rocks wriggled his lips, licked at the cuts, coughed once or twice, spat blood-tinted saliva.

"Oh, let me help you, lover." She bent to his face and started kissing and licking at the cuts. He withdrew his tongue and let her do it alone.

The outside of his mouth was all wet with her saliva when she finished and he wanted to wipe it dry, but couldn't do anything about it, bound as he was. He also realized he had a chance of getting away now and didn't want to blow it by offending her by asking her to dry

his mouth.

"What's your name?"

"Fuck my name." She smiled brightly. "Let's fuck!" She returned her attention to his groin. "We gotta get that thing outta there, don't we?" she said. She pulled at his belt and found out it's much harder to unbuckle a belt on somebody else than on yourself if you haven't done it before. It took a little time and a lot of fumbling, but she managed to get his trousers open only to encounter the -- to her -- mysteries of jockey shorts. "Ah shit, how do I do that?"

"It isn't going to work," he said.

"Whadya mean?"

"Look at me," he said in the same firm, flat voice he used earlier when he had the upper hand on all of them.

"Yeah?" she said, looking at him from head to bent knees. "So what's to look at?"

"I have to get on you or you have to get on me. We can't do it with me trussed this way."

She grinned crookedly at him. "You're just trying to get me to untie you, that's all. We can do it without me untying you."

He shrugged as well as he was able.

She tore his shorts getting him out of them. Then she pondered his limpness for a moment before saying brightly, "Hey, wanna see my tits? They're pretty good." She giggled. "But you already know that, don't you? You saw them back in Texas." Her next giggle was muffled by her blouse as she pulled it over her head. She cupped her breasts at him. "Nice, huh? And firm, too. You know what? They're gonna get bigger!" She looked inordinately proud of that, then glanced away and nibbled on her lower lip for a few seconds. "Men like to suck on tits. I bet you like to suck on tits. Here." She lay next to him and put a nipple between his lips. She ooed and cooed as he lipped it. She ooed and cooed and wondered what all the fuss was about; she didn't realize he wasn't putting any passion into it. She looked down his length, still no physiological reaction.

"Geeze. Okay." She popped to her feet and stripped off her skirt and panties. She stood in what she thought was a provocative pose. "How do you like that body, huh? Pretty good, if I say so myself." She gyrated, watching him. No reaction. She danced as sexy as she could, no reaction.

"Humph. You queer or something, you don't get turned on by girls?" she demanded.

"I like women," he said flat-voiced. "But I told you, it's not going to work this way."

"Okay, why the fuck not?" Now she was getting frustrated and angry. What was this, no man ever seemed to get excited about her body or wanted to pop her cherry. Was something wrong with her or what?

"Because I have to be very careful what I do or I'll choke. I can't move, I'm in pain from being bent backward like this, I can't do anything." That was said patiently. Then he cracked the hint of a smile. "Besides, nearly all men like to use their hands, touch their women."

"If you're just trying to get me to untie you, mister, you're going to be sorry."

"What can I do if you take this cable off me?"

"Well..." She went to the trash can and found the box the padlock came in. The paper that had the combination printed on it was there. She grinned when she swivel-hipped back to him. "Like what you see, honey?"

"Sure."

She shook her head. "You do have a way with words. I better be careful, or next thing I know you're going to sweet talk me into going to Utah with you."

"Be a good idea if you did."

"*Humph.*" She knelt behind him and figured out the lock. In a moment he was stretched out, bending his knees, wiggling his ankles, sitting up, rotating his shoulders and twisting his neck. "Feel better?"

"Lots."

"Okay, now down to business." She pushed him back. "Lift your hips." Without waiting for him to do it she pulled his pants down below his knees. "Oh, boy." She rubbed her hands together and straddled him, she started rubbing herself against him, confident that would get him to harden.

He cried out in pain and arched his back.

"What's the matter?" Anxious, she lifted her weight off him.

He clenched his jaw and breathed heavily. "The cuffs," he gasped, "they dug into my back. Get off." He rolled on to his side and sent her sprawling. "Goddam, that hurt." He writhed as though in agony. The cuffs had hurt when they dug into his back, but not as badly as he was pretending. What he was actually doing was, behind his back where she couldn't see, he was jerking and pulling at the

cuffs, trying to break the chain.

"Oh, let me see." She hopped to him and rolled him onto his stomach. He tried to resist but she was stronger than he expected and he went with the roll. "Oh baby, where?" She rubbed his back under the handcuffs. "Does that feel any better?" she asked, sounding concerned.

"Yes, yes." He wheezed.

"Here, let's do this." She rolled him over and up into a sitting position and looked at the dresser. She scooted around to his front and sat between his bent knees with her legs around his hips. "Listen, this is serious," she said, and draped her arms over his shoulders and nodded her head so their foreheads were together. "Getting my cherry popped is real important to me. Those bozos, Drake and Art, they won't do it and every time we get a man who maybe could, they kill him too fast. So you're my chance. I'm gonna show you a good time here." She didn't know quite what that meant, but she'd heard Lucy and Mina both say it, so she figured it meant something to men. "I don't know if I believe what you were telling us before -- Mina does, I know that -- but I don't think all you want is just to kill us. If that's all you wanted you probably would have done it back in Texas. Right?"

He nodded.

"Good, that's what I thought. So listen, if I take the handcuffs off your wrists so we can do this thing, do you promise to let me put them back on when we're through? I won't put the bicycle chain back on. And when the others come back I'll be against Lucy, that bitch, if she still wants to kill you. Promise?" She looked earnestly into his eyes.

He looked back into her eyes. "I promise."

"Okay. Wow! Let's get it done." She disengaged herself from him and scrambled to the dresser without standing up. "Sometimes that Drake is forgetful," she said when she came back. "He forgot the handcuffs came with *two* sets of keys, and he left the other pair here." She showed him two small keys, and tried one in the handcuffs. It didn't work, so she tried the other one, it did.

Rocks shrugged his arms around to his front and shook them out. He was rubbing the indentations from his wrists when she jumped on him and knocked him onto his back. She flung herself on him and kissed him with an almost violent passion. She straddled his hips and started rubbing herself against him. "Oooh," she went when she felt him starting to rise under her. Hey, men are made that way, they

respond to certain stimuli. His mind ignored the stimulus even while his body reacted. He wrapped his arms around her.

"That's right, lover. Use your hands, put them anywhere you want. Just get it up and do your thing with me."

Suddenly he flipped them over and pinned her to the floor. She wrapped her arms around him.

"This is better, right?" she asked.

He didn't answer. He grabbed her wrists and brought them down to her sides. Then he raised up, grasped her shoulders firmly and twisted hard. She let go with her legs and sprawled face down. He slammed her wrists into the small of her back, held them there with one hand and grabbed the cuffs with the other. Click, click, she was cuffed. "Hey! What is this?"

He groped, found the other key, unlocked the cuffs on his ankles, slapped them onto hers. "I told you last time, kid. Come back in thirty years when you know what it's all about and maybe then I'll be interested."

"But, but," she started crying. "You promised. I'm going to kill you for this," she bumbled through her sobs.

"So I lied. I'm not your prisoner, you're mine. I'm taking you in. Anyone I don't take in I kill." He pulled his pants up and put his belongings back in his pockets.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

Now that Rocks had gained his freedom he had to figure out his next step. These rogues weren't going to listen to him, not as a group. What had happened with Lucy? He thought he'd convinced her but there she was, the one pressing the hardest to kill him and do it right now. Mina believed him, she may have been the only one. Drake clearly didn't. Art didn't seem to care one way or the other. The girl seemed unable to think beyond losing her virginity. Okay, get Mina out of harm's way and deal with the others. Somehow he had to isolate Lucy, maybe if he had more time he could at least get her to the Ranch and then she'd believe. Art, maybe. Drake, he'd have to kill Drake, not much chance of getting out of that. The girl, well.

The naked, hand- and ankle-cuffed girl flopped on the floor like a beached fish and cried. Rocks ignored her wailing just as he ignored her nakedness -- he simply didn't care. She was too young and too snotty, too much of a punk kid. And she wasn't Tanya.

Well. He had her, may as well keep her.

Drake had his gun, that was the biggest problem; Rocks had no way to defend himself from anyone who was more than a few feet away, and that pistol could kill him just as easily as he could use it to kill a rogue. However he chose to deal with the situation, it wasn't going to be easy. Maybe he should call Howie or Belinda, one of them might be able to get him another pistol. No, it was the middle of the night. Unless they had a pistol, or were experienced burglars, they couldn't come up with one before mid-morning. Did Louisiana have a waiting period? He didn't know the firearm laws in Louisiana, if they were tough it would take longer than a day. And he might not be able to get hold of either of them anyway, the Ranch might have called them and they could be out looking for him right now. And the rogues were going to be back sometime before dawn, likely in the next hour or two. Not enough time to call anybody or wait for someone who might be on the way, he was on his own for this. Unless he was willing to take the chance on them getting away from him again.

The first thing for him to do was get the girl out of the room or she'd give them a warning when they got back and he'd lose whatever chance he had against them. Damn. Too bad he didn't know whether Howie or Belinda were on their way. If they were they could take her off his hands. But he had no time to wait.

The girl lay on her stomach, not moving now except for the heaving of her chest when a sob wracked through her. Her clothes lay within reach. Rocks got the key to the handcuffs and straddled her.

"Oh, that's it, huh?" she stopped crying and snapped at him. "You get your jollies by humiliating a girl and then raping her, is that it? Well jerkoff, jerk, I'm keeping my legs closed."

He ignored her. He moved fast to grab her blouse, uncuff her wrists, pull her arms over her head, the sleeves over her arms, and the blouse down over her torso. She struggled as soon as one wrist came free. Her strength was far greater than that of a normal man, but Rocks wasn't a normal man and his strength was far greater than hers. Had she struggled any harder she might have hurt herself, she was almost as helpless against him as any normal person would have been.

"I'm going to tell them you raped me, you bastard," she shouted. She wanted to scream but couldn't keep the disappointment out of her voice and a scream wouldn't come. "They'll kill you, you'll see. You're dead meat!"

He bounced her wadded panties in the palm of his hand and looked at her cuffed ankles. Legs are stronger than arms, if he uncuffed them to pull her panties on she might get in a kick to his chest. With his chest sore from the pellet Drake shot him with, he didn't need to be kicked as well. He tossed the panties aside and pulled her skirt over her hips and fastened it around her waist. He didn't bother tucking the blouse in. The whole time he was dressing her, she kept up a steady stream of invective.

"Girl, I didn't rape you and you aren't going to tell anybody I did. Whether you like it or not, you're going to the Ranch to be civilized. But I've got to get you out of here before your friends come back. I've got some friends here. If I could I'd just hand you over to them for safe keeping, but there isn't time. So I'm stashing you in my car." He shook his head. "I wish I could trust you to keep quiet for the couple of hours this is going to take me."

"You're right, you can't trust me. I'm going to get you, you motherfucking cocksucker."

He looked around for the handkerchief that had been crammed

into his mouth as a gag. It was cold and wet when he picked it up. "Sorry about this," he said as he shoved it into her mouth.

Her eyes popped wide and she looked shocked and indignant when it was shoved into her mouth.

"Don't get too upset, I'm not going to use the strap to keep it in like your friends did to me, and I'm not going to bend you backward with the bicycle cable, either."

He looked out the door, no one was in the corridor. He walked down it to the fire stairs and made sure the door opened freely. Then back to the room. He picked the girl up and slung her over his shoulder in a modified fireman's carry. He made sure he'd be able to get back into the room without a key before easing it shut behind himself, then sprinted to the stairs, hoping nobody opened a door and stepped into his path before he reached them. No one did. The most dangerous part of the trip to the garage was over. Now for the hard part, they were on the fourteenth floor and he had to walk all the way down the stairs with the girl over his shoulder. They weren't likely to encounter anyone on the stairs; few people ever bother to use the stairs in a hotel. If they did, well, he'd deal with the situation if it arose.

It didn't arise. Once, he'd had to stop and wait for a few minutes while someone a few flights below went from one floor to the next, but they didn't directly encounter anyone going to the garage.

In the garage Rocks was glad he'd thought to park the car near the stairs, there were people around. Fortunately, none of them were close and he was able to get to the car without being noticed. He jammed the girl into the narrow floorboard space between the front and back seats. He had to take a few deep breaths before he was able to talk, and then a few shallow ones to ease the pain in his chest. She struggled a bit; he pushed down hard on her shoulder.

"Don't struggle," he ordered. This will go a lot easier on you if you just lay quiet. This may take me a couple of hours." He talked in a low voice, bent over her head so she could hear. No harm's going to come to you. When I come back I'll take the cuffs off if you promise to behave. I'll have some blood for you then, too." He started to move away, then leaned in again. "It's late, go ahead and take a nap, you probably need some sleep by now anyway. The time will go faster if you do." He massaged his sore chest as he walked away from the locked car. He didn't bother to think that even though vampires heal far faster than normal people they hurt just as badly while injured. That was a simple fact of life -- one never thinks about simple facts of

life.

He took the elevator back to the fourteenth floor. He had been gone for fifteen minutes. He listened carefully for a long moment outside the room door. He pushed on the door, it didn't budge. That was wrong, when he left he made sure he could open it with a shove. No sounds came from inside. They were back. He put his eye to the peephole, but could only see a blur that told him nothing. He took a couple steps to the side of the door so they couldn't look out and spot him while he took the time to think about his next step.

Down the hall he heard the whoosh of elevator doors opening. He dashed to the stairwell and ducked inside, leaving the door cracked far enough to see who came along. It was Howie, nervously looking all around, shifting from one foot to the other, uncertain what to do. He headed to the door of the rogues' room and listened at it. He hesitantly raised a hand to knock and Rocks stepped out of hiding.

Howie heaved a deep sigh. He stammered and stumbled over his own voice trying to talk. Not much was clear; he and Belinda had gotten calls from the Ranch that he might be in trouble and to check out the situation. They decided to start by looking at the hotel. Just as they arrived they saw Rocks stepping onto an elevator. A moment later the four adult rogues came off one; three of them looked worried. The other, the redheaded woman looked furious. They heard her berating the others for not killing him earlier. Belinda followed them, Howie came looking for Rocks.

That was enough. "Let's get downstairs," Rocks said. He raced to the elevator bank, Howie puffed along behind. The car Howie came up on was still there. "Did they see you?" Rocks asked on the way down.

Howie shook his head. "We were close enough to hear them, but they didn't even look in our direction."

Belinda was in the lobby anxiously waiting for them. "They went to the garage," she blurted. "They opened my car and were pretty angry about something. Then they got into a Lincoln and took off. I was afraid to look in my car, so I came back up here." She wanted to ask Rocks what was going on but sensed an urgency that didn't allow the time for questions.

"Shit. They didn't take anyone out of your car?" Rocks asked. Belinda shook her head, her eyes opened wide with shocked understanding. "I've got the girl in your car," he said. *Why wouldn't they have taken the girl?* "Let's get down there," he ordered. "I'll give

her to you to keep for now," he told them on the way down. He hoped the girl was still there for him to hand over. "Belinda, it's better if you keep her. The main thing on her mind is getting laid, she won't give you as hard a time as she will Howie." He was talking to keep them calm and to distract his own mind from what he was afraid they'd find in the garage.

Belinda made a nervous smile and agreed to take the girl. Howie looked relieved. Then they were at the Aspire. Its door was ajar, the girl was in an unnatural position and her skirt was hiked up around her waist. She wasn't moving. Rocks pulled her out. He had to fish in the back of her mouth to pull the gag from her throat.

Belinda turned away and squeezed her eyes shut to keep from crying. Howie turned away and tried to keep from throwing up. The girl didn't lie quietly like Rocks told her to, she struggled to get free and to spit out the gag. In her struggles she sucked the handkerchief into her windpipe and choked to death on it. It hadn't been much more than ten minutes since Rocks left her there, but the asphyxiation only took a few of those minutes. That was one way their health wasn't improved by the virus; they needed more oxygen than normal people, they couldn't go as long without breathing before unconsciousness set in, quickly followed by death.

Rocks eased the girl's limp form onto the back seat and gently pushed her eyes closed. "Howie," he said softly, "go get your car. Now."

Howie mumbled something and wandered away to do as he was told. Belinda stepped a few feet farther away from her car. Rocks didn't say anything to her, he understood what she was going through; the same as Howie. Death is no stranger to those afflicted with vampirism, but there are different kinds of death. When they killed it was simply so they could live. They took no joy or comfort from it, it was simply a fact of life -- some die that others may live. When they cleaned up after the rogues, that was unpleasant, but again a necessity. They might decry the unnecessary slaughter or be revolted at the waste of blood -- if the rogues didn't drain it all -- and the wantonness of it, but it was still a fact of life, something that must be done so they could continue to live. If Rocks had killed the girl and they had to clean up it would be distasteful but, like killing to live, a thing that had to happen, something that could fit easily and clearly into their cosmology. This girl was one of them, and at the same time she wasn't of them. The same virus coursed through her veins that did theirs, but she didn't

know how to conduct herself, she created danger for them all, threatened their very existence. If she had to die she had to die and that was all there was to it. Belinda and Howie would grit their teeth and the body would vanish as though the girl had never existed. But this...

She could have lived, all she had to do was lay quietly and wait. She killed herself by accident. This was like walking along the street and seeing an acquaintance lean too far out a sixth story window and fall to her death. This was a death that wasn't expected and needn't have happened.

And they didn't even know her name.

Belinda tried not to think of how the inside of her car smelled and the cleaning job she'd have with it after they disposed of the body. When the girl died her sphincters let go and her bladder and bowels emptied themselves. If she thought about that, it would only make the whole business worse.

Howie rolled up in his car. Rocks handed Belinda the keys to her Aspire and held his hand out for the keys to Howie's car, it was a nondescript, gray Taurus, the perfect car for being invisible in city traffic. Howie reluctantly turned over his keys.

"Clean it up and notify the Ranch," Rocks said in an emotionless voice. "I'll call you later." He got behind the wheel and drove to the cashier. "A Lincoln left here a few minutes ago," he said to the cashier. "Did they say where they were going?"

"They asked for directions to the causeway across the lake."

Rocks asked for the same directions. Outside he waited for the other two and gave Howie back his car. "You don't have to call the Ranch," he said, "I will."

He found a pay phone and a minute later was telling the tape recorder in Nevada about the death of the girl and the escape of the adults. "I'm not going to wait for somebody to spot them," he finished. "They've been heading east ever since they hit Southern California. They're probably going in the same direction now. I'm following them." He hung up and went looking for another car. Two blocks away he found a Porsche with the keys locked inside. The car wasn't parked straight, probably somebody came home after a night of too-hard partying, he might not even realize the keys were in the car. In the morning when he didn't find his car he might simply think he forgot where he parked it and not report it stolen right off.

Making the phone call, finding the car, and getting it open all

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took time. When Rocks settled behind the wheel of the Porsche the rogues had a 45 minute lead on him. He swore silently, but knew the little car could catch up with them in a few hundred miles. If they took the route he'd follow himself. He drove across the 23 mile long causeway over Lake Pontchartrain and turned east onto I-12, toward Florida.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"Now do you believe me?" Lucy shouted, her voice was laced with anger and edged with hysteria. "I told you he wanted to kill us, all that other crap was just to gain our confidence." She included all of them in what she was saying, but it was mostly directed at Mina.

Mina curled tightly in a corner of the back seat and cried.

"I believed you from the beginning, Lucy," Drake said. "Now shut up." He was driving.

Lucy's head snapped as though he'd slapped her. She glared at the back of Drake's head but didn't say anything.

"Dumb little twat just wanted to get laid," Art muttered. He had the front passenger seat. "Did you see? She wasn't wearing her panties."

"How could I not notice with her bare ass sticking up like that," Drake said.

"He must have talked her into unlocking him," Art continued as though he hadn't heard Drake. "You had the keys, how the fuck did she do it?"

"I forgot the goddam extra set of keys," Drake said. "They were right there on the dresser when we got back."

"Was there an extra set of keys, Drake?" Art wasn't listening to any voice other than his own. "There must have been and we didn't think of them. The dumb twat probably got naked and tried to get him up and he told her he couldn't do it locked up like that so she unlocked him and the motherfucker killed her." He turned in the seat so he was facing Drake and could look at the women in the back by simply turning his head. His eyes had an empty look about them, his face seemed drained of strength. "I want to get that son of a bitch and kill him," he said more firmly than he looked. He said to Drake forcefully, "How the fuck am I supposed to catch him and kill his fucking ass if we're running away? Tell me that, how can I do it if we're running away, goddam it!"

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Mina wasn't listening to anything anybody was saying. She kept saying, as though chanting a mantra, "He strangled her! Why did he have to do that?" She didn't know about the handkerchief the kid had been gagged with, or that she had struggled after being told not to, she had no idea the handkerchief had lodged in the girl's throat. "He strangled her!"

"We aren't running away, Art," Drake said with all the calmness he could muster; he said it even though felt to him like that was exactly what they were doing. "He got the upper hand on us back there. Damn it, I just know he had help, he couldn't have found us so fast without help, lots of help. We aren't running away, we're going someplace where we'll have the advantage again, someplace where he won't have any help."

"Do you think there is such a place anywhere?" Lucy demanded. She hadn't spoken since Drake told her to shut up. "If what he said about that society of his is true, he's going to have help no matter where we go, we can't get him alone."

"Maybe," Drake conceded. "Maybe not. He lied to us about wanting to take us someplace safe. Why not lie to us about how that society has people everywhere? We have to try."

"Where can we try?" Lucy asked. "Where can we go where maybe he won't have help?"

Drake grinned into the rearview mirror at her. "Someplace where there's too damn much sun for people with sun-sensitive skin. We're going to Florida."

Drake wanted Rocks to follow them. He made a point of them being highly visible everyplace they stopped. And they did make stops; for gas, food, physical relief. Never for sleep; the order of the day was keep going until they got to their destination.

*

The highway signs near the northeast corner of Lake Pontchartrain briefly confused Rocks, he didn't see where I-12 went. He quickly figured it out, though. I-10 went south of the lake, through New Orleans, and up around the east side of the lake. I-12 merged with it where it came back north of the lake and surrendered its own identity; I-59 started there and went north. Rocks merged smoothly onto I-10 and went as fast as the sporty little car would go. But only for a few miles -- he'd heard stories of the Mississippi state cops and how they reacted to foreigners, non-Mississippians. He didn't want to find out for himself how true those stories were, there wasn't time to

go messing around with local authorities and he didn't want to kill any cops. Not now. It was easy for him to push the dead girl out of his mind so he could try to concentrate on catching the others. But the only thing he could really think of was Lucy.

Lucy, Lucy, Lucy. Why, Tanya? Why do you think I want to kill you? I told you I didn't want to, I told you all I wanted was to take you to where it was safe. Lucy, I have to get you and bring you in. I have to do this, I HAVE TO, LUCY. *TANYA, I LOVE YOU!*

He set his jaw firmly and thought briefly of the others. Drake, he'd have to kill him. Maybe Art too. Art the tough guy wouldn't listen to sense. Mina, she said she believed him. Maybe Mina would help him with Lucy. If she didn't he'd kill her too. But Lucy. Oh no, he wasn't going to kill Lucy, never Lucy. No one was going to stop him from saving Tanya. No one; he'd kill anyone who tried to keep him from bringing her in. They had too much future together, him and Lucy. No matter what, he wouldn't kill her. Tanya, he was going to save Lucy. Later, after she learned how to live, then he'd take her to St. Louis to live with him. Maybe they'd move away from St. Louis. The only reason he was there was it was in the middle of the country, he had to travel less living there than if he lived on one of the coasts. Maybe once Lucy was with him he would quit being the hunter. Before he took it over permanently the job was always done on a one at a time basis by volunteers. There was no need for any one person to always be the hunter. Right, he could let somebody else do it. They could always go back to the old ways if nobody wanted to take over the job when he left it. He and Tanya could go anywhere they wanted. He wondered where Lucy might want to go. They could travel if she wanted, he hadn't seen much of the world outside the United States. Yes, that sounded good, travel.

Soon, Lucy, soon. I'm coming to rescue you. Wait for me, Tanya, I'm coming.

*

The Lincoln sped through the night of Mississippi and Alabama and into Florida. Near Pensacola Art and Lucy idly watched the lights out over the Gulf of Mexico and wondered about them. Mina was scared and couldn't be talked into looking. Drake was too intent on his driving to spare more than an occasional glance. The lights were jet fighter aircraft flown by Marine and Navy pilots learning night landing techniques on aircraft carriers in the pre-dawn dark. The people in the Lincoln didn't know that, but Lucy and Art

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were glad of the distraction of the light show that seemed to be put on for only them.

East of Pensacola I-10 bent to the north, into the interior of the Florida panhandle. They stayed on it. The sun came up while they were driving through the cotton fields of Okaloosa County. Drake snapped the visor down and jammed his sunglasses onto his face; the sun had far greater impact than he expected. He wondered why the sun seemed so much brighter here than it had in New Orleans, they were no farther south here than there. Drake yawned and stretched. The other three had gone to sleep an hour earlier. He wondered how much longer he could drive before handing the steering wheel over to somebody else. He wondered which one of them he could trust with the driving.

*

Rocks stopped for gas, breakfast, and a wash up at a rest stop somewhere between Biloxi and Mobile. Before leaving the lunch counter he asked the bored overnight waitress about the rogues. Yes, she remembered the two men who looked dangerous and the two women who looked like they'd been crying. They'd taken a corner booth and been quiet. They ignored her except to give their orders. They were cheap tippers and left less than an hour ago. No, she didn't see the Lincoln, they could have been driving a pickup or a Rolls Royce for all she knew, nor did she know the direction they took. Rocks left a generous tip and wondered what was going on, why hadn't they acted up and left the waitress trembling? This wasn't like them. The pump attendant remembered the Lincoln with the four people who looked like they hadn't had enough sleep. He recommended a place to them to grab a few hours shuteye, but they simply thanked him and said they had too far to travel before they could stop. Rocks wondered at their politeness.

When Rocks passed Pensacola the Marine and Navy aircraft had all landed for the night and the carrier was steaming off somewhere else with its deck landing lights extinguished. Rocks had no light show to entertain him. The sun rose before he reached Okaloosa County.

*

Drake had to quit driving when they reached the intersection with I-75. He found a place for them to clean up and have lunch. They talked in hushed voices over their food.

"Somebody else has got to take over the driving," Drake said.

"I'm beat."

Mina didn't respond. She hadn't given voice to her mantra again when she woke, but *he strangled her* kept circling through her mind. No chance she was going to do the driving.

Lucy looked like she was thinking about it.

Art held out his hand for the keys.

"Can I trust you?" Drake asked.

"Trust me? Why not?"

"Because you want him too badly. You want to turn around and go get him, that's why."

Art shrugged and smiled tightly. He kept his hand out. "What if I do?"

"You might screw everything up and get us all killed, that's what if."

"You think the man's on the road, following us. You think I didn't notice how you were leaving signs everywhere so he could follow? If you're right, then he's out there alone and we can get him alone. Shit, man, you got his gun. We just corner his fucking ass and blow him away."

Drake looked at Art levelly. "What's he driving?"

Art shrugged elaborately. "I don't think it matters. We'll find him, no sweat."

"What if he's got himself a new gun? He probably knows what we're driving, the son of a bitch'll spot us first."

"You worry too much."

Lucy nodded to herself, her mind was made up. "I don't know what you've got in mind," she said to Drake. "How sure are you it'll lead him into a trap and we'll get him good."

Drake smiled at her. "Positive."

"Give me the keys and tell me where you want to go. I'll get us there while you get some sleep."

Art glared at them while Drake gave the keys to Lucy, but he didn't object. He thought, *All right we'll try it your way, sucker. If that doesn't work then we do it my way.*

Drake snuggled into the back seat and was asleep before Lucy pulled onto I-75 and headed south. She turned onto the Florida Turnpike near Oxford and followed it down and across the peninsula, through Orlando. She got off it near Fort Pierce on the Atlantic coast and switched to I-95. After a few miles of slow going she realized I-95 was a mistake; in South Florida I-95 had exits at every city, town,

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borough, or other municipal assemblage and was used as a local access road.

It was dinner time when they got into Fort Lauderdale. They made like tourists, driving down Seabreeze Boulevard. They *ooed* and *ahhed* at the ocean on their left with its broad, sand beach, and giggled at the touristy shops on their right.

"Look at all the boats," Mina went when they reached the marina.

Lucy *ooed* and *ahhed* some more.

Art's eyes went to the tall hotel on the bit of land jutting into the marina and his jaw dropped. "Hey, am I seeing right?" he asked Drake. "Tell me what that sign says."

Drake looked at the sign brightly shouting at the world from the top of the hotel. "Bahia," he said and faltered, he dragged the second word out slowly, "Mar." He and Art gaped at each other.

"It's real?" Drake finally said.

"Sure as shit looks like it," Art said back. "Wouldn't it be a gas if he was real?"

"Think we can find his houseboat?"

"Let's try."

"What are you two talking about," Lucy demanded crossly. She was tired from all the driving.

"Travis McGee, that's what," Drake said. "Or are you so ignorant you've never heard of him?"

Lucy and Mina exchanged confused glances. Who was Travis McGee? They'd never heard of John D. MacDonald, either.

A half mile farther the road turned to the right and Drake ordered, "Turn around, Lucy. We're past the hotels. Let's go back and get one near Bahia Mar." He and Art grinned at each other.

Lucy clucked at them, but turned around anyway. She could tell Drake was probably right about being past the hotels. Before they got back to Bahia Mar they found a national chain hotel that had a suite available for the indefinite number of days they expected to be there.

They had an undistinguished dinner in the hotel restaurant, which was furnished with glazed-over tables made of roughly weathered boards that supposedly had been the decking of an old sailing ship that sank off South Florida. The menu was hokier than the furnishings and priced far beyond its quality. They enjoyed their meal, though -- they found all the tackiness a kick.

Later they went looking for someone to satisfy their other hunger. They found him near the International Swimming Hall of Fame. An early morning fisherman next found him floating in the marina. He called the cops and, while waiting for them to show up, also called the TV news and the newspaper. The police were perturbed as much by the news people being on the scene before they arrived as they were about the murder. Since they couldn't convince the news media to not run the story at all, they settled for keeping it low key. Can't upset the tourist trade, you know.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Rocks looked at the electronic map of Florida and realized what he planned wasn't going to work. He figured they'd hit the east coast at Jacksonville and head south from there. What he hadn't figured on was how big Florida was. That wasn't unusual; most people don't realize the size of the place. It's not merely that Florida is the largest state east of the Mississippi and bigger than a couple of the states on the other side, it's also the way it's laid out in an upside-down "L". That makes for eight hundred and thirty-six miles by the shortest highway route from Pensacola to Key West. All right, he wasn't going to Key West -- he hoped. But he might be going to Miami, and that was 675 miles from the Alabama line. He'd already covered over five hundred miles from New Orleans and gone without sleep for more than twenty-four hours -- not counting the nap in the guest house, the nap with Lucy in his arms.

He pulled off the highway at Lake City and into a motel. He had a light dinner in the motel's restaurant before going to his room. Inside the plain room he undressed, took a quick shower, and collapsed on the bed. Though he hated to think this way, he realized he had to give them time to do something that would catch somebody's attention before he'd know where they were. He didn't bother setting any kind of alarm, simply told himself to get all the sleep his body might need, enough that he could go another day or two without any more sleep. By the time he woke up maybe the rogues would have done something that could pinpoint their location for him.

He dreamed. In his dream long hair kept cutting itself short, growing back at lightning speed, cutting itself off again. Freckles so dense they almost formed a tan flickered on and off. Tanya was fair-skinned and short haired; Lucy was Lady Godiva mottled. The two images mixed and blended, separated from each other, superimposed one on the other, confused him about who was who. The only constants were the triangular face, the smile, the yearning he felt. When he woke well before dawn he was totally disoriented, it took a

long time for him to understand the mutable red hair and freckles. It took time for him to realize it wasn't real, that this had been the first dream he'd had in more than twenty years. Perspiration beaded his entire body and his heart was thudding. Shaking outside, aching inside, he stumbled into the bathroom and took a long, long shower. The shower was more than long enough to cleanse his body, nowhere near long enough to cleanse his soul.

If the place hadn't had a nighthawk lunch counter he would have had to go hungry. When he gave his order in the restaurant Rocks asked the counterman about the rogues. When served he asked if the cook remembered seeing them. When he paid his check he asked the woman at the cash register. None of them remembered the people he was looking for or the Lincoln. He realized he should have asked before sleeping, the restaurant staff probably changed shifts while he was asleep. He shrugged it off and continued east to Jacksonville and down I-95 from there, keeping to the legal speed limit now; he didn't want to pass them and have to backtrack too far if he did. He tuned into the Jacksonville all-news radio station. It served as background noise during the end-of-night drive for as long as he was in its broadcast range; he didn't listen to it, but if it gave a story that might be about the four people he was following his ears would automatically pick up on it. It was the same with the Orlando all-news station. Then the one in Miami. He stopped a couple of times along the way for coffee. At least that's what he wanted the people working in the nighthawk places to think he stopped for. He asked both times about his quarry. Nobody remembered them. Rocks hoped that was because the rogues hadn't stopped at those places, or because they took a different route. He didn't allow himself to think it was because they'd gone north, or had already stopped and he'd passed them.

It was too early in the day, there wouldn't be a newspaper with anything he could use for several more hours, if there would be anything printed today. He tried not to think maybe he was wrong expecting them to head down Florida's peninsula.

It was the morning rush hour when he reached Pompano Beach; at this hour the local traffic that clogged I-95 from West Palm on down was at its peak; the traffic moved in fits and starts. At times it flowed as fast and smooth as one would expect on a major highway; at times it was city-street slow. Now he had to wonder if he was right about the rogues. Had they come this far? Did they stop and he passed them? Had they gone in a different direction? He got off the

highway and found a place that was open for breakfast. There were only a couple of other people in the place besides one waitress and the cook, it was past the tail end of the breakfast hour. Rocks leisurely ate a ham and egg sandwich and thought about his next step.

His next step was one he should have taken a while back. He needed a gun and ammunition to replace the one Drake took from him.

After paying he found a pay phone and did the beeper-thing. The message he left on the tape said he would be at a lunch place on Collins Avenue in Miami Beach at 11:00 AM to receive the weapon from whoever was available to get it to him. Time was less important here than it had been in New Orleans, now he had to find them again.

From there he continued on to Miami and, to kill the time, made like a tourist. He didn't feel like getting out of his car to go into the OMNI International, or any of the museums or parks, so he just drove around. Driving around was better for his purposes anyway. He got to see what the city looked like, let his subconscious mind work on where and how to meet the rogues and deal with them if they were here. He drove past the Orange Bowl, then back-tracked to MacArthur Causeway and across it to Miami Beach. On Collins Avenue he bought a newspaper and found the lunch place in which he was scheduled to meet someone. He scanned the newspaper while he worried at a cup of coffee. It was too early an edition to tell him anything he needed to know. What the paper did tell him was more than he wanted to know about drug dealing and crime and international terrorism. He ignored the story about the most recent Air China passenger jet that dropped out of the sky over the South China Sea.

Promptly at 11:00 AM, a nervous looking man slid into the other side of the booth.

"You sure know how to make life tough on a body, don't you?" the man said without introductions. Rocks looked at him. Walter-Mitty-soft shape and face. Eyes that jerked furtively from side to side. Shoulders hunched as though expecting a wooden stake. Trembling hands. Necktie snugged high on the throat, sleeves rolled all the way down, broad-brimmed straw hat flopped onto the table, faint sheen of sunblock, dark glasses pushed up on the forehead.

This is someone I'm going to have to remember, Rocks thought, then a half-smile twitched the corners of his mouth as he remembered that once he and Lucy were together maybe he'd never have to go after another rogue ever again. Let someone else worry about this one; this one who looked like he was on the verge of slipping over the edge,

going rogue himself. Rocks made a mental note to recommend to the council that they bring him in for a stint at the ranch. "Do you have it?" was all he said out loud -- even then, in a voice low and soft enough it couldn't be heard in the adjoining booth.

"Right here." The nervous man used only the tips of his fingers to poke-push a plain-brown-paper wrapped package from under his hat and across the tabletop. "Hollow points," he said, and shivered, a high-pitched giggle squeaked its way out of him.

Rocks put his hand on top of the package, wrapped his fingers around its sides, lifted it a quarter inch. It felt the right weight to be what he asked for. "Where can I zero it?" he asked, and got a blank look in return. "Test fire it."

The man still looked blank. "Why do you need to do that?"

Rocks was as patient about prying understanding from this man as he was sitting in his room in St Louis waiting for his phone to ring. "The sights are different on all of them. I need to find out how this one's sights are set so when I pull the trigger the bullet will go where I want it to."

The man blinked, remembering something long forgotten. "Oh. Yeah, right. Zero. I forgot that term." Another high pitched giggle. "I haven't fired any guns since I got out of the Army. That was a long time ago." He giggled again. "I forgot. I *wanted* to forget."

"So where can I zero it?" Rocks waited patiently for an answer.

"In, in the Everglades, I guess."

"Where are they?"

He pointed and said, "Inland. About twenty miles." The direction he pointed was toward the Atlantic Ocean.

Rocks didn't bother to correct him, too many people can't correlate outside directions when they are indoors. "Take me there."

The man didn't move, but still seemed to shrink. A finger went to his collar and ran nervously around it. "Why?" His voice cracked on the word.

"Because I don't know my way around here and you do." Still patient.

"Oh." He swallowed. "All right." He was unsteady getting to his feet, stumbled stepping out of the booth. He flinched when Rocks put a steadying hand on his elbow.

"Be cool," Rocks told him, "my only business with you is for you to give me this and act as guide for an hour or two. Then you can

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go back to your own business and we'll never see each other again."

"Yeah, right. Come on." Outside the lunch counter the man hesitated and looked both ways. "We going in one car?"

Rocks shook his head. "I'll follow you. You show me where, then you can leave."

"Fine, fine. Where are you parked?"

Rocks told him.

"I'm right here." The man pointed to a dark blue Mitsubishi parked across the street.

"Get in and get ready to lead when I reach you." Rocks headed toward his Porsche without waiting to see if the worried man did what he told him to. *Leave him alone*, he thought, *let him have room and he'll calm down*. He took his time getting into his Porsche and starting it up. The Mitsubishi pulled out in front of him when he reached it. It took more most of an hour to get through Miami and into the Everglades to a spot that looked like no one was too near by.

The landscape was dotted with trees, individual and in clumps, covered with wide swatches of dense brush, open here and there. The ground was wet and mushy, often covered with water; the trees grew where it was firmer.

Rocks ignored the man who nervously followed him across the spongy ground. He picked out a tree and used a piece of cord to tie a broad leaf around its trunk at chest height. Then he paced off ten yards from it and squatted down to open the package and examine its contents. The man who had delivered it hovered over his shoulder. Rocks locked the slide back and looked through the barrel of the Ruger to make sure it was clear. He slipped an empty magazine in the pistol and worked the action and pulled the trigger a few times; it felt smooth. There was a second magazine in the package along with a box of hollow point Parabellum rounds. He loaded five rounds into each of the two magazines, loaded one of them into the pistol and jacked a round into the chamber. Then he stood in a one handed stance and aimed at the leaf. He slowly pulled the trigger. The pistol bucked in his hand; the crack of the bullet was somewhat muffled by the surrounding foliage and wet earth. He looked to see where the bullet hit, then fired the next four rounds, taking time to carefully aim at his initial aiming point. Then he went to the tree to see how tightly the hits were grouped. All five were together in a space that could have been covered by half of a playing card, they were about three inches from where he aimed.

Rocks nodded, satisfied, and returned to his firing line, he loaded the second magazine into the pistol as he did. This time he didn't take the time to aim carefully. Instead, he pointed with both eyes open and pulled the trigger as fast as he could pull the muzzle back onto target. His hits weren't as close together as the first were, but they were all on the leaf.

He wiped the pistol and magazines with a lightly oiled cloth that was also in the package and carefully loaded each magazine with all thirteen rounds it could hold.

"Tell me," the man said hesitantly, "why, why do you need this?"

"In case I need to kill someone." Flat, disinterested voice.

"But, but," he nibbled on his lip, "I was in the Army in the Philippines, back in ought eight. We couldn't knock anybody down with a .38, it was too small. A 9mm is even smaller. That's why the Army adopted the .45, it could knock a man down."

Rocks looked at him for the first time since they reached this place. "You're right," he said slowly. "The .45 has one-hit knock-down power. Lots of it. If I was going up against normal men, that's what I'd want to use. But I'm not going up against normal men. See this?" He held up a round for the man to inspect. "Hollow point. It mushrooms in the body, makes a hell of a mess inside and causes massive internal bleeding. If it goes all the way through, it makes a huge hole on its way out. We heal fast. A .45 can knock one of us down with a hit that will kill an ordinary man. But one of us can get right back up and keep going. I don't want someone to keep going after I shoot him. The damage one of these makes, one of us will bleed to death in a hurry." He looked into the distance for a moment, back toward the heavily populated coastal strip. "Another thing. We move fast. These bullets are faster than the .45, and there's more of them. I have a better chance of hitting someone in the first place with a 9mm than with a .45." He looked into the distance for a long moment, then said, almost to himself, "Before they made hollow point bullets, we did use the .45 when we went after rogues. He turned to the man, wondered how close he was to turning rogue, and asked, "Any more questions?"

The man quickly looked away from Rocks' eyes, swallowed, started to shake his head no, hesitated, then asked, "You ever kill anyone, any of us I mean?"

"A couple times." Rocks watched him carefully, ready for

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whatever he might do. The man didn't do anything, so he said, "Lead me back to Miami."

The man's head bobbed like a dashboard doll and he scurried to his car. He was on the move before Rocks even had the Porsche in gear.

A later edition of the paper was on the street when Rocks got back to Miami. He bought a copy and leafed through it while eating a sandwich. There, buried on page five, he found it. It was a short item, only three inches long. The short piece told of a man found floating in the marina in Fort Lauderdale, his throat was slit. According to a preliminary examination he had probably been killed a little after midnight. The article didn't say anything about how much blood was in his body, but Rocks didn't care about that. He'd found the rogues. He left a tip next to his unfinished sandwich and headed back north.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"Come on, Tanya," Rocks said, half pleading. "Get packed, whatever you want to take with you. It's time you went to the Ranch. You've got a lot to learn and that's the place to do it."

Tanya raised her arms and stretched. The way her body arched on the bed when she stretched filled him with lust, almost made him put aside his feeling of urgency, almost made him forget that other thing she did. Then she caressed her freckled breasts and the dried blood flaked off it. He grimaced, he wished she wouldn't smear blood on her breasts and belly when she killed; that was the thing she did that he didn't like, it was as though she enjoyed the killing. He didn't know anybody else who enjoyed killing. He shuddered.

"Go take a shower, Tanya," he said. "I'll start your packing while you clean up."

"I don't wanna take a shower," she said and grinned at him wickedly. "I wanna fuck. Right now." She reached her arms up at him and around his shoulders, she pulled him down on top of her and ravenously kissed him.

The feel of her lips on his, her tongue in his mouth, the mass of her body under his, overcame his feeling of urgency to leave, made him momentarily forget the dried blood on her body. He responded with a feeling of a different kind of urgency, kissing her back as hard as she was kissing him. Until his roving hand reached the thin crust on her breast. He recoiled and broke free of her grip, sat up, leaned away from her.

"No, Tanya." He shook his head sorrowfully, nibbled on his lower lip. "You have to wash that stuff off first, I can't stand the feel of it."

She looked at him curiously, a tempting, teasing smile curved her mouth. "You don't like it? But honey, you're the one who taught me." She laughed softly. Her wind chimes were duller than before her change, as though cracks had developed in the pristine metal. "I wouldn't be doing any of this if you hadn't taught me."

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Tears clouded his vision, but didn't trickle down his cheeks. "I didn't teach you to wash yourself with it. I didn't teach you to enjoy it." His voice was as thick as his heart was sick.

"We're vampires, baby. That's what vampires do, don't you know that? Vampires kill people and drink their blood." She giggled. "I loff you, honny. Ant I loff beink a vampire," she said in a fake Transylvanian accent; her eyes were wide and staring.

"Oh god, what did I do?" he moaned. "Maybe, maybe I should have taken you to the Ranch right away, the next day. Maybe I shouldn't have tried to teach you anything myself." He remembered how when Aunt Molly changed him she had somebody come immediately to take him away, he started his education before he made his first kill. He taught Tanya to kill and drink fresh blood, still hot from the victim, before she knew anything about the disease. Maybe that was the way it was supposed to be done and he did it all wrong. Nobody had ever told him how to go about changing someone -- and he hadn't thought to ask before he changed Tanya. He sobbed and his shoulders shook from it. He wondered how Aunt Molly arranged the transportation for him so quickly. Private cars weren't as common back then as they were now.

"Please, Tanya. Wash the blood off yourself. Then we can make love." He wasn't going to demean what they did by calling it "fucking." To him, it was making love.

Tanya cocked her head and smiled Mona Lisa watching him. Then she winked. "Whatever your heart desires, Master." She got up and languidly walked to the bathroom. Her hips swayed gently side to side and he groaned at the sight he always found so lovely.

He rubbed the wet from his eyes and started rummaging through the dresser and closet, trying to decide what she would need. They only had one small suitcase and a backpack between them and he didn't think they could take everything they had. They didn't have a car, they were traveling by bus. He idly wondered how long the stuff they left behind would remain before someone else came in and found it. They'd left the not-quite-a-commune a month earlier because Tanya started acting oddly after her change -- at least the others thought she was acting oddly. Oddly enough to frighten them. Rocks saw that and took her away before somebody asked them to move. Tanya was feeling too strong, had too much a feeling of being right whether she was or not. He didn't want to see what she might do if someone told her to do something she didn't want to do. They had taken up

residence in an apartment in an abandoned apartment house. It didn't have electricity, but he figured out how to turn the water and gas service back on, and that was enough. Living was cheap and they had each other. That was all they needed -- except for her training at the Ranch.

Tanya didn't have much in the way of clothes: A few shifts, a pair of Bermuda-length shorts, a pair of jeans, a couple blouses, no bras, two or three pairs of panties -- "For formal occasions," she said of them -- a couple pairs of socks, a pair of pumps she never wore, a shawl, an army field jacket. They almost filled the suitcase. Add her things from the bathroom and the suitcase would be full. He started stuffing his own things into the backpack. If he stuffed it tightly enough, maybe they wouldn't have to leave any clothes behind. If he had to, he could wear two shirts. Tanya could wear one of his shirts over her shift.

He heard the water go off in the bathroom, followed by soft footsteps behind him. He turned. Tanya stood in the doorway, glistening with water from her shower. One arm reached up to the lintel, she leaned against the jam, her hips were cocked. Rocks groaned silently, he felt all the strength go out of him. Anybody would agree, he knew, Tanya was the most beautiful, most desirable woman in the entire world. She was his and he wanted her, right now.

He whispered her name and she came to him. He didn't care that they made the bedding wet or that he had to dry himself off afterward.

*

The Greyhound, with its full compliment of semi-successful migrant farm workers off to in-season fields, divorced mothers with their squalling kids headed to grandmother's house, soldiers and sailors going home on leave, and retirees doing their grand tours on the cheap, headed east in fine form. It barely breathed hard going over the Coast Range and sailed easily through the San Joaquin Valley. The Sierras made it huff and puff. The bus tried to preen in Reno, but nobody bothered to give it access to the necessary freshening-up facilities, so instead it came off as a dowdy dowager on a fling. Nevada's Basin and Plain gave the bus conniptions. Around the north side of the Shoshone Mountains, over the Toiyabes, around the Toquimas and the Monitors. The flats in between were so hot the bus threatened to go on strike for better coolant. That bus was in a foul mood by the time it stopped at Ely. So were most of its passengers.

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"We only have a few minutes, Tanya," Rocks said. "Don't go away."

"I'm just going to the ladies'," she said with a sweet smile. "I simply have to sit for a minute on something that isn't jiggling under me or pressing in on me from the sides."

Rocks nodded and watched to make sure she did go into the ladies room. Then he went to the lunch counter to get a couple sodas and sandwiches for the rest of their bus ride. He didn't go into the mens' room, the jiggling under him was just one of those things he figured he had to put up with on a long bus trip. Besides, if he had to go, at least he didn't have to sit on that cold metal seat in the tiny room in the back of the bus.

Tanya hadn't reappeared when the bus driver started reboarding the passengers. She still hadn't come out of the ladies' when she and he were the only two who hadn't reboarded.

The driver looked at his watch, looked at Rocks, and said, "I can't hold the bus up, we gotta go."

"She'll be here in a minute," Rocks said. "You can wait for just a minute, can't you?"

The driver looked at his watch again, then stepped to the dispatch window and spoke to the woman inside. The woman said something back, then left her window and went to the ladies'. She opened the door and announced the departure.

Tanya, smiling widely, followed her out. She ran to Rocks and planted a quick, wet kiss on his mouth. She grabbed his hand and pulled him onto the bus. Rocks looked back at the driver and managed a quick thanks. The driver shook his head and muttered something uncomplimentary about "women" and "damn hippies," took his seat, shifted into first, pulled away.

Tanya giggled and tossed her head as she danced down the aisle to their seats. She snuggled against Rocks in the too-small seats and pulled his arm around her, held his hand on her ribs, tight under her breast. The divorced mother with two raucous, undisciplined kids across the aisle frowned down her nose at this unseemly public display of affection.

Tanya buried her face in Rocks' neck and giggled. "Look," she whispered, and pulled the scoop neck of her blouse away so he could look at her breasts.

The disapproving mother sniffed, frowned farther down her nose, and said, "Well, I never!"

Tanya pulled her face away from Rocks' neck to look at the woman and smile with her brows lowered and lots of teeth showing. She continued to hold her blouse open for Rocks' view. "Right, you never, you fat biddy. That's probably why you're riding with two kids, and I'm riding with my man."

The woman looked away, flustered. She wanted to say something to this little hussy, but that smile unnerved her. She looked sternly at the back of the seat in front of her and smacked one of her kids when he said something.

Rocks looked at Tanya's offering, looked away, went limp, moaned. "Why, Tanya, why?" he asked quietly so he wouldn't be overheard. "You didn't need to do that there. We don't need any until tonight and we'll be at the Ranch by then." Her breasts were red with freshly clotting blood.

"I did it because it was fun, I did it because I was bored," Tanya said loudly enough he tried to shush her.

"Don't you shush me, Rocks," she snapped. "I'm my own person. I'll do whatever I want, whenever I want to. And you've got a lot of nerve, telling me not to do that. You taught me, remember?" She jerked away from him and sat leaning against the window, hugging herself.

Rocks left her alone for a moment before moving close and talking softly into her ear. He was loving and forgiving and placating and soon enough she forgave him and started billing and cooing.

The divorced mother watched them out of the corner of her eye. She sniffed, but not too loudly, and resolved to demand that she be allowed to change her seats at the next stop because she didn't have to have her children exposed to the dirty things being done by those dirty hippies. She stopped sniffing and started smiling when she thought about how badly she could upset the Greyhound people if she made her fuss the right way. She grinned wickedly when it occurred to her that if she made a big enough stink, they might even put those two dirty hippies off the bus.

Rocks never asked Tanya what she did in Ely, it was easy enough to imagine. She had caught someone alone in the ladies' and killed her. She must have left the woman's body sitting on a toilet seat, her feet visible under the stall door. He wondered how long it would be before she was found. He wondered if the police would manage to find and question any of the bus's passengers. He knew some of them heard what Tanya said about doing "it." The police could easily

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enough figure out she, they, had something to do with that murder. Damn, Tanya'd even said his name; some people might even remember it. Damn damn. Sure, they didn't have to worry about the police, not really. Still, the sooner they got to the Ranch, the better it would be for everybody. The way Tanya was acting was very dangerous for all of them. She was acting the way he heard rogues did, though he'd never met a rogue and had only heard about a couple of them over the last several years.

The biddy didn't get a chance to make a fuss and move her seats, or get the dirty hippies thrown off the bus. Except for a couple of roadside flag-me-downs, the bus didn't stop again until Wendover, just across the Utah line. Rocks and Tanya got off there.

Tanya got in the last word. "You never, you fat old biddy. And you'll probably never get a man again, either."

The woman started at being spoken to that way. She huffed to herself, but all she could do was turn to other passengers and demand, "The nerve of that tramp! Did you ever?"

*

Abe met them. He and Rocks hugged tightly and slapped each other warmly on the back. Abe lifted an eyebrow when introduced to Tanya. Rocks couldn't read his expression, but it wasn't the warm welcome he had expected his old friend and teacher to give to the woman he loved. They climbed into the front seat of a pickup truck that looked well past its usable years, but which ran smoothly and had good enough shock absorbers it didn't bounce as hard as it looked like it would on the rutted dirt roads Abe followed into the wilderness. Rocks sat in the middle to let Tanya have the best view, he'd been here before and knew what it looked like.

"If either of you feel the hunger before we reach the ranch," Abe said, "I brought along a couple pints of blood in that cooler." He pointed at a small, battered, aluminum cooler on the floorboards. That was his only conversation the entire trip.

Tanya looked dismayed out the windows at the barren salt flats they drove over. Rocks tried to explain to her about Lake Bonneville, but she didn't want to listen and he fell silent. They drove across that barren landscape on which nothing seemed to live for what seemed like forever to Tanya. Even the mountains she saw distantly bordering the salt desert looked to her to be devoid of any possibility of life.

Rocks had killed her once when he turned her into a vampire, Tanya knew that. Yet she was still alive. Did he mean to kill her

permanently now in this lifeless place? She needed a half pint of human blood every day to live. They drove for hours without seeing another person. Who was there for her to prey on in this awful place?

*

"Yeah, I'm here kind of permanent now," Abe told Rocks the first day they were at the Ranch. "I found I like teaching the new ones how to do it. And I'm damn good at it." He smiled and relaxed and laughed when he was with Rocks or the other people at the Ranch. He never did when he was with Tanya. He didn't seem to enjoy teaching Tanya. He never said anything about it, though. The others involved with her training seemed satisfied with her progress despite the odd fact that the more time she spent with them the less she talked.

A couple of days before the trip where the trainers would observe her make a kill and dispose of the body -- she didn't need to be taught how to kill -- Abe said to Rocks, "Maybe it'll be okay, maybe you did a good job of teaching her things on your own." But he didn't sound like he believed it.

Tanya's trip was into Las Vegas. When Rocks went through the training, Las Vegas didn't exist as it does today, it was simply a tiny refueling stop-over place for airplanes making cross-continent flights. The trainers moved from city to city for this phase of the training. It wouldn't do to have too many people disappear in one place. That was one of the beauties of the Ranch. Not only was it so far in the middle of nowhere it was almost impossible for anybody who didn't know where it was to find it, all the places they could go for their kills were far enough away nobody would think of looking there for killers if anybody did notice anything wrong.

Rocks wished Tanya well on this trip, told her she had nothing to worry about. He joked that she could probably teach the trainers a thing or two. She didn't say anything in reply, just looked at him with this blank-eyed expression that shook him deeply.

Abe and two other trainers took Tanya and one other trainee into the city. Tanya didn't come back with them.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

You know Fort Lauderdale. Even if you've never been there, you know it. *Where the Boys Are*. Miles and miles of broad, sun-baked beaches. Tens of thousands of college kids on spring break. (Mothers, close your eyes for this one:) Wet t-shirt contests. Summer-in-the-winter beer-busts. Travis McGee lives there on his houseboat.

Only it wasn't that time of year, the t-shirts were dry, Travis McGee is dead, and you can't find slip F-18 without help anyway. This was the time of year that parts of Seabreeze Boulevard look like a ghost town. The broad, sun-baked beaches are too hot for any but the most diehardy. The locals are in control. Go ahead, ask them, these transplanted Midwesterners, New Yorkers, Montrealers; the locals have the place to themselves, these people who have left the rigors of winter behind and ignore the rigors of the heat and the hurricane season. They have it to themselves. Along with several thousand vacationers who couldn't make it during the season. And a lot of lonely traveling salesmen, disappointed because they didn't know until it was too late that the bikini sun-bunnies and wet t-shirts aren't there this time of year.

Most people find off-season Florida too hot for the sun and surf. Most people try to get into someplace air conditioned and stay there. Rocks wasn't most people, and the four he was after weren't either. Air conditioning could wait. He took US 1 along the Intercoastal Waterway, up past where it stopped following the shoreline, through Hallandale, Hollywood, and Dania, all those little towns that are so close together you never know you're leaving one municipality and entering another if there aren't signs to tell you. He went up as far as East Las Olas Boulevard in Lauderdale before hanging a right and heading back to the ocean. With only the broad beach between him and the breakers, he turned right onto Seabreeze and backtracked along it to make a quick turn around the marina. Only this part of Fort Lauderdale is a you-can't-get-there-from-here kind of place. You can't do a quick turn-around of the marina, not by car.

Fort Lauderdale has 250 miles of canals and other waterways, and most of the canals are concentrated in the marina area. On the inland side of the marina the canals are laid out like streets and it's easier to get around by boat than on land. The residents don't mind that inconvenience; if you can't afford at least a modest yacht you can't afford to live there. They all own yachts. At least one per household.

So Rocks backed and filled and found his way back to Seabreeze. He followed it south to where it turned right and became the 17th Street Causeway, got turned back around, and followed it north, past the marina and the Jungle Queen cruise boat, from which those normal mortals who can't afford at least a modest yacht get to ogle the homes of those who can -- at least one per household. He went beyond Bahia Mar and kept going up beyond Sunrise Boulevard where Seabreeze renamed itself Atlantic Boulevard. All the way he watched the people on the sidewalks and the beach and those he could spot on the sidestreets. He saw lots of broad brimmed hats and even more sunglasses, but no shirts buttoned to the collar, no long sleeves. And no faces he recognized.

He stopped in Lauderdale-By-the-Sea to have a seafood dinner at an off-season place that faced the ocean. He had a vague feeling of *deja vu* when he stepped inside, but only vague and quickly gone. This restaurant was one of the few still left over from the 'twenties, and its decor hadn't changed in all that time, merely been well maintained. Rocks hadn't gone to many restaurants back when he was a kid, so he didn't recognize the decor that well. The air conditioning was on, it had to be to get diners to come in, but it wasn't enough to chill, only enough to help evaporate the sweat you wore when you came in and keep it off as long as you sat still and didn't lean over your hot food or coffee.

Rocks examined the menu handed to him by a teenaged waitress who was far more interested in spending her time with the small group of teenagers in a back booth who were the only other customers, and selected what seemed like a proper Florida dinner. Had he bothered to notice that sort of detail, he might have thought the only thing on that menu he wouldn't have found along the New Jersey Turnpike was the chicken fried steak. The combination seafood platter he eventually ate also tasted like the one he once ate at a place along the New Jersey Turnpike, but Rocks never noticed that kind of detail so he wasn't disappointed in the meal. Neither was he disappointed at not seeing the rogues during his drive around Fort Lauderdale. It was

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hot, and the sun was very bright, the ocean reflecting the sun made it seem brighter than it was when he followed them through Arizona and New Mexico. They didn't surprise him by being indoors during those bright sun hours. He didn't allow himself to think maybe they had moved on already and he was chasing a shadow. Instead he allowed himself to anticipate seeing Lucy again, getting her to the ranch so she could learn. Living with her forever afterward.

He lingered over his coffee until the sun was low in the west and the buildings on the land side of Atlantic Boulevard cast shadows that played footsie with the waves tickling the shore. Then he paid up and started driving again, looking for the Lincoln. He hoped they were still in it. He was sure they were, they had to be. Someplace, sometime tonight, he was going to catch up with them again. He was certain of that. And then...

Lucy, Lucy. Oh, my Tanya, I'm so sorry. Tanya. I'll make it up to you, Lucy.

*

The sun went down, the stars came out, the temperature went down, people came out. Most of those people went back in as soon as they could, back into someplace else that had air conditioning; it wasn't as hot as it was earlier, but it was still hot. The best restaurants, the ones that served something other than what could be found along the New Jersey Turnpike, quickly filled, rapidly acquired 45 minute waiting lists for the diners who came out a little too late and neglected to make reservations. The watering holes filled more slowly, didn't peak until the dining salons emptied enough that they could give late diners a choice of tables with no wait. Cars, an inordinate percentage with tightly closed windows and chugging air conditioners, prowled up and down Seabreeze/Atlantic Boulevard, in and out Las Olas and Sunrise, up and down Federal Highway. The beautiful people -- and some not so beautiful -- were out looking for something exciting to do. Youthful partiers and would-be partiers hung out open windows, shouted at each other, played variants on "chicken" as they tooted around. Some of them had a lot of fun, some of them scared the old folks or annoyed the cops, none of them got hurt this night. One of them getting hurt would have really annoyed the cops who had to deal with it.

Somewhere in this joyous melee a hint of ironic smile showed on Rocks' lips. Spotting the Lincoln wasn't going to be as easy as he'd thought. People who can afford to own even modest yachts tend to

drive Rolls Royces, Mercedes Benz, Maseratis. They keep Lincolns the way other people keep Hyundais -- as their knock-about putt-putts.

*

"Goddam those people, what's wrong with them?" Art growled, staring at the television in the living room of their hotel suite. Drake and Mina were in one of the bedrooms watching the evening news on a different channel, Lucy was in the other bedroom watching a third channel's local news. "Fucking talking heads," Art shouted, "all they ever tell you is what's going to make their pompadours look good. That fucker's hair would wilt and he'd puke all over his fucking shirt if he had to tell us what they found." He jabbed a finger at the well coiffured and dressed newsman reading the news reports. Two of the three channels gave ten seconds to that morning's discovery of the body in the Marina, none gave any details. The third channel hadn't mentioned it at all.

"Shut up, Art," Drake said from the other room. "We don't need everybody hearing you."

Lucy snapped off the TV in the other bedroom and came to sit against Art. "The newspaper said enough," she said softly. "If he saw that report, he knows where we are."

"Right, if he read the paper. How do we know he reads the goddam papers?"

"If he didn't somebody else did and will tell him," Lucy said. She rubbed his chest above his folded arms. "How the hell else do you think he found us so fast in New Orleans?"

Art snorted and folded his arms over his chest. The answer didn't satisfy him, but he knew he had to accept it. He flexed his shoulders and chest to push Lucy's hand away, but she kept it on him. Lucy's hand wasn't there for him, it was there because *she* needed contact and comforting. Art decided to ignore her, even when she slid her other arm around his shoulders.

Drake and Mina joined them, plopped into chairs in the living room without bothering to turn off the TV they had been watching.

"He saw it in the paper like Lucy said," Drake said. "Or somebody else saw it and will tell him."

"The fucking paper didn't say anything," Art said.

"It said his throat was cut," Mina said.

Art shrugged and almost dislodged Lucy's hands. "Slit goddam throat, don't mean nothing."

"It'll mean something to him," Drake said.

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They sat quietly for a while, Art and Mina idly looked at the television screen, but didn't actually pay any attention to the pictures that flickered across it. Drake lost himself in thought. Lucy leaned her head on Art's shoulder and closed her eyes; she wished he'd put his arm around her, but didn't say so. The local and national news ended and the TV started showing the "local" programing; syndicated reruns of sitcoms and animal shows from twenty years ago.

"I'm hungry," Drake said. "Let's go to the restaurant." He got to his feet.

"I don't feel like going out right now," Lucy said. "Let's order from room service."

Drake looked at her, sudden concern on his face. "You feeling all right?"

"I can't get the kid out of my mind, what he did to her. Right now I don't feel like facing people."

Mina grimaced at the mention of the kid. "I don't feel like going out now either," she said. "Lucy's right. People are having a good time, they'll make me sick to look at them. Let's go out later."

Drake looked at Art, who looked at Lucy.

"Will you let go of me if we get room service?" Art asked.

Lucy nodded and sat up, she snuffled and rubbed the back of her hand across her nose.

Drake acquiesced. "Where's the menu?"

The menu was by the phone. It was sparse. "This is all they got in the restaurant, it don't got much business," Art muttered when he saw it. If nothing else, the thinness of the selections made ordering easy. "I got a C note says you can't get it up here in less than half an hour," Drake said into the phone when he placed the order. Room service accepted the bet and delivered in twenty-five minutes. Drake paid up. The food improved their tempers.

"Now what?" Mina asked.

"We get him and kill him," Lucy answered. Her voice was curiously flat and at the same time vicious. Maybe it was the very flatness that made it threatening.

Drake looked outside at the darkening sky. "If he's here by now, he's out there looking for the Lincoln. But he's probably not here yet. Let's give him a little more time, then get the car out of the garage and be conspicuous. Make it easy for him to find us. Then we can do him."

The others thought that was a fine idea. They paired off and

adjourned to the bedrooms for something slow and easy. An hour and a half later they were dressed for the evening and went out. Drake barked a laugh when they pulled onto Seabreeze Boulevard.

"If he's looking for a Lincoln, he's got a problem," Drake said. The others looked and saw all the Lincolns on the road and laughed with him.

They drove around and around until midnight without seeing anyone who could be Rocks.

"You know, we could be following a half mile behind him, or he could be following a half mile behind us and we'll never meet," Drake finally said.

"You're right," Art said. "We got to park this sucker someplace where he'll see it when he comes by." He was looking to see where they were. He remembered a few signs from their earlier go-rounds, signs that made him curious. He recognized a curve they went through and the drawbridge they came to after it. "Right up ahead here past the shopping center there's a big parking lot on the right. We can go in there. If he's looking for us he'll see the Lincoln easy. Then he's going to have to come in after us and we'll surprise him." He laughed loud and happy. "Oh, will we surprise him."

*

Before the witching hour the crowds started thinning out. After all, it wasn't the season. Most of the people on the streets had to get up in the morning and go into the office. Or go to school; there's a variety of educational institutions in Fort Lauderdale. But not all of them. There were some vacationers doing their tourist bits. And some traveling salesmen looking for some substitute for the bikinis and wet t-shirts they hadn't seen yet. If you look hard enough you'll find substitutes. Everyplace has go-go bars.

It must be something about the Mason-Dixon line. Go-go bars in the South aren't like they are in the old industrial Northeast. Sure, you'll find the standard places: bars with stages on which lithe, leggy dancing girls dressed in sequined bikinis, or halter tops and hot pants, looking like nothing so much as an updated Ann-Margaret in made-for-walking-boots, dance to rock and roll or disco. You know, the kind of place where when you go your wife, girlfriend, mother doesn't do much more than shake her head and cluck her tongue over it. Hell, your girlfriend will probably go with you -- though she may not enjoy herself as much as you will. You're there having a good time watching the dancing girls dance; maybe your girlfriend is comparing herself to

them and is afraid she suffers in that comparison.

But there're other places as well. Perfectly legal places there, south of the Mason-Dixon line, places that have licenses and pay taxes and everything. The lovely dancing girls in these places start out in sequined bikinis, or halters and hot pants just like the girls in the other places -- or maybe they prefer lingerie or what have you -- and spike heels and jewelry. Your wife, girlfriend, mother, will get very upset if she knows this is where you're going. You see, by the end of the second song in her set, the dancing girl on stage is down to the spikes and jewelry. They don't bother with such niceties as pasties and g-strings.

These are the places the traveling salesmen who doubt their luck at picking up the cocktail waitress at their hotel's lounge, the men vacationing womanless and so far luckless, even some local men who find themselves alone and really want to look at a naked woman, will find to spend a few hours in. What the hell why not. It can be cheaper than buying a whore, you get a better view, it lasts longer, there's less chance of picking up a disease. And it's legal.

In some of these places, the dancing girls wear garters, usually mid-thigh, sometimes higher. While they're dancing, patrons are welcome to approach the stage and slip a dollar bill tip under the garter. That's not the case in Fort Lauderdale. In Fort Lauderdale the stage is behind the bar and inaccessible to the patrons. So when one of the lovely dancing girls finishes her set, she redons the sequined bikini, halter and hot pants, lingerie, what not, and takes to the public side of the bar, snuggles up to the men, asks for tips. Maybe even suggests -- for a somewhat higher consideration -- something they can't do with everybody watching, something that could get her arrested for soliciting. Yeah. Not all of them ask. Maybe not all of them say yes or tell you how much if you ask. By now you've got the idea.

You can spot these places easily enough. Often, theirs are the best lit and most garish signs. There was such a bright, garish sign on an isolated building on the back side of the parking lot Art remembered. Drake grinned when he saw where Art was directing him and pulled into the lot. "Oh yeah, we'll surprise him all right," Drake said. Lucy and Mina looked at each other, wondering what was going on. There were only a half dozen other cars in the big parking lot, all clustered near the building. It was late on a weekday night. Earlier the lot was jammed, on the weekend it would still be jammed this late.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The frizzy headed blonde with half inch dark roots didn't pause in popping her gum when the two couples walked in the door and down the short corridor to the small counter she sat at. "Five dollah covah," pop, "ladies free," she said. Pop. This was the first time men had brought a woman into the Pink Pussy Tail in the four months she'd been dancing there. Pop. On the nights she was taking the cover, that is. Pop. Once in a while when she was dancing, she'd seen hookers the johns brought in when she went around hustling tips. Pop. She liked it when the men brought in hookers. The men usually played big man when they did and tipped five or ten instead of a buck -- showing off to the whore. Pop. Thing here was, these two guys looked tough enough to bring a hooker in and have her give them blow jobs while they watched the dancers spreading their lips, but these girls didn't look like hookers. Pop. Well, the two guys looked like they were some kind of studs who thought they were tough enough to make their girlfriends come in with them. And make them like it. Pop. She didn't think anything more about it until she needed a refill of her drink. That's when she found out how tough they really were. The women, that is. Pop.

Art handed over a ten dollar bill and Drake nudged Lucy through the turn at the low counter, down the short, dark hall beyond it to the beaded curtain hanging at the far end. Lucy reached the curtain, brushed it half open, and gasped.

"What is this shit?" she demanded as she spun around.

Drake put his hand on her shoulder and pushed to keep her spinning, and gave a light shove when she was facing the curtain again. Lucy stumbled going through the curtain, but immediately caught her balance. He followed close enough behind his body pressed against her.

"What was that about?" Mina asked Art. He merely grinned

and guided her through the curtain. Mina didn't gasp, she went rigid. "You're kidding me," she whispered. Art gave her behind a friendly pat and they trailed behind Drake and Lucy.

They made quite a parade. Drake smiled and looked through the deep darkness of the room for a table for them to sit at -- the table area was illuminated only by light reflected from the mirror behind the stage. Lucy averted her eyes from the stage. Art leered at it, Mina gawked. It was easy for Drake to find a table with a good view of the stage, none of the tables were occupied. He held out a chair facing the stage for Lucy. Lucy stepped around him and sat in a chair facing away from it. Mina accepted the chair Drake held. Art pulled the other back-away chair out so he could see the stage.

"What is this place?" Mina squealed, still gawking.

"This is a go-go bar, what do you think?" Drake answered. He leaned back and smiled widely, looking at the stage behind the bar.

The stage was about ten feet wide and six deep. Footlights and lights on poles at its front corners lit it brightly and changed color frequently -- they and a few neon beer signs were the only lighting in the room. A large mirror was on the wall behind the stage. A woman with long, flaxen hair leaned her hands and shoulders against the mirror and languidly wagged her pear-shaped tail at the few drinkers at the bar. From behind it was clear that all she was wearing was a pair of high heel shoes. After a moment she pushed herself away from the mirror and turned to face the men.

Breasts, according to brassier manufacturers, come in three shapes regardless of size; orange, pear, and banana. Think about it, it'll come to you. The blonde jiggled her orange-shaped breasts at the few men at the bar. They looked too big to stand that high and firm. Her wisp of pubic hair was nearly as light as her tresses. She didn't have a tan-line. She did an in-place march step, then bent over and jiggled some more.

Art groaned, then cheered and clapped. The blonde smiled in his direction.

"Damn," Mina murmured, "if I had a body like that I'd..." her voice trailed off.

"You'd what?" Art asked.

"I'd make more money with it than I bet she's making," she said wryly and gave him a quick grin.

"My name's Wanda. What can I get from the bar for you folks," a whiskey-and-cigarette husky voice said.

Everyone but Drake looked at the voice's source. Drake couldn't look because the speaker stood directly behind him with her breasts cradling his head. She wore a black babydoll nightie, not quite translucent, but enough so there was a hint of color at her nipples; her hair matched the color of the nightie. She smiled with her lips open to show rows of white teeth; the teeth were held apart and the tip of her tongue caressed them.

Art leered at the brunette. "I'd like the blonde, Wanda," he said. "But I'll settle for bourbon, rocks."

A laugh rattled from deep in Wanda's throat. "I'll see what I can do," she said and winked at him. "Bourbon, rocks." She looked at the others for their orders.

Lucy covered her eyes. Mina giggled at her, then ordered strawberry daiquiris for them both.

"Scotch and soda," was Drake's choice.

"Mud in your eye," Wanda husked. She gave a shimmy that wiggled her breasts against his ears, then swayed to the bar.

Lucy leaned over the table and half whispered, "What are we doing in here?"

"Setting a trap," Drake said.

Art gave Drake an excited glance, then looked at Lucy and asked, "How's your boy going to react when he walks in and sees the stage?"

Lucy looked intently at him, thinking about the question, ignoring that his eyes kept shifting away from her, back to the naked blonde on the stage. A smile slowly curled her mouth. "He's going to freeze for a second."

"Uh huh. Enough time for us to get to him first."

Mina tipped her head toward the others but kept watching the stage while she said, "Not if everybody's watching the stage."

"And what about all these people?" Lucy asked, waving a hand to her rear.

"There's not that many," Drake said. Four dancers -- including Wanda, the husky voiced waitress -- six customers, a burly bartender, another big man who was probably the bouncer, the blonde at the door. "Not many at all."

"They don't matter anyway," Art said.

"But," Lucy tried to come up with a good objection, but she was still slightly rattled by unexpectedly coming upon the naked woman displaying herself behind the bar, and then the waitress who

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was more aggressively friendly than she'd ever seen a waitress before.

"All right, we clean out the people first," Drake offered, and winked at Art.

"Make the customers leave?" Lucy asked. "This place is so empty they're liable to close if we're the only ones in here."

"So what if they do? We get the owner to leave the keys with us and we lock up when we're through." Drake laughed when he said that. It was a low, nasty laugh. Art laughed along with him.

Mina looked away from the stage for a second, the look in her glistening eyes and the way she grinned said she was getting ideas about how they could make clearing out the place be a lot of fun. She winked at them.

The babydolloed waitress came back with their drinks. While she was setting the glasses on the table the blonde's set ended. The bartender picked up a microphone and, in an AM radio DJ style, asked the audience to give Juicy Gerry a huge hand and be generous when she came around for her tips. Then he announced the next dancer, Emerald Emelda, and urged the bar's patrons to give her a big hand. He was big on calling for big hands. The men at the bar clapped a few times, one of them wolf-whistled. Wanda bent low enough Art could see clearly inside her top. He saw more clearly than she realized. A tough looking Cubana in leather tights, her face still full with baby-fat, took the stage and started gyrating to some Latin rhythm that boomed out of the speakers.

"I'm on next, honey," Wanda said and leaned against Drake's shoulder. She told him how much the drinks were, kissed his forehead and scratched his back when he overpaid by ten dollars.

Lucy got a thoughtful expression and slowly turned to look at the stage. The olive-skinned dancer was unzipping the upper part of her tights and peeling it off to reveal a semi-transparent bra.

The first song ended and the dancer was down to the bra, a g-string, and bare feet by the time Lucy turned back and said, "There is a way we can make this work."

"You better believe there is," Art said and leered at her. Mina giggled behind her hand.

Lucy ignored Art's remark and kept talking. "Another thing, we left the cooler with the blood in the hotel, didn't we?"

Drake nodded. He was smiling, he liked the way Lucy was getting the idea.

"If our man doesn't get here soon, we're going to need some

from another source."

Drake nodded again.

They turned and looked at the stage when Art whistled. The dancer was naked now and they saw what he whistled at. She had shaved her pubic hair into the shape of a valentine heart.

"You're disgusting," Mina said to Art, but she stared at the black heart anyway.

The blonde, Juicy Gerry, was making her rounds of the bar now. She wore a clamshell bra and French cut bikini pants. She snuggled up to the five drinkers one at a time, rubbing their backs, gripping their thighs, giving them a cheap thrill for their tips. Four of the five gave her a dollar. The fifth, a sun-bleached blond who looked like an accountant who had a rich fantasy life in which he was a pro football player, said something that made her tip her head back as though thinking about it. She said something into his ear and swayed toward the four people at the one occupied table in the place.

"Everybody enjoying yourselves?" Gerry asked. She maneuvered to position herself so she was in front of them without blocking anyone's view of the stage.

"Oh yeah, we sure are," Art said loudly enough the Cubana glanced into the darkness in their direction.

"You're enjoying yourself, for sure," Gerry said, bending forward from the hips and putting the tip of a forefinger on Art's nose.

He grinned widely at her. "You got the prettiest ass I've ever seen."

She half turned toward him and wiggled it. Then she turned her attention to Lucy and Mina and half raised her eyebrows in question. "How about you, are you enjoying the show?"

Mina beamed at her. "I love it," she said and giggled. "How do you get a job here?"

Before the blonde could answer Drake spoke, "Pull up a chair for the lady, Art."

"Oh, I don't know if I should," she objected. "The boss might not like it if I spend too much time with one customer." Art reached over and pulled a chair behind her.

"It's okay," Drake said, and slid a twenty dollar bill onto the table top. "There's more than one of us here."

Gerry made the twenty disappear without seeming to reach for it and sat. She shifted close to Art and cocked her head speculatively toward Mina. The tip of her tongue flicked once between her lips.

"You want a job here? I guess you talk to Bill. He's the big guy against the wall over there." She nodded her head toward the bouncer. "He's the owner's brother and sort of the manager. He gives all the girls their auditions."

"Does he know much about dancing?"

Gerry tossed her head back and laughed. "No, but he knows pussy." She looked more carefully at each of them, seeking any hint they might be cops and this was a trap. "You got a good tail or a good head, you got a chance for a job." She looked toward the stage where the Cubana was finishing her set. "But you've gotta keep that good tail or good head if you want to keep your job."

"You mean you've got to put out for the boss if you want to get hired, and keep putting out if you want to keep it?" Mina asked with eyes wide and an amused smile. The announcer called for applause for Wanton Wanda.

One of the men at the bar got up and walked out before Emerald Emelda came for her tip. Drake watched him leave, shook his head slightly when Art started to rise to go after him. Art sat back and nodded to Drake, then put a proprietary hand on Juicy Gerry's thigh. Gerry favored him with a smile so brief it didn't make the slightest pause in her conversation with Mina.

"I never said that," Gerry said.

"Uh huh." Mina looked at the stage where Wanda was now strutting. The black-haired dancer with the husky voice twirled around with her arms held out perpendicular to her body, the babydoll top spun all the way out under them and showed her flying breasts. Mina looked back to the blonde. "You ever have amateur nights here?"

Gerry laughed again, harder than before. "I think Bill would love that. You're funny, honey." She touched Mina's hand, the touch lingered a moment longer than might have been expected.

"Mina!" Lucy said. "You can't..."

Mina's eyes opened wide for an instant when Gerry touched her. Somewhere she'd heard that a lot of dancers in the rauchier go-go bars were lesbians; even many who did things with men preferred girls. It made sense, the ultimate tease -- look at what you'll never touch, bastard; or touch what you'll never possess: suffer, stud. Maybe. She laid her hand on the blonde's arm and softly caressed it. "I think it'd be fun," she said, looking deeply into Gerry's eyes.

Gerry returned a secret smile and said, "I'll get Bill."

Mina's smile turned mean when Gerry stood and started toward the big man against the wall. Look at what you'll never touch, bitch, she thought.

Bill saw Gerry when she was halfway to him and came when she crooked a finger.

During the few seconds available in the blonde's absence, Lucy leaned forward and gripped Mina's arm tightly. "Mina, what are you thinking?" she asked, both anxious and excited.

Mina grinned and leaned close. "This is going to be fun. Just follow my lead. We're going to have these clowns going so hard they won't know what hit them." She giggled shrilly.

"We're with you, Mina," Drake said.

Art nodded eagerly. "This is going to be a *lot* of fun."

The blonde was back. Bill took the chair she had sat in. He didn't bother to edge it away from Art. Gerry went around to the other side and stood next to Mina.

"Okay, what's your idea?" Bill said without bothering with introductions and no preliminaries.

"I want to get up there and dance," Mina said excitedly.

"I donno," Bill said and idly looked around the room as though bored with the conversation and looking for something that needed his attention. "I got four girls here, that's all I need tonight. Besides, it's a slow night, the girls aren't getting much tips, they won't like it if I let someone else get up there and take their tips." On the stage, Wanda had discarded her top and her breasts bobbed in the colored lights shining on them.

"I don't care about the tips," Mina said. "If I collect any I'll give them to your girls." Her eyes were gleaming and she had to restrain a laugh. The blonde put a hand on her shoulder, Mina wrapped an arm around the blonde's hips and caressed her lower belly.

Bill looked lazily up at the blonde. "I donno. Wha'da you think?"

Gerry fished her hand to Mina's neck under her hair and squeezed. "I think we oughta give her a shot."

"Yeah?" Bill looked at Mina dispassionately. "Maybe. Stan' up."

Mina stood. "You don't get to see what's under unless I get on that stage," she said.

"Zat so."

"That's so," Art said and leaned against him. Bill leaned away

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and looked harshly at Art, but Art's smile was friendly enough he didn't say anything.

Bill looked at Mina, looked at her the way a possibly inept cook would look at a roast in the butcher shop. "So what're you gonna do on stage?"

"Kill 'em dead." Mina smiled wickedly.

"Yeah?" Bill raised an eyebrow. I'll think about it," he said. He never did, though.

Gerry thought she saw Drake move, but it was so fast and so dark she couldn't tell for sure. What she was sure she saw was Bill suddenly slump forward and clamp his hands to his throat. Art slapped a hand on Bill's shoulder and held him there. The next thing Gerry saw was Drake standing close to her. He wore the most evil smile she'd ever seen. She shuddered, but before she could step away from him there was a flash of movement under her chin and her throat felt hot and cold at the same time. Then she couldn't breathe because her mouth and throat were filled with something hot and wet. The last thing she saw was Drake's face grinning at her as he lay her gently on the floor.

Wanton Wanda was down to her spikes now. She flashed a smile into the darkness where she knew there was an occupied table. She couldn't see that three of the four people were moving away from it, leaving the fourth doing something to Bill, who sat slumped in his chair. Nor could she see Gerry laying on the floor. Wanda tilted her pelvis forward and bump-and-thrust it a few times toward that table.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Wanda picked up her panties from where she'd kicked them aside, gave the men at the bar one last shimmy, and ducked through the curtain next to the mirror at the back of the stage.

The bartender picked up his microphone and urged the drinkers to be big handed and generous for Wanton Wanda. Before he could announce the next dancer, Mina came behind the bar and headed toward the door next to the stage. "Hey," he said as he pushed the off switch on the mike, "you can't go back there."

"Sure I can," Mina said over her shoulder.

The bartender reached for her but didn't make it; his arm was suddenly in a vice that was bending it in a way arms aren't supposed to bend. He yelped.

Art said, "It's okay, pal. Bill said she's allowed."

The bartender looked at Art, saw how effortlessly he held his arm and bent it. He was too occupied to notice Lucy go behind the bar and come back with two drink shakers.

"Let him go," Drake said to Art and took the mike from the bartender's hand. Art let go and the bartender stood half crouched, holding his arm, wondering if it was broken, looking at Art with fear.

"Hey, whachu doing?" Emerald Emelda demanded. She knew these were the men from the table, the men who cat-called while she was dancing. That woman going back to the dressing room must have been with them. She looked around for Bill to take care of matters.

"Bill said my friend there could do an amateur night gig," Art said, grinning at her. "Hey, doll, I really like what you did to your pussy. Let's you and me sit down here and watch the show." He sat one stool away from the end of the bar. He effortlessly picked her up and set her on the stool next to him. She started to struggle, then stopped when Art shook a finger in her face and said, "That's a no-no." His smile was terrifying. Even more terrifying was the way he held her up with only one hand. What the hell, if they wanted to rape her

she'd go along with it. Getting fucked without getting paid was a hell of a lot better than giving some yanqui bastardo an excuse to hurt her.

"Gentlemen," Drake said soothingly into the mike, "and ladies," he added with a nod to the woman in a red Shirley Temple wig and red sequined bikini who now stood on the stage looking wonderingly toward him and the bartender. "The Pink Pussy Tail is proud to bring you an unexpected treat tonight. Straight from her most recent smashing, slashing engagement in New Orleans, Mean Mina and her red dye number Bill, she's the meanest bitch you're ever going to meet." He flicked the off switch on the mike before chuckling cruelly.

The curtain was thrown open and Mina strutted through. She was wearing Wanda's babydoll top, a silk scarf was tied around her hips, jewelry hung from her ears, around her neck, bangled on her wrists and ankles. Somewhere, she had found a pair of stiletto spike heels. Something with lots of rhythmic bass thumped out of the speakers.

"What do you think you're doing, baby?" asked the wigged dancer who was being upstaged.

"Stealing the show," Mina said and smiled sweetly at her. She smiled wider when she saw the two drink mixers in Lucy's hands as she walked past Drake on her way behind the stage to the dressing room door. Mina saw Drake slip the straight razor into Lucy's pocket. Lucy nodded at her as she went through the door. Mina took the wigged dancer's arm and threw her through the curtain. There was a thump, followed by a metallic crash and a cry from backstage. One of the men at the bar stood up and started edging toward the exit. Art left Emelda with orders to stay, then intercepted the man and sat him back down.

"Stick around, bub. This is going to be the best show of your life." The man was bigger than Art, a professional beach bum type. But he sat back down and gaped at Art. "I'm not the show, sport. She is," Art told him. He put a hand on the back of the man's head and twisted his face to the front. The man went rigid. He didn't move when Art let go.

The accountant who imagined himself to be a football player, the one who had said something to Gerry instead of giving her a tip, looked like he wasn't interested in Mina's show either. He was looking around for Gerry. He knew she had gone to a table in the back, back where it was so dark he couldn't see anything from his bar stool. He

didn't know, but suspected this guy who took the mike from the bartender had been at that table. He moved close to Drake and demanded, "Where is she?"

"She's up there," Drake answered, and pointed at the stage.

"No, not her. Juicy Gerry." This man scared him, but he was pretty tough himself and wasn't going to be put off. "She went to your table for tips. She was supposed to come back to me but didn't. Where is she?"

"Stick around, you can join her in a few minutes. Watch this." Drake chuckled as he nodded to the stage. He put a finger along the man's nose and pushed his head to face the stage.

The man wanted to smack the hand away from his face, he wanted to stand up and tell this jerk to fuck off, but something in Drake's eyes told him that wasn't a good idea just now. He looked at the stage and his eyes popped.

Mina was squatting, bouncing up and down on her heels. Her knees were spread wide and stretched the scarf tight, fully exposing herself. The babydoll top was off, in her hand, between her legs. She was doing something obscene to herself with it.

Two of the men at the bar clapped loudly and hollered for her to do more. Mina smiled and blew kisses at them. She tossed the nightie top at one of them; he was pudgy, round faced, and wore glasses. He grinned widely at Mina and rubbed the babydoll over his face.

Mina wriggled and shimmied upward until she was standing erect. The curtain opened and Lucy was there handing her the two shakers. Mina took them and jiggled to the front of the stage. "Red dye number Bill," she told the men at the bar. Then she tossed her head back so far she was bent over and lifted one shaker high and slowly tipped it until its red contents poured out and into her open, eagerly waiting mouth. Some of the fluid overflowed or splashed onto her face, it dripped through her dangling hair and splattered onto the floor of the stage. When it was empty she flipped it aside. Then she straightened up with her head still back and slowly upended the second one over her face. The red ran down over her neck and shoulders and chest and breasts and stomach and back and was sopped into her scarf-skirt, from there it drip-dripped onto the stage. She dropped the shaker and used both hands to rub and caress the liquid, smeared it all over her torso and arms. The men hooted and hollered and clapped, even the beach bum and the imaginary football player.

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Then, without warning, Mina leaped the five foot span from the stage to the bar and landed without a trace of stumble.

"Wow, did you see that?" one man shouted.

"Hey, baby, how'd you do that?" the man at the far end of the bar asked. He looked like an insurance salesman.

"How did I do what, honey?" Mina asked as she strutted down the bar to stand in front of him.

"Jump like that in those heels," he said, awed.

"I've got good legs," Mina said.

"You've got great legs, baby."

Mina's hands were flat on the scarf and shifted back and forth, upward, pulling the scarf higher on her thighs. "Want to see more?"

"Oh, baby, you know it."

Mina shuffled to the edge of the bar and squatted directly in front of him. She put a hand behind his head and pulled. "Take a close look." When his head was between her legs she closed them on it and snapped the scarf down, like a tent over his head.

The man made noises that were muffled by her legs and he started twisting his shoulders. He clasped her thighs and twisted harder, it looked like maybe he was trying to get away.

Drake glanced quickly at the stage and saw Lucy peeking around the curtain. She nodded at him. He flipped on the mike and purred into it, "Mean Mina is busy right now, so here's something else for all you gentlemen in the audience. Let's give a big round of applause to Luscious Lucy. You'll know when you see her, she's finger-licking good. Here's Luscious Lucy!"

Lucy slithered through the curtain. She had already stripped down to bra and panties. Nothing fancy about her underwear, she hadn't planned on a major seduction scene for the evening. She wore no shoes or jewelry. Her expression was somber and haughty. Her tongue slipped and slid between her lips. She danced with ancient, arcane footwork that the men at the bar understood even if they didn't remember ever having seen it before. Her hands were high above her head, clapping out a slow rhythm with her steps, her fingers snapped a counterpoint to that rhythm. There was no music from the speakers, not for Lucy's dance. Drake cupped his hands together and blew into them; the hollow sound filled the room despite its softness. Art bop-bopped with his mouth. Mina beat a tattoo; the scarf-skirt was her snare drum, her thighs were the bass, the back of the man struggling between her legs was her tympani. Mina started keening; a clear,

wordless, tuneless wail that cut to everyone's soul. Just like Mina's dance in the desert. Lucy had been wrong about it back in the desert; a short haired woman didn't look dumb dancing like this, not if she knew how.

Where Mina had been an extra raunchy strip joint dancer, Lucy was something primordial. No one hooted or hollered or whistled or clapped while she was dancing, not even after she removed her undergarments and displayed her full nudity to them. They were totally captivated and all stared in open-mouthed awe, even the bartender and Emerald Emelda.

No one in the place paid any attention to the man with his head between Mina's legs, no one noticed his frantic pounding on the bar or foot stomping. Only one of them spared him a glance when he kicked over his stool. His struggles abruptly stopped. Mina cocked her head at him and gave an extra squeeze with her thighs to make sure. Then she looked down the length of the bar and caught Art's eye.

Art saw Emelda was engrossed in watching Lucy and slipped away without her noticing. He kept up his bop-bopping as he walked the length of the bar, stopped it only long enough to do what Mina wanted: He picked up the knocked over stool and shoved it under the man between her legs, forced his limp body into a slumped over sitting position. Mina, still crouched, sidled back and removed the scarf, she billowed it out and let it flutter down on the red mess that was the man's crushed head.

Mina smiled at Art and said, "He told me I have great legs."

"You sure as shit do." Art grinned back at her. He put out a finger to rub in the red that smeared the insides of her thighs, then licked it off and grinned wider. He gave the body a jiggle to make sure it was stable before going back to his own stool, bop-bopping as he went. He sat on Emelda's right side now instead of her left.

Mina stood on the bar, drumming on her thighs, now using her belly for the deeper tones, watching Lucy dance until the other woman slowed down to a little two-step sidestep. Then Mina strutted down the bar, kicking ashtrays, empty glasses and beer bottles, and anything else not being used, off it. One by one, every head in the room turned to her.

The first man she came to looked like a long distance truck driver. He looked at the man who'd been between Mina's legs, saw how unnaturally he was crumpled on the bar and stool, saw the scarf didn't stand high enough to have a whole head below it. He looked at

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Mina and saw the red smearing her legs was fresher than the red on her torso. He leaned back, afraid of this wild woman.

"What's your problem, stud," Mina sneered. "Scared of a naked woman? Think I've got razor blades stuck up my cunt?" She showed wet, white teeth when she grinned down at him. Her teeth looked hungry.

Next was the pudgy man, he leaned forward on his arms. Smiling widely, he looked up at her legs -- all the way up. "What's that stuff you poured all over yourself, sweetheart?" he asked.

Mina stopped in front of him and stood with her feet wide. "Why don't you take a taste?"

He laughed low and stood up to lick at her thigh. He didn't recognize the taste at first, except it didn't taste good. He pulled back and his smile turned upside down. "Yuck." He wiped his hand across his mouth. "What is that shit? It tastes like..."

Mina tossed her head back and laughed loudly before he could finish saying what it tasted like. "Tell you in a little while," she said.

That's when the girl who took their money at the door came in to refresh her drink. She wasn't there to watch the naked dancing girls, not like the paying customers were. Neither did she have any proprietary interest in what went on on the stage, as did Bill or the bartender, not on nights when she wasn't dancing. When she was on the door and had occasion to enter the bar -- to visit the ladies room, refresh her drink, conduct business with Bill -- she simply didn't look at the stage.

So it happened that she made it halfway to the bar before noticing that there was not one, but two naked women there. She stopped in place and looked at the scene intently. She knew the short haired redhead wasn't one of the dancers. Neither was the one on the bar. Vaguely, she recognized them as the two women who had come in with the two tough men. Since she wasn't here for a show, she wasn't expecting any special effects on the women and immediately saw the drying red smeared all over the woman standing on the bar was blood and she froze, horrified. She even stopped popping her gum. She thought that woman had somehow been injured, that someone had taken over the place and was brutally forcing the women to dance naked. She looked to see where the one on the bar was cut, but the way she sashayed along it quickly told her the woman wasn't injured. Then she saw the man at the other end of the bar, saw how he was crumpled on his stool with his head so low to the bar it seeming to

be laying half under the bar top. She recognized the scarf laying over his head by its pattern and knew its color wasn't red. She threw her hands to her mouth and screamed.

It was a frozen moment for the five-dollah-covah woman, she didn't realize how quickly Drake reached her. Neither did the bartender or the customers, they were too stunned by the unexpected scream.

"Come with me," Drake said harshly and dragged her to the bar. He plunked her jarringly hard on the stool next to Art, away from Emelda, then grabbed the bartender and hauled him over the bar and hustled him to the entrance.

"Lock the door and turn off the outside lights," Drake commanded.

"I, I," the bartender said. He grabbed the door handle and jerked it open. Before he could take a step out Drake grabbed him and hurtled him against the ticket counter.

"Don't fuck with me, man. I can kill you right now and lock up myself. Lock the door and turn off the outside lights.

The bartender struggled to his feet and, hands shaking almost too much to do it, threw the deadbolts on the door, turned a key in the lock, and opened the circuit breaker box to cut the outside lights. Drake half dragged, half carried him back to the bar.

"Fun time," Drake announced as he tossed the bartender over the bar.

Art had left his seat between the two women to stop the truck driver from bolting out the emergency exit. Mina and Lucy stared hard at the other three men, as though daring them to try to make a break. Naked or not, the two women's postures said *we're tougher than you are*.

Emelda suddenly jumped off her stool and ducked behind the bar to dart through the door to the dressing room. Lucy watched her go, then shook her head at Drake. Drake smiled and nodded. There was no exit that way. A scream rent the silence that had settled in the bar and Lucy smiled at it.

"She just found out what happens to little girls who don't do what I tell them to," Lucy said.

Emelda staggered from the dressing room. Her hands were bloody. "They're dead!" she shrieked. "They're dead, both of them." She backed into a corner and took a fighter's stance. "Come an' get me, muthafuckas," she snarled. They ignored her, she wasn't going

anywhere, and as long as she was in the corner she wasn't going to do anything.

"My, you're a pretty one," Drake said to the cover taker. "Are you a dancer too?"

The frizzy headed blonde shook her head, not tonight she wasn't.

"You are now," Drake said. He grabbed the front of her blouse and jerked at the two sides, popping off the buttons. He yanked the blouse back and down over her shoulders. She wasn't wearing a bra and her pear-shaped breasts hung heavy.

She screamed and started crying. She waved her hands, trying to cover her breasts with them, but the way her blouse was pulled down her arms she couldn't.

Drake stuck his fingers inside the waistband of her pants and yanked down. The zipper burst open from the force and her pants were down around her knees. He shuffled them down to her ankles, then picked her up and lightly tossed her across to the stage. She thumped on it and bounced once before rolling onto her side facing away from the bar: a tampon string showed between her legs; that was why she wasn't dancing tonight. Drake vaulted the bar and hopped onto the stage. He yanked on the string coming from between her legs and tossed the blood-stained tampon to Art. Art grinned and stuck it in his mouth like a cigar. Then Drake picked the girl up by her armpits and held her facing the four customers. She writhed vainly in his grip, trying to break away, trying to cover her nakedness.

"Hey, studs," Drake said to the men, "you came here to look. I bet you want to do more than look. Here she is, who wants her?"

None of the men said anything. One of them tried to look away, Art twisted his head back to the stage.

"You," Drake snapped. "You wanted to fuck Juicy Gerry. Well, you can't have her. Will this one do instead?"

The would-be football player blanched. "Where is she?" he asked, and his voice broke on the words. "What did you do to her?"

Drake didn't answer him. He looked at the four men sitting at the bar and the bartender. A sly expression came over his face when he saw Emelda still crouched in her corner. "I know what'll turn you on," he told the men. "There's one thing that always fascinates and excites men." He looked at Lucy and at Mina, who were both looking at him curiously. "Get her," he said and jerked his head at Emelda.

"What?" Lucy said slowly. She put her arms akimbo and

leaned at him challengingly.

"Yeah, what do you have on your perverted mind," Mina asked.

Drake grinned happily from one to the other. "What do you think?"

"Drake, you're sick. You know that?" Lucy said, her mouth agape and eyes wide.

"Yeah," Mina echoed, "you're sick, Drake." She smiled crookedly at him and added, "I like that in a man." She streaked the length of the bar and bounded into Emelda's corner. The Cubana fought, but Mina hardly seemed to notice her blows and kicks as she picked up the smaller woman and carried her to the stage. "Where do you want her?"

"Just get her up here and strip her," Drake said, still smiling.

In a moment the frizzy headed blonde was supine with her knees spread wide, her clothes still restraining her arms and legs. Emelda was naked and laying end to end across her.

"Eat," Drake ordered. "Eat like your lives depend on it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Rocks drove the circuit two or three times, past the hotels and the nightspots, without seeing a Lincoln with Louisiana plates. Then he headed into the side streets and byways of Fort Lauderdale's inland residential areas and prowled them for a couple of hours. He started getting edgy after midnight when the streets were clearing of the partying people who had to get up in the morning and his was frequently the only car on the road for more than a quarter mile in either direction. He was as certain as he could be without seeing the body himself that the people he was looking for had committed last night's murder. Now he started worrying that maybe he misread them, maybe they didn't stay in Fort Lauderdale, maybe they went on. But where? West into the Everglades? Up toward Lake Okeechobee? Did they backtrack by a different route than the one he'd taken today, by the same route after he arrived? Did they continue south? Was he completely mistaken about that murder? Had they switched cars again so looking for a Lincoln was futile?

No, he couldn't be mistaken, this is where they had to have come, the slit throat was their method, leaving the body where it could be found and reported like that was clearly an invitation for him to come to them. But where were they?

Calm down, Rocks, he told himself. He felt himself near the verge of losing some of his control; the verge of losing any control was a place he never visited, Rocks never lost any control. He'd developed and maintained solid, unrelenting control over his actions and emotions ever since that day more than twenty years earlier and had no idea of what would happen if he lost any of it. He didn't want to find out what would happen if his control slipped, not even a little slip. He knew the result, whatever it might be, would be bad and he didn't want to find out how bad. Panic tickled at the fringes of his mind, panic that somehow he wouldn't find them in time, panic born of fear that he'd

somehow lose Lucy. Find them, he ordered himself. Find them before it's too late.

He didn't consciously think it, but he knew he could call the Utah ranch and request assistance, tell the Council he had them cornered and all he needed was help watching the exits from Fort Lauderdale so they couldn't slip away again. But asking for assistance felt like failure. More, if he asked for help someone might volunteer to help hunt and he didn't want that kind of help. In more than thirty years he'd never once had to ask for help in taking someone. He was Rocks, the hunter, the enforcer. He was Rocks, who always brought them back. One way or another, he always found them and quieted things down. All he ever needed was help in locating someone. He couldn't call now, too much was at stake. Not just getting them. If he had to he could easily trap them and kill them all, he didn't need anyone's help for that. But if he asked for help someone could come in to help take them and that someone might kill Lucy. He couldn't have that, no that musn't happen. He wouldn't allow it. No. Tanya would not slip through his hands again. He would die himself before he let anyone kill her.

No! She can't die! It was a silent scream of agony to all the gods he and his ancestors ever believed in, and all those he and they never did.

The street he was on intersected US 1. He turned south on it to 17th Street and back to Seabreeze Boulevard. Along the way he'd stop at every hotel and check its parking lot, its garage if it had one. Somewhere, someplace, he was going to find that Lincoln. Then in half an hour or less, it would all be over. Drake would be dead, probably Art as well. Lucy would be with him and on her way to Utah. Maybe Mina too.

Lucy, I'm coming. Tanya, I'll be there soon. We can do whatever you want then, Lucy. We'll be together always, Tanya.

*

The big parking lot was dark and almost empty and Rocks was so wrapped in thought he nearly missed the Lincoln. He was even with it when he saw it out of the corner of his eye. He tapped on the breaks and twisted the wheel. The car resisted, its breaks wanted to keep it going in a straight line while it stopped, Rocks won the wrestling match and got pointed back on the other side of the street. Fortunately, the nearest oncoming traffic when he spun around was several blocks away. When the Porsche skidded to a rocking halt he

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was facing the Lincoln. He down shifted into first and rolled forward in the turning lane. His head swiveled as he slowly drove past the Lincoln; his eyes probed into the deep parking lot. Only a few other cars were in it, mostly clustered next to a cinderblock building with unlit signs, signs he knew from earlier passes were large and garish, on the far side of the lot. Strange that those cars should be parked next to a bar after the place was closed, he thought. He slowly rolled into the lot and slowly drove all around it, looking everywhere. It looked like any shopping center anywhere; lots of small shops, a supermarket, a big department store, construction going on at an empty storefront. He saw nothing that seemed out of the ordinary, saw no one moving about.

Then something in the distance caught his eye. Lights. Lights from another bar on the far side of the small shopping center this bar was next to. His head snapped back at the cars parked next to this dark, closed bar; he looked again at the Lincoln parked alone by the road and he knew what was going on.

They were here. The place wasn't closed, they merely made it look that way to keep passers-by from coming in. They had captives inside; the staff and probably some customers. It didn't cross Rocks' mind that the rogues might be doing something to the people they held captive. If asked he would have supposed they were. He didn't care about the captives though. All he cared about was the four he was after. And Lucy. They had deliberately parked the Lincoln where he would see it when he drove past. It was the bait that was going to draw him in. All right, he'd play their game, he'd come after them. Right into their lair.

He stopped, set the parking breaks, and got out. They thought they set a trap for him. He told them the first time they met, back in Texas: They were kindergärtners, he was a PhD. Let them watch him now as he turned the trap around.

He parked near the entrance and got out. His automatic was ready to hand if he needed it, and he was certain he would. Carefully, Rocks tested the front door of the place; locked. There were no other openings on the front side of the building so he went around the side. There was a window before he reached the end of the wall. He peered in, from what little he could make out in the darkness, the window seemed to open into a small office. A small sign in the corner of the window said, "No cash, no valuables. He continued around to the back. High on the back wall were three long, narrow windows. Red

light shining dimly through them told him the place was lit inside. The windows were too high and too narrow for him to be able to get through quickly and easily. In the middle of this wall was a fire door, it had a visible lock, but no opening mechanism on the outside. He held his ear against the door and listened; he heard music. The building's fourth wall was barren of openings.

Rocks went back to the office window and tested it. The screen window was triple-track; Rocks didn't wonder why anyone in South Florida needed triple-track storm windows. He tried to shimmy the screen up but it wouldn't budge. He took out his pocket knife and cut the screening from its frame. The inner window was a common sash window and was locked, and the only lock visible on it was a common sash catch. He could simply burst through it, but that might make enough noise to alert the rogues before he could scope out the situation, give them the advantage. Probably he could locate something to use to pry the sash open, but that would break the lock and make a lot of noise as well. If he had a glass cutter he could make a hole in the glass over the catch and reach in to unlock it. Then home free. Unless the inner door was locked and needed a key to open. That was a chance he'd have to take.

He had no glass cutter, but if he could score the glass with something, that would work the same. He started examining the ground. There was nothing usable near the building, so he went over to the construction site. There, laying on the sidewalk, up against the wall, he found a piece of flat iron. It was one inch wide, an eighth of an inch thick, about six inches long. It was a discarded scrap, one end was cut at an angle, the acute angle on the cut was sharp. Rocks carried the bit of flat iron back to the office window and scraped the sharp point against the glass. It wasn't going to do the job as well as a proper glass cutter, but as long as he kept his hands steady and drew straight lines, it would work.

The metal squealed piercingly on the glass, enough to set most people's teeth on edge. Rocks ignored the squealing and kept scoring the glass. After gouging three lines in the same cuts he tapped the glass with the blunt end of the flat iron. The glass snapped along the cuts with very little stalling away from them. He wriggled the small pane of glass until it lifted out of the molding and fell inside. The glass tinkled when it shattered on the office floor, but it wasn't loud enough to be heard inside the bar. He unlatched the window, eased up the lower sash, and climbed through. He padded to the door and

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listened.

There were unclear voices speaking low from somewhere deep inside the building. Someone was crying, maybe two people. It didn't sound as though there was anyone near the door. He tried to turn the knob but it wouldn't budge. He felt a twist-button in the middle of the knob, twisted it, and tried again. The knob turned easily and he opened the door a crack. The voices were clearer now, and he could tell there were two people crying -- a man and a woman. Now he could hear what the music was. There was a thumping that was one set set of hands beating a rhythm on flesh, a second pair of hands were drumming on wood; there was mouth music and finger snapping as well. He eased the door open far enough to look out. He saw a short hallway. At one end of it was the entrance and a small counter with a stool next to it. At the other hung a beaded curtain. The sounds and dim light came through the curtain.

Rocks slipped through the door and checked the entrance area. Both the short hall to the door and the hall to the bar proper were empty. The door was locked with dead bolts and throw bolts and a couple of chains, as well as a lock. He took the key from the lock and pocketed it. Now nobody inside could get out this way in a hurry. Satisfied none of them could quickly get past him and out that way, he pussy-footed toward the curtain and stopped as soon as he could see shapes through it. He took his time examining the scene. To the right of the curtain he saw a dark area with tables. Only one of the tables was occupied; by a man who sagged on his chair and onto the table. The man was obviously dead. Rocks looked more closely at that table and around it. He saw another, unidentifiable, shape on the floor next to that table and guessed it was another dead body. Beyond the table area was the bar. One obviously dead body leaned from a stool onto the bar, another body was laying on it. A third male body lay crumpled in the corner of the room to the left of the bar. A big man built like a football player huddled low on his stool, crying into his hands. Two other men, a pudgy one and a trucker-type, sat still, staring at the stage. Mina, nude and coated with dried blood, squatted on the bar near the crying man; she was slapping out a tattoo on the polished wood of the bar top.

On the stage a nude, frizzy haired blonde, lay on her back with her knees up. She was crying. A second nude woman, dark haired and olive-skinned, was kneeling between that woman's legs, doing something to her that Rocks couldn't see. Drake stood next to the

kneeling woman, commenting on what she was doing. Lucy, also nude, stood straddling the head of the supine woman, talking to her. She was pounding out a rhythm on her thighs. Rocks' heart jumped when he saw Lucy, he wondered how Drake was making her do this obscene thing. She couldn't be doing it voluntarily, oh no, not Lucy. His Tanya would never do something like that, never. Art was nowhere in sight.

Rocks took a slow step backward and stood with his pistol held pointing up and away in his hand. He needed to think about it. There were at least five dead already. The rest of them were going to have to go as well, no helping that. He could easily shoot Drake from the cover of the curtain. Mina might try to run away, take off through the emergency exit. But even if she was willing to instantly run outside naked as she was, he thought the shot would paralyze them for the split second it would take him to get through the curtain to the fire door and block their exit. Then he could get Lucy away from the others, protect her from whatever Drake was doing to make her do these things. Maybe then he could talk to them, get them calmed down, and take them to safety; but he had no qualms about killing any of them. Except Lucy. But where the hell was Art? And the place had to be cleaned up and the witnesses taken care of. Best get things moving.

Rocks retired to the office, quietly locked the door behind himself, went to the desk, picked up the phone. It was aggravating, having to wait the minute for all the connections to be made before he heard the beep of the recorder in Nevada. It took less time for him to tell the machine what the situation was and what he wanted than it had for his call to go through. Now, should he wait for the people he asked for to show up or should he go ahead with what he had to do?

The problem with waiting was it might take as long as two hours for anybody to reach the Pink Pussy Tail. Bar closing time was only an hour away. Surely some of the people in there had somebody waiting for them, somebody who knew where they were and would come looking for them if they didn't show up when expected. There was also the possibility that the rogues would finish what they were doing before then, get tired of waiting for him to show up, and decide to leave. Or the rogues might do some exploring of their own and come into the office, that flimsy doorknob lock wasn't going to keep them out for more than a few seconds if they wanted to see what was behind it. There was also the possibility of the police patrolling by and wondering why those cars were parked outside with the place's lights

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all off; the cops might discover the broken window and come in to investigate. Waiting for the clean up crew to arrive before making a move of his own wasn't a good idea.

Rocks headed back to the beaded curtain, he hoped he'd see Art this time so he could make his move right away.

A man let out a sudden bellow of fear and protest that was cut off before Rocks reached the curtain, the crying woman cried louder. Drake's voice came to him clearly. "You want to live, girly? Then bite it off."

Rocks reached where he could see the stage and rage flushed through him. One of the men, the one who had been crying, was on his back on the stage, his pants were down around his ankles. The frizzy blonde was on her knees, bent over his middle. Lucy was sitting on his face, her knees pinned his shoulders to the stage floor. Mina knelt at his feet, holding down his legs.

"Bite it off," Drake repeated. He held the straight razor near her throat; he could flick the blade and kill her without having to move any more than his wrist.

Rocks didn't feel rage because these normal people were dying; normal people had to die so Rocks and his kind could live. But there was absolutely no need to torture them the way the rogues were doing. No reason to make that girl think if she participated in what they were doing she would live. Every kill Rocks had ever made was quick and clean, the victim had no time to suffer. The same with everyone he knew. You kill only when you must and you have mercy on your victim, that was how they could live with the constant need to kill innocent people. Rocks raised his pistol, aimed, and pulled the trigger.

Drake staggered back from the impact of the bullet, blood spattering from his chest, and almost fell. Lucy and Mina dove off the stage to take cover behind the bar. Drake shuffled unsteadily and faced the curtain, blood spurting from the hole in his chest. He roared out a curse that choked in his throat from the blood that was flooding his lungs. Rocks shot again, at his head this time. Drake jerked and took another step back. He screamed out something that didn't sound human and took two steps to the front of the bar. "I'm gonna get you, fucker!" he shouted. He took another step and tripped over the man the frizzy blonde was still bent over and fell forward, tumbling over the edge of the stage to crash loudly to the floor.

"Nobody move," Rocks said as he stepped through the curtain. The muzzle of his pistol moved to include everyone. Everyone Rocks

could see froze. Where was Art? "Lucy, Mina, come out. I won't hurt you. That's not why I'm here. I'm here to help you."

"You killed him," a female voice shrieked behind the bar. The voice was so strangled Rocks wasn't sure which woman it was. He told himself it wasn't Lucy.

"You saw what he was doing. I had to. There's no redeeming a man who does that. Where's Art?"

The olive-skinned woman, Emelda, spoke. "Can I move?" Rocks looked and saw her in the corner, straddling the dead man there. He grimaced. "Onto the stage where I can see you."

"You a cop, mister?" one of the men at the bar asked.

"Shut up," Rocks snapped. "Nobody talks unless I say so."

"Drugs," the pudgy man whispered. "I told you it was drugs."

"Shut up," Rocks said coldly. "I shoot next the person who speaks out of turn."

Emelda sat on the stage next to the frizzy blonde. The two women held each other tightly and stared into the darkness where Rocks was. The man with his pants down lay still, he didn't cover himself or even turn his head. His chest shuddered with sobs.

"Lucy, Mina, come out. Where are your clothes? I want you to get dressed and come with me. You'll be safe." The normal people he'd seen when he first looked were all in sight. Lucy and Mina still hid behind the bar -- and Drake was also there, dead. Only Art was unaccounted for. Rocks raised his voice. "Art, come out from where you're hiding. Maybe I don't have to kill you. I don't want to, but if you keep hiding, when I find you I will."

Someone giggled hysterically behind the bar. It wasn't Drake, it didn't sound like a man's voice.

Rocks walked slowly, quietly around the side of the room, toward the body in the corner. He stopped when he could see behind the bar. Lucy and Mina were hunched down, whispering together. They had positioned themselves so the ice maker was between them and where he had been. Drake's corpse lay like a broken doll, Rocks could see the back of its head was pulped. The pistol Drake took from him in the hotel in New Orleans was tucked into the back of his waistband.

Lucy and Mina didn't see him, so Rocks ran past and through the door next to the stage. There was a small, cluttered dressing room back there with two female bodies cast aside in it. One was naked, the other was wearing a red sequined bikini, a red wig was askew on her

head. There were some street clothes that looked as though they might belong to Lucy and Mina, but only one set of underwear. Rocks opened the wardrobe that stood against one wall and saw more street clothes, he figured they belonged to the dancers. He grabbed the clothes laying about the room and took them with him. The only other thing he found in the back was a tiny utility room with a sink, broom, mop, and shelves with soaps and cleaning solvents. No sign of Art. Rocks went back out and behind the bar. Checking the back had taken less than ten seconds. Lucy and Mina were peeking over the bar in an attempt to spot him. No one else had moved. Rocks tossed the clothes at the two women behind the bar.

"Get dressed."

The two women jumped. They twisted around and scooted away from him. Mina grabbed some of the clothes and clutched them to herself. Lucy stared at him with hatred for a long moment, then stood and smiled at him.

"Rocks, you came back for me," she purred, and started toward him, swinging her hips in a parody of seductiveness.

Rocks blinked rapidly a few times. In the uncertain light reflecting from the stage mirror, her hair looked briefly long, but it was only an illusion. He had to swallow twice before he could speak. "Get dressed, Lucy. We're going." Behind Lucy, Mina had sorted the clothes and was struggling into her own.

Lucy spread her arms in invitation. "Come to me," she said. "This is what you want, isn't it?"

"Lucy, stop. I beg you, stop." Rocks pointed his pistol at her chest and kept it there. His jaw tightened and his hand holding the pistol trembled slightly. He tried to look at everyone in the room, but his eyes could find only Lucy.

She walked all the way up to the pistol, put both hands around it and held its open end tight between her breasts. She spoke and her words started soft and loving, "That's what you want, isn't it," but the tone of the words changed as she spoke, became harsher, sharper, "to kill me? Go ahead, Rocks, pull the goddam trigger and get it the fuck over with!" and ended with a scream.

Something unfamiliar glazed Rocks' eyes, occluded his sight. He twisted his head to one side then the other. "No, I don't, Lucy, I don't want to hurt you. Please don't make me," is what he meant to say, but his throat was so thick and voice so fogged he wasn't sure what sounds came out.

"You bastard," Lucy spat. "Fuck 'em and kill 'em Rocks, that's you."

"NOOO!" The one word rose high and loud, inarticulate, torn from his breast.

Lucy wrenched the pistol from his hand and twisted from in front of him an instant before something hit him hard from behind. As he staggered from the blow he cursed himself for a fool: He went into bars so seldom he'd forgotten a closed off place they all have.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

You go in the front door of the Pink Pussy Tail and straight along a short hallway to the cover-counter. Then you turn right and go along another short hall to the curtained doorway that opens into the bar. Within that "L" formed by the two short halls were the customer restrooms. Rocks hadn't looked that way when he entered the room after shooting Drake. He should have.

The gunshots startled Art, but he managed to catch himself before he charged out of the men's room. He made himself think about it before he acted. The first thing he did was turn off the light, then he opened the door far enough to see what was going on. He was glad he was cautious when he heard Rocks' voice to his left, at the beaded curtain. Art didn't see any of his companions, but he heard Lucy shouting from behind the bar, "You killed him." "Him," that had to mean Rocks killed Drake, he got himself another gun from somewhere. Goddam, Drake was dead. Art flashed red for a second, then held himself back and tried to devise a plan; if he just went charging out, Rocks would probably kill him before he could do anything. He saw Rocks run across the room, pause to glance behind the bar, then dart through the door next to the stage. Art went through the door low and fast then, and stayed below the level of the tables as he went through the room. Rocks returned from the back room and was at the end of the bar, talking to Lucy and Mina before Art got close enough to do anything. He stood and picked up a chair and swung it at Rocks with all the strength he had.

The chair shattered and pieces flew all over the room. Everyone ducked to avoid the flying shards, but the nearest man at the bar, the trucker, didn't move fast enough and was struck in the side by the splintered end of a spindle. He screamed and tumbled off his stool, grabbing and clutching at the wound.

As Rocks staggered he swung an arm at Lucy, but she danced just out of his reach. Rocks turned his stagger into a turn and regained his balance as he faced Art, who was rushing him with a piece of the

broken chair back held like a dagger. Rocks sidestepped and chopped down at Art's extended arm. Art screamed in pain and dropped the sharp piece of wood; he stopped his onrush and gripped his injured arm.

With Art temporarily out of the way, Rocks went after Lucy. He saw her pointing his pistol at him and managed to step out of the way an instant before she pulled the trigger. He dove before she could reaim and his shoulder slammed into her stomach, knocked the air out of her, and sent her sprawling. The pistol flew from her hand and skittered behind the bar. Lucy curled into a fetal ball and threw up from the force of the hit; she lay there gasping for air.

Mina scrabbled after the pistol Lucy dropped and picked it up. She held the weapon with both hands and pointed it, arms extended, at him. "Stop right there. I'll shoot, I swear I'll shoot."

"No you won't," Rocks said and took a step toward her. He could see she had no idea of how to use a firearm, her finger was wrapped around the trigger guard instead of inside it on the trigger. But before he reached her to take the pistol away he had to spin back to face Art.

Art's right forearm and hand were tingly, half numb, from the blow, but this wasn't the time to nurse his injury. He leaped at Rocks, hoping to land on his back, knock him down where he could pound on him and keep him down until one of the women came to his assistance. He had to take one step to get close enough to make his leap. Rocks heard that one footfall.

Rocks didn't have enough time to steady himself before Art barreled into him and the two men tumbled back into the front of the stage. The collision stunned them both. Rocks was the first to recover. He jumped at Drake's body and pulled the pistol from the back of his belt. One handed, he grabbed Mina and flung her at Lucy, who was just now starting to sit up. The two crumpled into a heap. The pistol flew from Mina's hand and lodged itself against the ice maker, Rocks ignored it. He looked around, saw Lucy's clothes, picked them up and threw them at her.

"Get dressed," he snapped. Then to Art, who was recovered from hitting the stage, "Get over there with them." Art moved slowly, watching the pistol all the way. "Down on the floor, on your face, cross your ankles," Rocks ordered him. Art lay prone on the duckboard floor. "Mina, on top of him, on your back, head to his feet." Mina did as she was told, rested her head back on Art's ankles,

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set her feet on the floor alongside his shoulders. "Uh huh. Feet on him, cross your ankles." Mina picked up her feet and crossed her ankles over the back of Art's neck.

Rocks looked at Lucy who still hadn't started to dress. "Get dressed," he said again. His eyes sagged at her mournfully. Why was she being so contrary? he wondered. It was as though she didn't want to go with him, as though she didn't believe a thing he said. He'd just rescued her, she could relax now, she was safe with him.

Lucy held up her blouse and pants. "My bra and panties," she said, half plaintively, half a challenge.

"Where are they?"

Lucy pointed at the stage. Rocks looked, spotted them on the floor next to the coat rack. He barely took his eyes off her. "Give them to me," he said to the two naked women who still held each other on the stage. Emelda let go of the blonde long enough to pick up the garments and shove them at him. He fluffed them in his hand to make sure there wasn't anything concealed in them before tossing them to Lucy. Lucy started to stand to pull on her underwear. "Don't. Get dressed sitting." Lucy shrugged have-it-your-way, and started shuffling awkwardly into her clothing without rising.

Now Rocks gave his attention to the two women who he supposed were both dancers, and the three remaining men. The pudgy man was giving the injured trucker first aid. The would be football player lay unmoving on the stage, sobbing quietly.

"You two," he pointed to the women. "Move some of those tables, make a big open space."

Emelda stood, hopped off the end of the stage, and boldly walked to the tables and chairs. The frizzy blonde folded her legs against herself and lay her arms over her breasts; she looked around for her clothes.

"Now, move it," Rocks snapped at her.

"But, but my clothes," she whined at him.

"Everyone's seen what you've got, you don't need to get dressed. Move it." Reluctantly, she stood, partly bent, arms arranged over pubes and breasts, looking like *September Morn* with a perm. It was one thing for her to dance naked when that was her job, but she wasn't dancing tonight and exposing herself now was different from when she was getting paid for it. "Stand up and move it. Now," Rocks barked. The blonde shot a hollow-eyed look at him.

"Hey, take it easy on her," the pudgy man said.

Rocks moved too fast for any of them to see and stuck his pistol in the man's face. "The next time you say anything without me telling you to you're dead. Understand?"

The pudgy man swallowed and his eyes opened wide. He nodded briskly.

Lucy was dressed now, sat still on the floor watching Rocks.

"Lay down on Mina," Rocks told her. Face down, your head on her feet, your feet on her shoulders."

Lucy glared pure hatred at him. Then she did as she was told. It was a very awkward position, she had to put her hands down on the floor boards for balance. None of the rogues were going to be able to move quickly.

"That's enough," Rocks told the women who were moving the tables and chairs. They had cleared an area ten feet on a side in front of the bar. "You," he gestured to the three men, "lay down on your backs. You," to the wounded one, "on the outside. You other two, one with your head next to his feet, one with your head next to that man's feet. Put a foot of space between you." The pudgy man and the trucker did as Rocks told them. The football player didn't get up, didn't say anything; he limply rolled his head from side to side. Rocks grabbed him one-handed and tossed him over the bar. The man landed with a crash that jarred a cry out of him. "Do it!" Rocks bellowed. The football player whimpered as he awkwardly crawled to the other men, pants still down around his ankles.

"Now you two," he gestured at the women, "lay across them on your backs, put your heads in opposite directions." When the women were in position he gave one more order to the men. "Put your hands on the women and keep them there, where I can see them." The pudgy man and the truck driver snaked their hands up between all the bodies and felt about for neutral places to place their hands on the naked women laying on top of them, they said their excuse-me's. The football player didn't care where his hands landed, he wasn't feeling anything. Rocks grunted his satisfaction when they stilled their movement.

He pulled a stool over to where he could watch the rogues behind the bar and the others at the same time without having to move his head. "Now we wait," he said.

"Wait for what?" Lucy snarled. "Why don't you just get it over with?" Then her voice broke and she sobbed.

Rocks' face showed all the anguish and confusion he felt, it was

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more than he thought he was capable of feeling, and his voice broke as well. He said, "Lucy, why are you acting like that? If you hadn't taken the gun from me, you wouldn't be there now, you'd be sitting next to me. Take it easy, we'll be out of this soon and then everything will be all right forever."

Lucy sobbed loudly at that. *All right forever* meant that he was going to kill her soon -- death was the only thing that was forever.

"What's going to happen to us?" Emelda asked.

"There are local people coming," Rocks answered, half distracted, voice not quite steady. "They'll take care of you while I get these three out of here."

"Cops?" one of the men asked hopefully. "You're a Fed and local cops are on their way?"

"You could say that."

"But it wouldn't be true," Emelda said.

Rocks didn't answer her.

But Lucy did. "He's not a Fed and when the cops get here they're going to find all of us dead."

"Shut up, Lucy," Rocks said harshly.

"The people coming are friends of his and they're going to help him kill us," Lucy continued.

"Stop it, Lucy," Rocks ordered her at the same time she was talking, but she raised her voice loud enough the people could hear her over him.

"They're going to kill all of us!" Lucy screamed at the same time.

"Shut up, Lucy!" Rocks roared.

The frizzy blonde started crying loudly. She covered her face with her hands and rolled into a ball on her side.

"I knew it was drugs," shouted the pudgy man.

"Shut up! Everybody," Rocks roared louder than before.

"No!" shouted the pudgy man. "I'm not laying here and get killed like a sheep." He pushed and shoved and tried to bound to his feet. He never made it, Rocks shot him once through the chest and he collapsed, half onto the blonde. Blood gushed out of his massive wound onto her legs. The blonde screamed and scrambled away toward the darkness that hid the table area from view from the bar.

BOOM! The bullet Rocks put through her back sent her flying into forever-darkness.

Then everybody was shouting and screaming and scrambling

all over the place. Lucy ran at Rocks, fingers extended like talons to gouge his face, tear out his eyes. He fended her off, but Art scooted in the opposite direction and got the pistol from next to the ice maker. He pointed and pulled the trigger. Rocks dove out of the way and collided with Mina, who was trying to run past him to the emergency exit. He grabbed her and held her in front of himself; a shield that wouldn't stop a bullet, but one at which Art might not shoot.

Rocks spotted the naked dancer and the last two men moving toward the emergency exit and pointed the pistol at them. "Stop," he ordered. "Get away from there." They stopped and looked at him, then Emelda said something under her breath and bolted for the door. Rocks shot her through the head. Swearing, he turned to the two men and shot them both down.

During the couple of seconds Rocks was distracted Art and Lucy rushed him and knocked him and Mina over. Art tried to shoot him but didn't pull the trigger because he didn't want to hit Mina. Lucy grabbed Art's hand and ran. The two of them slammed the emergency exit open and ran out. Rocks swore, then grabbed Mina by the back of her blouse and ran out after them. He kept Mina in front of him now that he knew for sure Art wasn't going to shoot at her. Mina stumbled several times, making him half carry her, and slowed him down. By the time they ran around to the front of the Pink Pussy Tail, Art and Lucy were more than halfway across the lot to the Lincoln.

"Stop," Rocks shouted at them. Art spun around and fired at him. Mina jerked under his hand and sagged. Rocks felt a fragment of the bullet slam into the ribs on his left side. He dropped Mina and fell to the pavement and rolled away in time to miss a second bullet that ricocheted off the blacktop next to Mina's body. He tried to aim at one of the two, but Lucy was the only one he could clearly see in the instant before the *slam-slam* of them getting into the Lincoln and closing the doors. Art twisted the ignition key and gunned it, he almost stalled out driving over the bolster dividing the parking lot from the sidewalk and street. The Lincoln fishtailed turning left, toward the Atlantic Ocean.

Rocks slowly stood without firing a shot at the fleeing car. The two shots Art fired at him had probably already drawn too much attention, the police might already be on their way. Rocks ignored the wound in his side, he could tell nothing was broken and knew the bleeding would stop in a moment or two and the wound would heal over soon. He swore briefly, he was certain he could have shot Art if

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the man hadn't been holding Lucy's hand, dragging her along behind him. He had seen Art holding Lucy's hand, hadn't he? She was Art's captive now, he had to rescue her from him. First he had to do something about all the bodies here, especially Drake's and Mina's. He couldn't wait any longer for the locals to show up. He picked up Mina's body and ran back into the Pink Pussy Tail.

He dropped Mina on top of Drake's body and hurried to get the solvent from the utility closet. He poured it over the bodies of the two rogues and dropped a lit match into it. The solvent lit and the flame spread with a whoosh. He stepped back and stood there for a moment, watching the bodies burn and the fire spread to the floor and stage. Then he ran back out and around to the Porsche. He let his engine warm up for a second or two longer than Art had given his. Then he set it in gear and left quickly, not too far above the speed limit. When Seventeenth Street turned into Seabreeze he dropped his speed down to legal and started looking for the Lincoln again. He didn't expect to see it, though, not until he was somewhere far north of Fort Lauderdale. He heard sirens in the background.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

He's crazy, he's insane, he's a murderer," Lucy screamed hysterically. "He shot him and kept shooting him. He just killed him without saying a word. He didn't say anything, he just started shooting him before we even knew he was there." She huddled low in the passenger seat of the Lincoln, hugging herself tightly, her legs were pulled up against her enwrapping arms. "If Mina and I hadn't ducked behind the bar he would have shot us too. Murderer!" She broke down into uncontrolled crying.

They were driving through the towns; Lauderdale-by-the-Sea, Pompano Beach, Deerfield Beach, Boca Raton. The traffic wasn't heavy, but what traffic there was was people going home from late-night drinking spots. Art had to concentrate on driving, he couldn't take enough of his attention from the other drivers weaving on the roads to comfort Lucy, to calm her down. He muttered tensely and tried to beat the traffic lights that were turning red ahead of him; he ran a couple of them and barely avoided break-squealing, cursing cross-traffic at one. He looked for signs that would direct him to I-95, but was concentrating too hard on the street and the other cars and the traffic lights, and was too distracted by Lucy's wailing to see any signs.

"He killed the kid, he killed Drake, and he killed Mina," Lucy cried. "He's going to kill us next, Art."

"We don't know Mina's dead, Lucy," Art snapped. Her crying was getting to him, he didn't think he could take much more of it.

"He killed her," Lucy snapped back. "In the parking lot. You and him were shooting at each other. I saw Mina fall. He shot her, he killed her. I saw it."

"Shut up about it." Art didn't tell her he didn't think Rocks fired his pistol in the parking lot, that he did all the shooting himself. As upset as she was, he certainly wasn't going to tell her he thought he shot Mina himself, even if it was an accident.

After a few minutes Lucy started talking again, her words came out in fragments of sentences and in broken syllables, very softly. Art

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would have had to lean close and pay attention to hear her words and understand her meaning. Instead, he gritted his teeth and ignored the burbling she made between sobs.

"He's followed us all the way across the goddam country," Lucy said in bits between sobs. "He killed the kid. It was horrible the way he killed that poor kid. Oh goddam him to hell! He killed Drake he killed Mina he killed all those people in that place. He's a murderer and he is going to kill us what can we do Art? We have to stop him we have to kill him there's no way to get away from him *ART!*" She screamed out the name, it reverberated in the car, bounced off the windows and repeated itself too fast for the echoes to be heard as anything other than a long, lingering sound. Then she stopped talking. Her body shook, wracked with quiet, violent sobs. Her mind went round and round about Rocks being a murderer; she kept seeing in her mind's eye the bullet going through Drake's eye, she saw time and again the five people Rocks shot in the bar. It never occurred to her to call herself or her companions murderers, they killed lesser beings and that wasn't murder. Only Rocks deserved the name of murderer -- he deserved it for killing her friends and wanting to kill her.

Art finally decided to hell with looking for direction signs and turned onto an west-bound street that looked wide enough to be a feeder for the Interstate highway. He didn't see the sign that said it was. He breathed easier and relaxed a bit when he got onto the highway. He figured the cops wouldn't bust him for driving five miles over the speed limit and goosed it. Then he tensed up again trying to keep his speed down -- every fiber in his body wanted his foot to crush the accelerator pedal to the floor and get as far away as possible from Fort Lauderdale as fast as possible. A few trucks in convoy caught up with him near Riviera Beach and he fell in with them, the seventy-five MPH they were doing felt so much more comfortable than sixty-five. The great bulks of the tractor trailers felt like a fortress around him, a fortress that would keep Rocks from getting to him. His muscles unbunched.

*

Rocks forced himself to stop at the Sheraton Yankee Clipper and go into the telephone lobby. There weren't any booths, the telephones all stuck out of the wall above shiny aluminum shelves. Fortunately, at this hour there wasn't anyone else using a phone, the only person nearby was a bellman who had nothing to do. Rocks glared at him and the man stepped away, out of hearing.

Rocks dropped money into the slot and used his beeper. He managed to not jitter while waiting for the connection to be made. "We've got a royal screw-up," he said at the beep. "They were slaughtering the people in that place, torturing them. I killed their leader to put a stop to it. When I had everything settled down to wait, one of the customers decided he wasn't going to wait to die. That set everybody off. I had to take care of all the witnesses. Two of the rogues got away from me. I set the place on fire to take care of the other two bodies, maybe the cops will think it's drug related. The two who got away are still in the Lincoln, they went north. I want someone to meet me with a radio at," he already had his map on and the GPS showing his position. As he spoke he judged distances, calculating times; how long would it be before the tape was heard, how long for the Ranch to get hold of someone who could meet him, how far he was likely to travel in that time, "the Daytona airport. I'm still in the Porsche with Louisiana plates. I'm not far behind them, maybe ten minutes, maybe less." He paused for a long moment, thinking about whether there was anything he wanted to add. There was. "I don't want anybody to interfere, just get me information about any sightings. Those two are very dangerous, and they're armed. They're too dangerous for anyone else to confront." He hung up and slowly, reflectively, left the phone lobby. It wasn't true that he didn't want anybody else going after them because they were too dangerous. They were dangerous, sure, but that wasn't the real reason. At this point, anyone else who came across the two would kill them -- kill Lucy -- without hesitation. He was the only one who could catch up with them and take them without killing her.

Rocks got into the Porsche and headed north on Seabreeze. He tried to pace himself to get the lights and didn't run any of them. No matter what the local street signs called it, this was Florida's A-1-A highway, before I-95 it was the main north-south freeway on Florida's Atlantic coast and was still heavily traveled. Definitely not where he wanted to catch them in the open.

He might have asked for a cellphone instead of a radio, a cellphone would have been more efficient. But cellphones were too new, and it was the Ma Bell divestiture problem all over again -- in spades. There were too many carriers for them to jigger all of their software and hardware to hide the calls away.

Rocks was tense driving along, not knowing where they were, how far ahead, if they'd turned off and gone aground somewhere. He

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didn't think it was likely they'd gone aground, he thought they were putting distance between themselves and him. There was only one way they could go if that's what they were doing. With a little bit of luck, Rocks could get ahead of them and let them run into him someplace where Art was looking back over his shoulders, surprise him so much he'd have them both before they realized he was there. He was tense as he drove along, but not as tense as Art had been.

Rocks turned off the A-1-A in Pompano and got onto 1-95. He hitched himself onto the end of a short convoy of tractor trailers and rode its 70 MPH wake north. He didn't notice the Lincoln that inserted itself into the convoy several trucks ahead of him near Riviera Beach.

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Some three and a half hours after hooking onto the end of the convoy, Rocks dropped off and pulled into the parking lot of the Daytona Beach airport. He didn't get out and go into the terminal, he sat quietly in the predawn dark and observed. There were few other cars in the lot, Daytona doesn't get much late night traffic. Four cars were clumped together in one big shadow near the lot entrance, three others sat as lonely shadows elsewhere. After a couple of moments one of the lonely shadows wobbled as the unseen person in it moved and opened the door to get out. A smaller shadow bumped above that shadow-car and moved. In seconds, Rocks saw the smaller shadow was a man walking toward him. He didn't move to get out; he sat unmoving, one hand on his pistol, the other on the top of the steering wheel.

The man stopped six feet away from the front of the car and looked at Rocks, looked at the Porsche, looked back at Rocks.

"You the man I'm supposed to meet?" the stranger asked.

"If you've got the radio, I am."

The man studied him for a moment, then asked, "How do I know you're that man?"

Rocks didn't lift his hand from the steering wheel, just raised a few fingers. They should have been invisible against the shadow of his body. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three. What does that prove?"

"If I wasn't the man you're supposed to meet, would I know you could see my fingers in the dark?"

"Got a point," the man said. "Show me what you're holding in the hand I can't see."

Rocks raised his right hand with the automatic in it, he kept it

in front of his body so the stranger couldn't see its silhouette.

"Baretta?"

"Ruger." He lowered the pistol.

"That's what they told me you were carrying." The shadow-man seemed to relax and came over to the driver's door. "Sorry if I gave you a hard time, but with those rogues out there, we gotta be extra careful."

"No problem," Rocks said and reached for the offered radio. "I needed to know who you were, too. Your questions told me." He flipped the radio's on-off switch a couple of times and twisted the volume and squelch dials, listened to the changing static as he did. He held the radio to his head, pressed the speak button, and said into it, "This is Blood Hunter, Blood Hunter. Any station expecting to talk to me, come in. This is Blood Hunter, over."

"Blood Hunter, this is Blue Ribbon." The voice crackled with too much static. Rocks made an adjustment. "Blood Hunter, Blue Ribbon. How do you hear me, over."

"I hear you well enough, Blue Ribbon. You me? Over."

"Well enough, Blood Hunter."

"Blood Hunter out."

Rocks turned radio off and set it down on the passenger seat. He turned back to the stranger. "Thanks," he said. Then shifted into gear and pulled away without another word or a glance back. The stranger stood there for a moment longer watching the taillights of the Porsche grow small, then returned to his own car and went home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Emotions conflicted on Abe's face when he told Rocks about it. He was angry at Rocks for not telling him more about Tanya, angry at himself for not trusting his own judgment. Hell, he should of called it all off when she wouldn't say anything to anybody on the whole damn trip, especially when the other trainers told him she hadn't spoken to either of them in more than a week. He was upset with himself for letting her get away -- he had a chance to stop her and he blew it and he knew he blew it. It was just that...

"Dammit Rocks, when she took her dress off and washed that poor bastard's blood all over herself I just froze. I never seen nobody do that afore, not even the rogues I hunted down personal. By the time I unfroze and started to say something it was too late. She had her dress back on and was running like a Kiowa maiden being chased by Cheyenne bucks. We looked for her for two nights and three days and all we could do was clean up after her. She made a real mess." He shook his head and spat into the dirt, just missing his boots. "What the hell happened afore you brought her in here, boy?"

"I don't know, Abe. I think it was just she didn't get the right training fast enough." Rocks hung his head and looked like a whipped dog.

"That girl killed five people in two nights. Then she flat disappeared. We couldn't find hide nor hair of her after that. She didn't have no money or nothing, all she had when we left here was the clothes on her back. And not much of them." He shook his head again at the memory of her slipping off her dress and being naked under it. "Alls I can think is she robbed them folks she killed and used their money to get away. Must of been. One of them was a woman didn't have a purse, one was a man had his wallet tossed aside empty. Now we gotta get someone go after her and bring her in."

Rocks didn't look up. He dry-washed his face and mumbled, "She's mine, I changed her. I'm responsible for what she's doing. I'll

go after her."

Abe studied him for a long moment before saying, "You know if you can't bring her back in, you have to kill her. Think you can do that?"

"I can bring her in."

"She ain't talking, boy. I never seen one before that didn't talk, not unless they was so far gone there was nothing could be done for them. What if you can't bring her in? Can you kill her? Boy, you're in love. Love does things to people. You really think you can kill the woman you love?"

"I won't have to. I'll be able to bring her in."

"We'll see."

*

The council met. They agreed that Tanya was Rocks' responsibility, he should go after her. But they didn't trust him to kill her if that was necessary. Someone else, they never told Rocks about it, also volunteered to go after her, someone more willing to kill her than talk her back in.

"This is a sad lesson for all of us," the council leader said at the end of the discussion. "We're all human, we've always been human and we have all the feelings, weaknesses, and failings of other humans. But it's damn dangerous for one of us to fall in love with someone who isn't one of us, someone who hasn't gone through the training. Someone in love loses perspective. Becoming a vampire plays severely on the human psyche, few people are able to deal with the need to kill other human beings in order to stay alive. The new vampire needs proper training immediately in order to guarantee that new person won't go crazy. It's been said often that as soon as someone is changed, that person needs to be brought in for the training. Unfortunately, nobody ever bothered to tell Rocks that, and now we have a rogue on our hands. Maybe we should make that part of the training, impress it on everyone from the very beginning. But it's seldom happened that one of us tries to change someone without consulting with someone here at the ranch. It rarely happens that one of us changes someone and that one immediately goes rogue, but when it does..." He let his voice trail off and shook his head. To Rocks he added, "You've never gone after a rogue, no one's ever told you how it's done. Someone will equip you and instruct you on how to do it."

That was the end of the hearing.

Two days later Rocks set out, properly instructed and equipped.

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Tanya had been sighted. She was in San Diego where she killed a sailor who had just returned from the war in Vietnam.

*

Tanya didn't stay in San Diego very long before heading north. In 1968 San Diego wasn't a good place for someone like her; the place had too many Marines just back from the war, men who had sharply honed combat reflexes. Hunting was too treacherous for her there. Not that she didn't think she could kill even a battle-hardened Marine, but it was a lot more dangerous than she felt like dealing with. Any predator will go for the easier game rather than risk suffering a hunting injury. Neither did she linger in Oceanside or San Clemente; they were the liberty towns for Camp Pendleton; the Marine base there also had too many recent combat veterans. She kept going north until she reached Los Angeles.

Los Angeles, the City of the Angles, the city of stars. City of glass and tinsel and unreality. Tanya thought it somehow fitting that there should be a vampire in Los Angeles. Los Angeles was big and sprawling. Full of the famous, the would-be famous, and the just plain kooky -- so full of the odds, ends, peculiarities, and dregs of American society it was anonymous. Tanya looked at Los Angeles and thought she'd never be found there.

It only took three days for Rocks to track her down.

*

If you start off at the legendary intersection of Hollywood and Vine and go east on Hollywood, past Orange and La Brea, you'll reach Nichols Canyon. Hollywood Boulevard then takes a twist or turn or two, and ends at fashionable Laurel Canyon. Before reaching Nichols Canyon proper, if you turn right you'll find yourself in Wattles Gardens Park. Keep going up the park and you'll be in Runyon Canyon Park.

Hey, neat! Right smack in the middle of what was then the third largest city in the country, a city that was growing so fast it was splitting at its sprawling seams, there were -- still are, for that matter -- densely populated, fashionable residential areas in canyons too geologically unsound for permanent buildings, and green parks where you can expect a house to stay where you put it.

If you're driving past Wattles Gardens Park on Hollywood -- and why wouldn't you be driving past? In Los Angeles, everybody drives past everyplace -- you would probably think it's just another one of the little parks that stud Los Angeles; but Wattles Gardens and

Runyon Canyon go deep, away from the Boulevard. On the other hand, if you're one of the few people who turn into it and start walking through the park at night, it seems a properly big enough park for a city the size of Los Angeles. Hell, it seems to go on forever when you're walking at night and don't know how big it is. But nobody ever walks through it at night; this is Los Angeles, the city Detroit allowed to grow horizontally instead of vertically. Driving, you'd just go past. After all, nobody walks anywhere in Los Angeles at night.

Rocks wasn't nobody, he just wasn't anybody anyone expected; he walked in Los Angeles. He walked past the entrance to Wattles Gardens Park. Then he turned back and walked into it. He didn't care that nobody ever did that. There was someone in the park, someone he had to find.

There was a social function on the fringes of the park that night. There was often a social function somewhere nearby at night. One of the tuxedoed partiers went out for a walk in the moonlight with the lady he wished to have for his own for the evening. He had a glass of champagne in one hand and an uncorked bottle in the other. Just in case, he also had a flask of cognac in his pocket. She had a glass of champagne in her hand and a lot of doubt in her mind. It wasn't that she had any particular objections to spending the night with a married man who wasn't her own husband, it was this particular married man. Besides, her husband was also at this social function and getting away from him for the night could prove to be awkward, and she hated public scenes that she didn't create herself.

They found the blanket he'd stashed earlier in the evening and settled down to drink and talk around how and whether they were going to spend any of this night together, and if so how much of it. That's when she saw the ghost.

She called it a ghost anyway. He said she was imagining things, if she saw anything it was just someone else doing the same thing they were doing. She insisted no, others doing what they were doing wouldn't be a lone woman with a transparent aura about her as she stood watching. The ghost tipped the balance in favor of her -- if not fidelity, at least not spending the night with this particular married man. He guessed she made up the ghost for just that reason and sat alone drinking the champagne. Then, sonofabitch, he saw the ghost, too.

The ghost had long, fair hair, longer than anyone else he knew. The loose dress this ghost wore was thin enough the moon behind it

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shown through and gave her welcoming-body shape a bubble outline. Light from somewhere sparkled off her smiling teeth. She held out a beckoning hand to him and softly padded backward as he came toward her. When he approached faster she danced lightly just out of his grasp.

When she thought they were far enough away from where she found him that no one looking for him would find them all that fast, she let him get near enough he probably never even saw the reflection off the blade of the knife that plunged into his throat, severed his jugular and carotid, and sent his life spewing into the night. He tried to scream, but couldn't make any noise through his destroyed larynx. He couldn't even resist when she knocked him to the ground and sucked at his flowing, spurting blood.

Rocks found her there. She was naked, squatting over the dead man, bathing herself in his blood.

"Tanya," Rocks whispered.

Her head snapped up, a feral animal threatened. She hissed and rose to a crouch and started backing away. Her eyes darted side to side, seeking a clear avenue of escape. Her long, long, beautiful hair hung in matted clumps.

Rocks stepped to the corpse and picked up her shift from the ground alongside it. He held out the dress. "Tanya, here, put this on."

She spat at him and backed away another step.

"Tanya, it's me, Rocks. Don't be afraid. I've come to take you home." He couldn't keep the fear out of his own voice; not fear of her, fear of what was happening to her. "Please, Tanya." He tossed the shift toward her so it fluttered down by her side, close enough for her to reach without having to look away from him. "Get dressed. Please. We'll go somewhere and get you cleaned up. Then we will," he sensed he was about to say something wrong and changed it, "then we can go someplace where they can't find us. Tanya?" He tried not to think of the .45 automatic that lay so heavy in its holster under his jacket.

Tanya didn't pick up the dress, neither did she continue backing away. Her eyes stopped shifting to the sides, she looked straight at him -- he felt she was looking through him. She did see every move he made, though. She hissed and slapped in his direction when he took a step forward. He stepped back. She stood slightly crouched, feet spread, one slightly ahead of the other, swaying side to side, looking through him -- or past him. There was no intelligence in her eyes, only wild animal.

Rocks stood still, hands out to his sides, palms facing her. He assumed as peaceful and friendly an expression as his face could form. He talked slowly, gently. She didn't seem to hear a word he said, or even notice the calming sound of his voice. Finally he tried something different. "Tanya, look at me. I'm going to sit down. See? I'm sitting. I can't do anything to you while I'm sitting. It's okay, Tanya." He sat cross-legged with his forearms on his knees, hands held open, palms up.

Tanya didn't move for a long moment, not even to shift her eyes with his movement. Her eyes stayed fixed: they had been looking through him, they now looked over him. She started swaying again.

Rocks continued talking softly. Calm, gentle words that were meant only to sooth her, he had no idea of what he was saying, the exact words didn't matter. He succeeded in calming himself, sharply relieving his own tension. So he wasn't ready for it when Tanya moved.

Instantly, she went from a gentle sideways sway to a sprinter's takeoff. She skirted around him, just far enough away that had he dove for her his fingertips could only have brushed her leg as she flew past. Rocks didn't dive for her, but he did spin about and come up halfway to a stand. He saw Tanya leap onto the body in the tuxedo and wondered if she was going to feed more, if she hadn't had time enough to sate her hunger. He never knew whether she was sated, he was wrong about her motive. Her arm flashed in the moonlight and then she was back on her feet facing him again. In her hand was the knife she'd killed with.

Rocks stared stunned as Tanya advanced, circling toward him; she held the knife low, businesslike.

"Tanya?" he said softly; his voice almost cracked. "Tanya, this is Rocks. You know me. I love you, Tanya."

She made a sound deep in her throat, it sounded like a growl, and she slashed the air with the knife, kept coming slowly toward him.

Rocks turned just as slowly, kept himself facing her. He did not rise fully erect, but into a crouch less deep than hers. The first time she lunged at him he twisted aside and threw his hands up, letting the blade slide harmlessly though the air where he had been. Tanya snarled and spun away, anticipating hands reaching for her, hands that didn't reach.

"Tanya, stop. Don't do this, Tanya."

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She came at him again and he dodged her blade again. The third time she didn't lunge straight in, she fainted and slashed. She guessed right and the blade drew blood from his side.

Rocks slapped a hand over the wound. It was shallow and he knew the bleeding would stop soon. He crouched lower and held out his free hand. "Tanya, stop. I'm not fighting you, Tanya. Can't you see that?" He was almost crying.

Tanya smiled at his sobs and came in like a fury. They grappled and tumbled and rolled about, her trying to stab him, him trying to break the knife from her hand. She suddenly shifted the angle at which she was pushing and his hand had no resistance against it. His hand went with the movement of Tanya's arm. He tightened his grip and twisted the blade away from himself.

A scream pierced the night. A few party-goers near the edge of the park looked about, looked at each other nervously, wondered how big that cat was, edged toward brighter lights and safety. But it wasn't a cat, it was Tanya. The knife ripped her side.

Rocks disentangled himself and knelt to examine the wound that took the fight from Tanya. He tossed the knife aside. Her chest and belly heaved in her struggle to breathe, the blade had torn her open under her ribs and plunged upward into a lung. "Don't move, Tanya. Here, put your hand on it, slow down the bleeding. I'll be right back." He fumbled with her hands, they weren't big enough to cover the entire length of the opening in her side. He bounded to where he'd tossed her shift. When he turned back she was charging him, the recovered knife extended like a sword. Her lips were pulled back in a rictus. Blood flowed and flew from her side, bubbled between her lips.

Rocks managed to avoid the blade but still she bowled into him and knocked him over. They grappled more, with him trying to get the knife from her once more. He did and this time he didn't toss it away. He rolled away. "Tanya, stop," he snapped. "It's no use fighting me, Tanya. I'm stronger than you and I've got your knife now, you can't hurt me."

She screamed again and rushed him. They tangled and somehow that he was never able to reconstruct, Tanya's chin came down on the point of the blade and it rammed up through her tongue and palate and embedded itself in her brain. She clutched the knife and rolled away, trying to scream but was unable to with her mouth pinned shut. She yanked hard on the knife hilt, but used a sawing motion that opened up more of her flesh, damaged her brain, caused

blood to flood out. She spasmed. Her body bucked and gurgling noises came from her throat.

Rocks dropped down and jerked the knife out. He pressed his hand under her chin to halt the flow of blood, but that did nothing to ease the loss from inside her mouth. She arched once more, shuddered violently from head to feet, then died and was still.

Rocks held her and rocked back and forth, sobbing, until he heard people moving about, calling for someone. Then he slipped Tanya's shift over her head and down her body to cover her nakedness and carried her away. He didn't care if the searching people found the man in the tuxedo.

*

This was Los Angeles, Tinseltown. If anybody saw him, nobody gave him a second thought. Especially not after he got back onto Hollywood Boulevard, this center of illusion. Maybe a couple of tourists stopped and gawked, tried to place his face, remember which grade B horror movies they'd seen him in. They knew about the Stanislawski Method, where an actor immerses himself into a role to the point where he lives the character. Even more than the young man who staggered hollow-eyed under his burden, they might have marveled at the dedication of the actress to her craft. Damn, if they hadn't known that all that blood on her dress and the gaping hole under her chin were makeup, they would have sworn they were watching a crazed killer carrying away the body of his victim for some nefarious, probably necrophilic, purpose.

But if there were any tourists gawking, Rocks didn't notice them. He didn't notice anybody until a car eased alongside, stopped a few yards to his front. The driver got out, approached him, gently took Tanya from his arms.

"Let's go this way, buddy," the stranger said. Rocks didn't recognize the stranger, could never later remember what he looked like. But he did know the man's eyes; they were the eyes of someone like him. The man lay Tanya's body in the backseat of his car, tried to guide Rocks around to the front passenger seat. Rocks ignored his helping hand and crawled into the back seat with Tanya and lay there clutching her limp form to himself. The stranger shrugged, threw a blanket over them, got in, and drove away.

At the Ranch they had to pry Rocks' arms from around her so she could be buried. Then they had to spoon feed him like a baby for several days. They talked to him, but he didn't seem to notice anybody

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was there, much less talk back. Even Abe couldn't get through to him.

So it went until one day, totally fed up with what he saw as nonsense, Abe smacked Rocks upside the head hard enough to knock him from the chair he was sitting on.

Rocks shuddered, pushed himself half up into a sitting position on the floor, rubbed his face, asked Abe, "Why'd you do that?"

"Because you're acting like some kind a selfish asshole what lets good people waste their time and energy caring for him and he don't care nothing for them."

Rocks climbed to his feet, looked Abe in the eye, and said, "I'm sorry."

"Let's talk, boy."

Rocks nodded and followed Abe outside. They got into a pickup and Abe drove for hours until they got into the mountains before he stopped someplace where there was no one in sight or hearing.

"Tell me about it," Abe said when they were settled in the shade of a rock overhang.

"I killed her," Rocks said in a hollow voice.

Abe shrugged. "You had to."

"I loved her."

Abe nodded. "I loved someone onct or twice myself. Hurts like hell if'n you have to hurt someone you truly love."

"It's wrong for someone to do what I did."

Abe shook his head. "It's never wrong to do what you have to do, it just hurts more if you don't want to do it."

"No one should ever have to do what I did."

Abe shrugged. "Sometimes there's no getting around it."

"I died myself when I killed her."

Abe nodded and grimaced. "Sure feels like it. I onct hurt someone I loved, I know what it feels like."

Rocks and Abe looked at each other and Abe wondered how long it would take for that bright and happy young man to recover from the hurting in his soul.

"Me killing Tanya was an evil thing for me to do. I'm tainted now, and I'm dead. It's wrong for anybody else to have to go through what I did, for anyone else to feel the way I do. From now on, whenever someone needs to be hunted down, I'll do it."

Abe shook his head. "That ain't the way we do it. Purely ain't right for one man to have to do all that."

*

Rocks insisted and the council met. There was debate and consensus was never reached, but they decided to give it a try: One man would be the designated hunter, the only person to go after rogues. Try it for a few years, see how it worked. It started temporary, eventually became permanent without ever again being officially discussed or voted on. Abe kept in touch with Rocks and saw him from time to time. But he never heard him laugh or saw him smile from the day he told him Tanya ran away in Las Vegas until the day that grizzly killed him.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

It was dawn when Rocks hit Jacksonville. His stomach was asking for breakfast and the rest of his body was calling for a sleep stop. He hadn't slept in twenty-four hours or eaten since dinner. So what, he thought. He was going to stay on the move until the hunger hit him or until he got a positive fix on Lucy and Art. Unless his mind faded and he had to stop because continuing was too dangerous. He didn't think his mind would fade. That Los Angeles night in 1968 was too clear in his mind, had been dredged up from under all the scar tissue that had grown over it during the many years since. The little black box he'd hidden it away in was exposed and breeched. There was no putting it back, he could only go on until he caught up with Lucy and, loving her, and with her love in return, exorcised that little black box.

Drive on, his mind ordered. His body drove on.

The radio crackled at him, he picked it up, it told him they were seen crossing into Georgia on US 1 at Boulegne. He checked the map to figure out where to find US 1. While he was fighting his way through Jacksonville their lead increased from 35 miles to 50. Rocks gritted his teeth and drove on. Near Oak Park another radio message switched him to I-16. North of Dublin, the ground started rising in ridges. Near Macon the radio told him to stay with I-16 until it merged with I-75, then stay with I-75 and keep going northwest. The land became steeper and more up-and-down beyond Macon. Somewhere along the line Rocks had to stop and download a fresh map. Rocks looked at the map and simply shook his head; the lines representing the highways showed long, sweeping curves, the roads he'd seen had a lot of short, jagged turns. He didn't have a map the right scale to show the detail he wanted. He was still twenty-five miles from Atlanta when the radio told him to turn right when he reached I-285, the beltway around Atlanta. His map told him he could cut off a few miles if he turned onto I-475 to get to the beltway. Just before he reached I-285 the radio told him they turned north onto US 19 and that

someone was following them, keeping track for him. He smiled when he looked at his map; if the report had the time right, he'd cut their lead in half going through Georgia. He applied a little more pressure to the gas pedal and weaved through the traffic.

*

"Where are we going Art?" Lucy asked. The strain of this long run sounded in her voice.

"To the mountains, cunt." Art spared her a quick glance. "Remember where we met and what I was doing? There's mountains up ahead. I come from mountains, I know how to move around in them, how to live and survive in mountains. That's where we can let him catch us. When he does, I've got his ass."

Lucy stared at him, frightened, but grim. "Are you sure he's still following us?"

"No screaming shit he's still following us. He got to New Orleans the day after we did. He found us in Fort Lauderdale the night after we got there. He's behind us all right."

They rode on in silence for a while longer, then Lucy said, "We need to stop, Art. I'm hungry and I need some sleep."

Art shook his head. "No fucking way we're stopping now. You wanna sleep, get in the backseat. You can wait until we get to the mountains to eat, I know how to feed us there. That sonofabitch's probably no more than an hour behind us right now. No fucking way I'm stopping before we reach the mountains."

US 19 turned this way and that, it went through Alpharetta and Coal Mountain and Dahlonega and places with even less probable names. It went through towns and villages and places so small they weren't noted on the map. It wended its way up into the southern end of the Appalachian Mountains, eventually reached into the Chattahoochee National Forest. Art left the highway at State 60, left it at some unmarked park road. He noticed that behind him a Toyota that he first saw on the beltway was still there.

"We got him," Art told Lucy. "He's right behind us."

Lucy jerked violently and twisted around in the seat. "Where?" she asked. All she could see was a Toyota flitting through the trees a quarter mile behind. In one brief straight away she got a look at the face of the man at the wheel; she couldn't see the driver well enough to be certain he was the man she'd spent time with in that New Orleans guest house, not the man who tried to kill her in Fort Lauderdale.

"Oh, that's him all right," Art insisted. "Watch, I'll show you."

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The road turned in a hairpin and ducked down behind a huge boulder. Art drove a little beyond the boulder to where the trees alongside the road were thin enough to cram the Lincoln in off the road. He jammed the car so hard against a tree in the small space he crumpled the grill and cracked the radiator. He didn't care what kind of damage he caused the car, he didn't expect to use it again -- and he wanted it to look like there'd been an accident. The Toyota had followed them along this isolated road, if it didn't stop to offer help to the evident accident victims that would be all the proof Art needed that the driver was the man who'd followed them across the country.

"Let's go." Art reached past Lucy to open her door and shoved her through. He left by the driver's door, ran around the back end of the Lincoln, grabbed Lucy's hand, and ran into the woods, backtracking up the road. The Toyota whined into the turn and Art went down, pulling Lucy with him. She didn't see him pull the pistol out, but there it was, in his hand. The Toyota seemed to jerk when the Lincoln came into view, but it didn't stop; instead, it picked up speed and went past. Art didn't see the driver's face, he wasn't looking at it.

Lucy did look. "That's not him," she said.

"That's okay," Art said. "If it's not him it's a friend of his driving and he's hidden in the back seat. He thinks he's too smart for us. He's going on past, a mile down he's going to stop and come back for us on foot." He grinned at her. "We've probably got an hour before he gets back. That gives us time to set a trap."

They worked fast -- Art was pleased with how quickly Lucy caught on to what he was doing. In well less than an hour they had three deadfalls set around the Lincoln; one by the driver's door, one alongside the road coming toward it, one in the woods at a place Art said was a good approach to the car. All of the material they scrounged for the deadfalls came from on the other side of the road so their quarry wouldn't notice anything awry as he came near.

"Won't kill anything big enough to trip them," Art said when they got the third deadfall set up, "but they'll let us know where he is and slow him down long enough for me to get him." They settled into a hiding place he had located while he was selecting the locations for the traps and waited. The sun went down and he hadn't come yet. They waited another two hours until the growling in Art's stomach was louder than that in Lucy's.

"Where the fuck is that sonofabitch?" Art stood. "We need food."

*

The radio told Rocks about the Lincoln being run into the trees below the hairpin. He thanked the voice on the radio. Then he decided if they were headed off the main roads and heading into the forest on foot he better stop for dinner before going down that country road himself. Dahlonga had a place where he could get a meal, he backtracked to it. Then it was night. He hadn't slept in a day and a half and now he was going to spend however many hours it took, tramping through an unfamiliar forest in the dark trying to find them. He found a place he could park the Porsche without being disturbed and curled up for a couple hours of sleep -- and to drink a half pint of blood.

He didn't feel great when he woke up, but the nap had taken the edge off his tiredness. Now he could be alert until dawn, longer if absolutely necessary. He hoped it wouldn't be necessary. He headed into the forest.

The Toyota's driver wasn't a native of the mountains, but he did spend enough time vacationing and backpacking in them to be familiar with this part of the forest. He followed the small road around until it hit a state road that took him back to 60 and went along it until he reached the road again where he went onto it. He parked and waited. When the Porsche showed up he got out and gave directions to its driver. He'd never seen that man before and hoped he never would again. Even at night, seen close up, the expression in that man's eyes was frightening. He watched the Porsche turn onto the dirt road, got back into his Toyota and went home. He didn't think he'd need the radio anymore.

*

Rocks tooled slowly down the road, using his parking lights instead of the headlights. When he estimated he was still half a mile from the hairpin he found a place to pull off the side of the road and got out. He got out his pistol and checked to make sure there was a round in the chamber, then walked crosscountry from there. The road hairpinned down to the left, so he followed it on that side, looking for the huge boulder. He blanked his mind of conscious thought and let his senses absorb everything they could about the forest.

His eyes picked out the way leaves and twigs moved in vagrant breezes, how night-hunting lizards made them shift, how branches bounced when owls landed on them. His ears distinguished the rustling of breeze-blown leaves, the skittering of small nocturnal

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mammals in the mulch underfoot, the high-pitched squeals of bats. He felt in tune with the forest by the time the boulder loomed in front of him.

He found where the road twisted back on itself then found a place in the deepest shadows to sit and watch and listen. The Lincoln was right there, about forty feet from his hiding place, jammed into the trees like the man in the Toyota said. Rocks looked at the car and decided it hadn't moved since the man first saw it there.

A straight line where there should have been only twisty, turny, curved lines, caught his eye. His eye followed it up as it climbed off vertical and disappeared into the foliage. He kept looking until he saw where it emerged again, split into two, and supported the two ends of a short log that was almost directly above the point where it rose from the ground. He looked down there and saw fragments of a straight line through the ground cover. A trap. Had he gone to the Lincoln to check it out from the driver's side he probably would have tripped the deadfall. He didn't think the deadfall could kill, or even seriously injure him, but it could probably slow him down for a few moments. If Art was close by, maybe the deadfall would slow him down enough long enough for Art to close in and make his kill. Rocks hadn't thought of the possibility of booby traps around the car, but he knew there might be a trap, an ambush, somewhere near it. Now he knew for sure. He kept looking and listening. Sooner or later either Art or Lucy would make some noise that would tell him where they were. All he had to do was be patient. Then it didn't matter how many traps Art had set, Rocks would get past them. Get past them to kill Art and rescue Tanya. Rocks shook his head and corrected himself: Rescue Lucy.

All those years waiting for the phone to ring had taught Rocks a preternatural patience. He could wait there until the hunger drove him to action, so it didn't bother him that he had to wait three hours before he heard a noise not made by the air in the trees or by nocturnal animals. He was a little surprised by where he heard the noise. He heard someone trip in the woods, a couple of hundred yards away, along the road; the road acted as a hearing horn to bring the noise to him. The tripping noise was followed by a low complaint, quickly cut off; Lucy's voice.

Rocks smiled to himself; they must have thought he was in the Toyota and gone looking for him since he hadn't come into their trap. Art must have put his hand over Lucy's mouth to quiet her, that's why

her voice stopped so abruptly. Art was hunting him. There was no longer any doubt in Rocks' mind that Art had to die. He wondered briefly if Art was using any force to make Lucy stay with him or if she remained by his side because she was afraid of getting lost. Rocks eased the pistol's safety off.

There was no more noise for another ten minutes; Rocks saw them before he heard them again. Art came around the bend in the road, creeping softly on the edge of it against the trees. Lucy was tucked in behind him. Art was looking all around and tipping his head slowly side to side, trying to look at everything, hear all sounds; he held the pistol like he knew how to use it. Rocks was too deep in the shadows for him to spot. Lucy was also looking around, but not as much as Art; it was obvious to Rocks Art had tracking experience and Lucy didn't.

That's okay, Lucy, he thought. If you want to learn I can teach you when this is all over.

Art stopped when he saw the Lincoln and stood still for a few minutes watching it. Then he crept forward again until he was near it. He looked at the deadfall, saw it was still in place. Rocks watched him go on from there, saw him check two more places that Rocks had to assume were other deadfalls he couldn't see from where he was. Rocks willed Art to come back, to come closer to where he was hiding than the Lincoln was. Art obliged.

When Art and Lucy were back on the road Rocks lifted his pistol in both hands and pointed it at them. The two stopped less than thirty feet away on the other side of the road and put their heads together. They talked softly enough that even that close Rocks couldn't make out what they were saying. He aimed as carefully as he could; it was dark enough that even with his eyesight he could barely make out the sights on his pistol. He squeezed the trigger rapidly three times. No going for finesse now, not in the dark under the trees, go for multiple hits to take him out and keep him there. The muzzle flashes seemed for an instant to blow away the night.

Art bucked and staggered, he reached out to Lucy for balance and knocked her down with his own fall. His pistol went off when he hit the ground, the bullet ricocheted off a stone and skipped harmlessly into the night sky.

Rocks was on his feet, sprinting toward them even before Art landed and the ground set off his pistol. "Lucy, I'm here," he cried as he came. "It's all right, I'm here for you, Tanya!"

Lucy scrambled to her feet and ran. She didn't know where she was going, just away from that voice, from that madman who wanted to kill her. Her path took her past the Lincoln and her flying foot hit the trip on the deadfall and it sent her sprawling. She was going fast enough that her momentum carried her beyond the impact point of the log section. She regained her feet and kept running. Rocks imagined he saw long red hair trailing behind her.

Rocks paused long enough to make sure Art was dying and to disarm him. Then he rushed headlong into the forest where Lucy disappeared. He heard her crashing through the brush ahead of him. "Tanya," he cried, "Lucy, stop! It's me, it's Rocks. I've come to take you to safety, Tanya. Stop, Lucy, everything's all right now, Tanya! We can go home now." She kept running and he kept chasing.

Rocks was faster and stronger, he was less afraid of the night forest than Lucy was. He caught her quickly, grabbed her wrist, spun her around to face him, pulled her into his arms. "I'm here, Tanya. It's me, Rocks. You can stop running, everything's all right now," he sobbed into her ear. She flailed at him. He thought her pounding on his head and shoulders was a clumsy attempt to hug him. He pressed his mouth against hers, she screamed he terror into his mouth. He thought it was a cry of passion. She wept. He thought the tears running from her eyes to his face were relief. She kicked at him. He thought she was signaling she needed to catch her breath. He broke off his kiss and rubbed a hand over her face, moved it down and clutched a breast. He breathed heavily when he said, "I found you, Tanya. It's all over now."

She screamed. This time he heard fear instead of passion and flinched. "Tanya, what's the matter?"

"You're going to kill me!" she screamed. "I'm not your damn Tanya. Whatever you did to her, you're not going to do it to me." He didn't see her horrified expression, his eyes were filling with tears of joy and confusion, nor did he hear her denial; he thought her say she was his Tanya come back to him.

"And you're going to rape me first," she screamed.

That he heard. "Tanya, no!" he wailed.

Her hands started running over his body. "That's right, no. You're not going to do either." Her questing hands found the pistol he'd taken from Art and pulled it from his belt. Somehow, her finger found its way inside the finger guard and jerked, the bullet thudded into a tree. She screamed again when the slide recoiled into the soft

flesh of her side. His grip loosened when she screamed and she broke away from him. She ignored the pain in her side and pointed the pistol at him. "You're not going to rape me. You're not killing me, either. I've got you now and I'm going to kill you! I don't care what you did to your precious Tanya. I'll bet you killed her, you sonofabitch." She jerked the trigger again, but the bullet went wide. She was better prepared for the recoil now, but not enough and the pistol almost flew out of her hands.

Rocks stepped forward when she fired and grabbed her hands where they came around the pistol's grip. "No, no, Tanya! I don't want to kill you, Tanya, not ever again. I love you!" She pulled the trigger again when he tried to wrench the pistol away from her. The bullet hit him a grazing blow on the forehead and knocked him back. He stumbled and fell over.

She shot again at the dimly seen bulk of his body on the ground, and missed again. She staggered forward to try again from closer. She was screaming almost incoherently, but he could hear *I hate you* and *You're not going to kill me*. She stood above him, shoulders hunched to hold the pistol steady in her hands as she pointed it down at him. The muzzle was just over two feet away, she knew she couldn't miss at this range.

"You killed all of my friends," she said, her crying almost made her words too indistinct to make out. "Now I'm going to kill you and go make some new friends."

Rocks rolled away just as she pulled the trigger and sent a bullet into the ground where he had lain.

Her words got through to him, broke him from the fantasy he'd been living in. Make some new friends, she said. With those words he finally understood that she didn't believe anything he'd told her, that she believed the old legends. He understood she believed he intended to kill her. He didn't have to think of the implications of her making new friends. Tanya was giving him no choice, he had to kill her again. He raised his pistol and pulled the trigger. He didn't miss.

*

In the morning a white-tailed deer moved downwind, browsing along a particularly succulent row of foliage. Usually the deer would go upwind in order to smell any potential danger before reaching it, but this grazing was too rich to leave. The deer came on a most strange sight and stared at it for a moment before bounding away to safety. So did all the other forest animals that came unexpected onto

this tableau.

Rocks sat with Lucy's body in his lap, his arms wrapped around her, rocking back and forth, keening softly. He shed no tears, there were none to shed. In the more than twenty years since the last time he'd cried his tear ducts had nearly atrophied. On this night he exhausted what tears he was capable of. It wasn't until the sun was at its zenith and he heard a car on the road above the hairpin that he finally stopped his rocking and keening. He gently laid her aside and went to take care of the car. If the driver stopped he'd kill him. Drink his blood. Then load Lucy and Art into his car and take their bodies away. If the driver didn't stop, that meant he had time to dispose of them before anybody else came along.

It was the Toyota. The driver stopped but didn't get out until he saw Rocks appear from the woods. He swallowed when he saw the wound on the other man's forehead and the blood on his clothes, but didn't say anything about it. He lamely gestured at Art's corpse.

"Thought if you were still here you might want some help with them," he said.

"Thanks." Rocks helped the man load Art into the back of the Toyota, but wouldn't let him touch his Tanya when he carried her from where he'd left her, wouldn't let him help put her in the car. He sat stiffly in the front seat and waited, staring straight ahead.

The driver got in and said, "Where do you want to take them?" Then he saw the distant look on Rocks' face and didn't expect an answer. *Damn*, he thought, *if this was what dealing with rogues does to you, I'm glad there's someone assigned to it instead of using volunteers like we used to.* "Well, let's go to my place, okay?" He shifted into gear and drove home.

Rocks sat immobile during the trip, lost deep inside himself. In a way he had died more than thirty years ago when he killed Tanya the first time. He knew after that he was evil. He died again last night when he killed her for the second time. There was nothing left for him now but to go back to that furnished apartment in St Louis and wait for the phone to ring. How much longer did he have? He might live until the dawn of the Twenty-second Century. Was he doomed to live that long a life unloving and unloved? Was he so evil that anyone he loved would have to die by his hand? Would the killing never end?

When they reached the home of the man in the Toyota Rocks excused himself to go to the bathroom. He looked at the plain room with its tile walls and porcelain fixtures. No need to leave a bigger

mess than necessary, he thought. He sat in the bathtub, held his head up, his eyes focused into nowhere as though imagining a place he'd like to be. Then he pulled out his pistol and put a bullet through his own head. When the man broke in to find out what happened, he found Rocks with a smile on his face, the smile he couldn't wear in life.