

DEADLY SLUMBER



Victor J. Banis

Deadly Slumber
by V.J. Banis

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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One of life's great teachings is that of gratitude. To know to be thankful is perhaps the beginning of wisdom, though I cannot pretend that I have made more than the merest of beginnings in that journey.

Certainly, here, I owe thanks to a number of people—starting of course, with Laura Baumbach and the entire MLR Press family for their unvarying support; and Deana Jamroz for her inspired covers; also to my ace editor, Kris Jacen, who suffers patiently through all my tantrums, absentmindedness and obstinacies. Sainthood must surely loom on this woman's horizon.

I owe special thanks to Nowell Briscoe, my number one reader (and I think number one fan) who, in addition to his unfailing encouragement, supplied me as well with all the details needed in this book relating to mortuary science; and to Jeanne Barack, who helped me with both the right lingo and the right attitude for young David Solomon.

Belated thanks are due to Wayne Gunn, who was the very first to suggest some years ago that I do a police/detective novel, and who should have been thanked in the first volume, *Deadly Nightshade*, but I hope this will make up for the omission; and to Lydia Hensel, who was a very helpful beta reader on *Deadly Dreams* (and on this one as well) and should have been thanked in that volume, but once again I forgot. This is not a lack of appreciation or caring. Usually, by the time I get a novel finished, my brain is frizzled. And I've reached a point where I can, if pressed, very conveniently just plead my age. Also, possible insanity.

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This time, I remembered to do this before the book was finished. So, if instead it's missing the last chapter, everyone will know what happened. It's age. Or possibly insanity.

And of course, I am deeply indebted to all of you who have bought and continue to buy and read my books, and especially to those of you who take the trouble to write and let me know that you have enjoyed them. You cannot know how this brightens my day.

And not just mine, either, but any author's. Which is to say, if you take pleasure in a book, please take a moment to let the author know. You will be giving unimaginable joy. "Not what we give, but what we share, for the gift without the giver is bare."

Victor

Prologue

It was said, of course, in the heat of anger: "You'll sell Bartholomew's over my dead body." And then, after a pause, that fateful postscript: "Or your own."

But, really, what did that matter now? When you're dead, you're dead. What does it signify how you got there?

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Chapter One

The House of the Dead.

He hadn't known, when he made the appointment, how appropriate that old sobriquet would be before the day, before the hour, even, was out.

That's what they had called Bartholomew's Mortuary when David Solomon was growing up just a few blocks from here—never dreaming that one day he would be standing outside like this, looking up at the pseudo-Italian palazzo, and summoning his courage to go inside for a job interview.

"You're going to work at the House of the Dead?" his sister Rose had asked, laughing.

"I hope. And live there too, if I get the internship."

"Won't you feel, you know, icky? All those dead people?"

"Dead people are just dead, Rosie. You want icky, I'll take you to a gay dinner party or two. You'll come to welcome a non-bitchy corpse."

He'd been so used to seeing the building, though, that as anachronistic as it was here in San Francisco's near-Mission, midst crumbling mansions and almost mansions, he had long since ceased to take any particular notice of it.

Today, however, perhaps because it had taken on a new significance in his life, or maybe it was only a trick of the early morning sunlight, but when he came around the corner from 17th Street, he saw it with new eyes, the way you catch sight of a different you in a store window's glass. Pausing outside to really look at the mortuary's facade, he could

suddenly fully appreciate it for the beautiful monstrosity that it was, in a way he'd never done before.

Built for a gold field millionaire whose fortune had vanished as quickly as it accrued—apparently before he'd spent so much as a single night in his new mansion—the palazzo looked, as wags sometimes put it, "about as Venetian as an amusement park funhouse." It was generally said, though, with an affectionate scorn. It was bastard architecture, to be sure, but fascinating in its own way.

The millionaire who'd commissioned the building had quickly vanished into obscurity, and the palazzo's subsequent history had been checkered: an expensive bordello, a brief and unsuccessful stint as a hotel (Victorian era guests apparently shied away from sleeping in a former bordello), a gambling casino, a speakeasy, a bordello again ("A whorehouse," some insisted this time), and for a year or so a boarding house, after which it had sat empty for ten years or more before Percy Bartholomew Senior, looking about for a place to establish a business, had seen it and said, "There, that will be Bartholomew's Mortuary."

The building was enormous, and for years Bartholomew's had needed only the first floor. The top three floors were used for storage and an apartment in which the thrifty Percy lived when he was not hard at work, which was seldom. It had been then a one-man operation, Percy serving as his own embalmer, funeral director, grief counselor, maintenance man, and accountant.

That remained the case for years, and might have continued for the life of the mortuary, had it not been for one twist of fate: the AIDS epidemic.

"It's an ill wind," Percy had been fond of saying, though this wind did not blow until after his demise.

When the AIDS plague first struck, many mortuaries did not want to deal with the bodies of its victims. The families of many of those who died conspired with the funeral homes in ordering hasty cremations, often with no kind of service, often without even posted obituaries. People just disappeared. They were there and then they weren't.

"No services," was the order of the day.

Enter Bartholomew's. Percy Bartholomew Junior, son of the now deceased founder, made a momentous decision, which he trumpeted throughout San Francisco's gay community: "Bartholomew's will provide full funerary services for AIDS victims, just as with any other deceased." An announcement, as it happened, heard round the world.

The ill wind of AIDS had been the making of the mortuary's fortunes. Additional slumber rooms, in the old fashioned terminology still in use at Bartholomew's, were opened. A growing list of interns came here to work for little more than slave wages while they finished their schooling, and served their apprenticeships.

Even when an intern did not eventually join the firm, everyone knew that an internship at Bartholomew's was worth its weight in gold at any mortuary anywhere in the country.

"Be gay," was a sort of unofficial motto for those applying for internship. It was generally understood, though rarely discussed openly, that being gay was a bonus for an applicant. At the very least, one must be fully comfortable with gay clients. Being especially good looking, and gay oriented, was practically a call to apply.

David Solomon, having completed his first year in mortuary school, and blessed with the sort of good looks that made passersby stop on the street and stare after him, had heard the call.

* * * *

The first of the tour busses was just pulling up outside Mission Dolores, down the street. The early morning breeze was strengthening to a wind, tossing David's dark curls, and making his blazer billow out behind him.

He pushed his way through the wrought iron gate, climbed the wide, shallow steps, and shoved open the elaborately carved front door. The vestibule in which he found himself, and that he had never seen before, was no less fantastic than the building's exterior. Elaborately inlaid marble covered the floor in an intricate pattern of sand, ocher and umber. In the very middle of the space, an airy staircase of black wrought iron spiraled upward, and when he glanced up he saw, four floors above, a domed ceiling painted in garishly impressive frescoes.

He stood for a long moment, craning his neck to study with a guilty sense of pleasure what surely must have been inspired by the Sistine Chapel, if it had fallen well short of its

inspiration. It reminded him of the cheap plastic replicas of Michelangelo's David that one saw in the tawdrier souvenir shops at Fisherman's Wharf, but on a much more grandiose scale. Kitschy, but not unlikable. Like the building itself, really.

Someone cleared his throat. David tore his attention from the artwork overhead, and looked to his right. A tall man, whose good looks were just beginning to fade, with pale blond hair so carefully arranged and with so bright a sheen that it might have been made of ceramic, came from behind an ornate teak counter.

"Mister Solomon?" he said.

"Yes." David came forward, hand outstretched. "I'm David Solomon."

"Cyril Bartholomew." Cyril Bartholomew looked him up and down, seeming pleased with what he saw. "Jewish."

"Yes. Non practicing." And was immediately embarrassed to have said it. What did that have to do with anything? It was something entirely private, wasn't it, whether or not he practiced his family's religion?

"I don't think we've had a Jewish director before. Our directors, of course, are chosen for qualities other than their religious practices. Or non practices, as it may. My Uncle Percy will be interviewing you this morning. He's the managing director of the firm. Come with me, please." He turned in the direction of the reception desk and the doors that opened behind and on either side of it, and hesitated.

"Normally," he said, "we'd take the elevator or the stairs from the business wing. But, this being your first visit,

perhaps you'd prefer the scenic route, through the public spaces?"

"I would, actually."

Cyril nodded, as if in approval, and led the way to the curving stairs.

"What are they?" David asked.

The blond man paused with one foot on the first step. "I beg your pardon?"

"What are the qualities for which your directors are chosen?"

Cyril took a moment to look him over again, slowly, from head to toe, and back. He might have been smiling faintly, but his face was a mask. It was difficult to be sure. Certainly there was a gleam in his eye that came from something more than the gilded chandelier above them.

"You have the look," he said, and started upward.

David followed, resisting the temptation to take another glimpse at that outrageous ceiling overhead, and kept his eyes instead on Cyril Bartholomew's ramrod straight back. Cyril was ahead of him up the stairs, though, with the result that his buttocks were practically on a level with David's eyes. David found himself looking at them, then, rather than Cyril's back.

Nicely sculpted buttocks they were, too, as David was altogether aware, with lush curves like a ripe peach, a similarity enhanced by the tawny silk of the trousers encasing them. David could not help thinking that, like a peach, they invited one to sink one's teeth into them. He was mesmerized by the play of muscles as their owner climbed upward, and

found himself actually leaning toward them. He caught himself with a start.

What a way that would be to begin his experience at Bartholomew's, he thought, laughing silently at himself—biting into the butt of one of the directors! He wasn't altogether sure, though, whether that would be a bad thing for his career, or a good one. The invitation they offered did not seem entirely unintended. It appeared to him Cyril Bartholomew wore nothing between his flesh and the silk of his trousers.

He made a mental note to observe if this state of dress was unique to Cyril alone, or indicated a style suggestion for staff members. After all, he very much wanted to fit in—if he got the job. And, he thought his own buttocks were rather nicely shaped. They'd look just fine, he felt sure, in tightly fitted silk, without the hindrance of underthings. He wished in fact that he'd thought of that beforehand. Everyone in the industry understood looks mattered when it came to Bartholomew's, and he had a notion that his own butt was one of his best features.

Once, Cyril looked back over his shoulder and smiled, and David had the impression that he was not at all unaware of the sight he was presenting to the young man following him up the stairs.

They reached the second floor. David had a glimpse of a chapel, filled with flowers, the perfume of roses and lilies and chrysanthemums seeming to flow out the open door like a fog of scent.

"Our original slumber rooms are on the ground floor. Of course, everyone wants them. The selection room is there as well, and the embalming room. I'll skip that for today. The newer parlors are here, on second," Cyril said, waving a hand at the second floor corridor. "They're a bit smaller, but also more up to date. Depending upon your interview, we can look at those later. The offices and the staff rooms are on the next level, along with a small kitchenette and cafeteria for our employees, and a quite good coffee shop for our guests." He started up another flight of stairs. "The top floor, that would be the fourth, is the dormitory for our interns."

David was suddenly aware of the silence that surrounded them. It seemed total. The thick carpet on the stairs swallowed up their footsteps, and when Cyril spoke, it was in little more than a whisper, though it had the effect almost of a shout. No breeze stirred the thick forest green brocade of the draperies. The air was not just still, it seemed gelid, as if they moved through it only with effort.

His mother would have said his imagination was running away with him. The atmosphere here was supposed to be hushed. Except in ghost stories, the dead weren't given to clatter.

They reached the third floor and went down a long corridor, past an open door where two or three well-dressed and handsome men were having coffee. They glanced at David with some interest as he went by but no one spoke, and Cyril did not pause for introductions.

He knocked at a tall mahogany door at the corridor's far end, waited for a respectful moment, then knocked again, a little louder. Finally, he pushed a door open, tentatively.

"Uncle Percy?" he said, stepping into the room, and then, in a sibilant whisper, "Oh, Jesus!"

Crowding in behind him, David first saw the enormous desk centered before the two green draped windows, the morning sunlight streaming in so boldly that for a few seconds he was all but blinded. It was another moment before he followed the direction of Cyril's wide-eyed gaze, and saw the man stretched out on the roan leather sofa against one wall.

He was dead. Even with only a year of training at the San Francisco Mortuary College, David could tell that at a glance. Eyes were open but unseeing, and a small trail of vomit had trickled from his mouth, staining one cheek. His shoes were on the floor beside the sofa, and near them, a large liquor bottle, on its side; a smaller bottle also, with a prescription label on it, too small to read at this distance, an empty glass and—tellingly—a syringe.

Cyril Bartholomew stepped to the corpse. One hand clutched a sheet of paper. Cyril took it from the lifeless fingers and, unfolding it, glanced at it briefly before folding it again and slipping it into the pocket of his suit jacket.

"Suicide?" David said.

"Obviously," was the answer. "You'd better go down to the reception desk. Take that elevator there, it'll be quicker. Matt's office is just behind reception. Tell him to come here. And stay there yourself, to welcome any guests. Mister and

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Mrs. Bunderson are due shortly. Escort them into the front parlor, the Rose Room, and make them comfortable. There's a bell pull there. If you need anything, coffee or whatever, ring for Armando. He'll take care of it."

David knew then that he had gotten the job.

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Chapter Two

Leslie Cavendish, as was her practice, was the first arrival in the morning.

"I like to get an early start," she told anyone who commented on it.

More than that, as the only female funeral director at Bartholomew's, she knew perfectly well that good enough wasn't good enough. She couldn't exactly say she suffered harassment from the otherwise male staff; everyone here treated her courteously and fairly. There was an unspoken sense that they were all a team, that what was good for one was good for all. They had some lesbian clients. A lesbian funeral director worked better with them. Everyone understood that. Her gender was, they all agreed, if not a business necessity, certainly a business asset.

Still, as any token woman in an otherwise male workplace knew, you had to prove yourself every day, over and over, endlessly. You weren't allowed to coast for a moment to catch your breath. Your successes were taken for granted; your failings could be magnified out of all proportion.

Moreover, even among mostly male workplaces, Bartholomew's was unique. For one thing, there was the gay factor. Everyone knew that to fit in here, you had to be gay or very gay friendly; that was only logical, considering the overwhelming bulk of their clientele. None of the funeral directors, including a couple who were resolutely heterosexual, minded in the least being taken for gay—nor,

as it happened, had any reservations about flirting, subtly or sometimes outrageously, where they thought it might pay dividends. They were as well a spectacularly handsome crew, and they all knew which side of their bread got the butter.

"Bartholomew's pays top dollar." Everyone knew that.

It was an open, if unspoken, secret among them that death affected some people in amorous ways.

"There are people who prefer to affirm life in the midst of death," was as frank as Percy Bartholomew had ever been on the subject. "Of course, as in all things at Bartholomew's, discretion must reign."

Even the most determinedly straight directors knew, then, that if a grieving client happened to make known his temporary interest in the affirmation of life, no one would fault him for retiring briefly to an unused parlor with the grieving partner or relative.

To cooperate in this manner was not exactly required and, again, never mentioned, not even in whispers. Presumably if one simply and utterly felt unable to acquiesce, regrets must be gracious and diplomatic, and delivered in such a way that no offense could be taken.

In fact, however, at Bartholomew's, that never happened. Their funeral directors were assiduously trained, some might say brainwashed, in the importance of making clients comfortable in every way possible.

"Our job is to ease their grief in a difficult time," they were told on first hiring. It was understood that this meant, "In every way possible." Bartholomew's did not hire unattractive personnel, and they did not hire fools.

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There was not a man among them, then, regardless of personal bent, who hadn't spent some time leaning against an empty casket in a dim lit room with legs spread. Even Leslie, whose clients were primarily lesbian, had sometimes been called upon to uphold the mortuary's tradition of total comfort. It was just part of what it meant to be a physically handsome staff member of the biggest, the most completely gay-oriented, funeral parlor on the West Coast.

No one spoke of it for good or ill. That sort of reputation, had it become generally known, could just as easily put a mortuary out of business. They all knew that, too.

It was just the way things were.

* * * *

At this early hour, of course, there were no clients to be accommodated. The building was silent. The night custodian was in his own little studio behind the offices but that door was closed and no sound emanated from it.

"Asleep," Leslie said to herself.

Except for those times when a call came through—a death of one sort or another, but not of the police sort—night duty was deadly boring. When she was on duty, Leslie simply went to bed and tried to sleep as usual, though her sleep was never as restful as when she was in her own little apartment in Noe Valley, with her partner Susan nestling beside her.

The interns on the top floor had not yet begun to stir. There were no clients at hand yet, at least, no living clients, though she supposed some of the slumber rooms were occupied, and there was nearly always someone waiting in

the embalming room. None of these, however, disturbed the quiet in any way.

There were some, she knew, who might find the silence of a funeral home unnerving, especially since the suicide death of old man Bartholomew a few weeks earlier.

"I like the stillness," she was fond of saying, "the peace. Having the place to myself."

It was one of the reasons she had first gravitated to funeral service. There were few businesses more given to calm demeanor, almost a *sine qua non* here. Voices were never raised, conflicts always downplayed. Like any business, it had its stresses, but it was, in fact, an astonishingly low key work environment. The directors were so accustomed to dealing in serenity with their clients that they tended without conscious effort to extend the same gentle solicitude to one another.

Moreover, she was hardly superstitious when it came to death, even to suicide. If ghosts existed, and she had never really formed an opinion on the subject, this was surely not where the unquiet dead would come to haunt.

"Marley visited Scrooge, didn't he, not his own embalmer?" she had said when Susan brought up the subject of ghosts.

A funeral parlor was a bleak place, it seemed to her, even soulless despite all those chapels ostensibly for people to pray, but there was no presence of horror here—indeed, quite the opposite, she thought.

She left her purse and car keys in her locker and locked it up. Her mailbox was right next to it. Rarely was there

anything in it and as a rule she gave it no more than a passing glance.

This morning, however, a carefully folded sheet of white paper waited for her notice. She took it out, unfolded it, and ran her eyes quickly over the printed message—brief, and ugly:

"Dyke bitch, why don't you go somewhere where you're wanted?"

She gasped, as much in astonishment as anger. Her initial reaction was to crumple the note up in a ball. She went to fling it in the wastebasket, and changed her mind. Instead, she smoothed it out, folded it again, and stuffed it into her pocket.

She would bring this up with the managing director, as soon as he came in. He ought to know about it.

She couldn't help wondering, though, who on earth had sent it. And why? It was absolutely the last thing she would have expected at Bartholomew's.

Perhaps, after all, there was horror to be found in this deadly quiet. But of what an unexpected nature.

* * * *

"Where are the lights?"

"Just right of the door."

Both question and answer were whispered. That was an instinctive thing for most people coming into a funeral home—especially for the first time, as the new trainee was—you whispered in the presence of the dead, however irrational that might be upon logical consideration. Those sleeping here

would hardly be awakened by the sounds of voices, loud or soft.

A moment's pause and then the overhead lights came on, so bright that both of them blinked. Marvin's eyes went automatically, as if guided by radar, to the coffin on its bier across the room, but Billy, the experienced deliveryman, was already setting down the two floral arrangements he carried.

"You put those on either end of the coffin," he said, "and I'll start bringing in the rest of them. We've got more than a dozen, and the casket spray. It's going to be a big funeral."

He went back outside. Marvin carried the two machés over to the coffin, bent to put one at the foot, and the other at the head. He paused to look briefly into the coffin. His eyes went wide and he actually felt his skin crawl, the way people talked about its doing, but which he'd never experienced before. There was a prickling at the back of his neck.

Billy had come in and set another pair of arrangements just inside the door. He left again without a word or even a glance in Marvin's direction. Marvin opened his mouth to speak, but he couldn't seem to form the words, and Billy was gone before his thoughts had settled themselves into anything that might be verbally expressed.

Back at the truck, Billy was just taking two more arrangements from the foam rubber carriers they transported them in when Marvin appeared behind him, so suddenly Billy almost dropped the flowers.

"Christ, what are you sneaking up on me like that for? What are you doing out here, anyway, you're supposed to be

placing the flowers around the room. I told you, put the little arrangements on the tables, and the bigger ones..."

Marvin reached for one of the delivery tags and leaned close to read it. "This Eleanor Rose, the deceased—is that a guy?"

Billy laughed. "What do you think, with a name like that? You ever hear of a guy named Eleanor?"

"No. Only, this one is."

Billy gave him a sharp look. Marvin looked pale. He looked, in fact, like he was on his way to Barf City. Instinctively, Billy took a step back. Somebody puking on him was one thing, but puking on the flowers, there'd be all hell to pay.

"What are you talking about? What's wrong with you? Are you sick or what? If you're going to..."

"No. I'm telling you, it's a guy in that coffin."

Billy scoffed. "You're crazy. Eleanor Rose was a friend of my Aunt Ginny's. I met her myself once or twice. Old lady, really old, sixty, seventy, something like that. Blue colored hair ... what are you talking about?"

"I-I think you'd better come in and take a look."

"Christ." An exasperated sigh. "Here, you bring these. And move it, we're running late." He thrust the flowers at Marvin and, turning on his heel, went quickly back into the mortuary. One of the funeral directors was just coming down the long hall, the really cute one with the chestnut colored hair. Luke, his name was. Luke smiled when he saw Billy.

Normally, Billy would have smiled back. He'd been thinking for a while of whether he might one day coax the sexy funeral director into one of the empty rooms for a few minutes. There

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were whispers about the staff at Bartholomew's, whispers he'd like to confirm, and especially with cute Luke.

Today, though, Billy barely glanced in his direction, instead went straight into the slumber room and crossed without pausing to the coffin in the far side niche. Where Eleanor Rose of the blue hair ought to have been lying.

"Shit," he swore, his eyes bugging out. He wasn't even aware of Marvin coming to stand beside him.

"I t-told you. And he's not sixty or seventy either."

Which Billy could see for himself. The naked young man lying on the pink satin lining of the coffin couldn't be more than twenty-two or twenty-three years old. A very splendid twenty-two or twenty-three—or at least he had been. Death did not gild the lily. Nor did the golden drapery cord knotted about the young man's neck.

Behind him, Luke, the cute funeral director said, his voice startlingly loud, "What the fuck?"

* * * *

"What do you know about Bartholomew's Funeral Home?"

"Bartholomew's Funeral Home?"

"Yes. Isn't that what I said? Is there anything, well, I don't know, funny there? That you know of?"

"Funny?"

Stanley Korski and his best friend, Chris, were having early breakfast at their favorite coffee shop, The Cove, in the Castro. The proprietress paused just then at their table to refill their coffee cups.

"Solange," Stanley said, "there's an odd echo in here this morning. Everything I say seems to bounce right back at me."

"Really?" Solange looked around at the crowded tables, and up at the ceiling. "The air conditioning, maybe, it's been acting funny. I'll have Maurice take a look at it."

When she was gone, Stanley glowered across the table. "Okay, let's have it. Why are you being so coy about a funeral home?"

"I'm not."

"Yes you are. I know you, and I know when there's something you don't want to tell me. Plus, I hate it when you don't share the dirt. Come on, out with it."

Chris started to protest, and gave a sigh instead. "Okay. I can't play footsies with you. But, fair is fair. First, tell me why you ask. What brought on this sudden interest in Bartholomew's? Has Korski and Danzel..."

"Danzel and Korski."

"...Private Investigators, got a case you haven't told me about?"

"Maybe. I don't know yet. I got a call, yesterday, from Cyril Bartholomew—do you know him? He was in the Gay Lesbian Council the same time I was."

"I know of him. I think I may have met him once or twice, casually—you know, at parties. Good looking, as I recall, but getting sort of long in the tooth. And a little precious for my tastes."

"Right on all counts. Anyway, he asked to see me, said there was a problem he wanted to discuss. I'm meeting him for lunch. Sandwiches. At the funeral parlor."

"Really? I wonder what kind of sandwiches they serve at a funeral parlor. I'd take a close look at the meat."

Stanley pretended not to hear. "But when I asked what kind of problem, he was a bit vague. He said there's been some kind of harassment going on. Someone making mischief, was how he put it. He said we'd talk about it in more detail when we get together. I just wondered if you'd heard any scuttlebutt."

"I know the old man died. Percy Bartholomew. A couple of weeks ago."

"I know that too. Suicide, wasn't it?"

"That was the story. Maybe Cyril doesn't think so. It does seem odd, doesn't it, he dies, and then some mysterious trouble starts?"

"If it weren't suicide, though, he'd be talking to the police, wouldn't you think, not a private detective? It happens like that in the books and movies, but in real life, we don't really do that kind of investigation. Besides, that's hardly the kind of thing he'd describe as mischief. So, I'd say it's, well, something that's not exactly police business, but not quite kosher, either. I just don't have any clue what."

"I might have an idea," Chris said, avoiding looking directly at Stanley. "In general terms, anyway."

Stanley narrowed his eyes suspiciously. It was unusual for him to have to pry information out of Chris, who was usually all too eager to share any gossip he picked up. "Really? What?"

Chris laughed a little nervously and gave Stanley an abashed smile. "Well, if you really want to know, this guy I

was seeing a while back, he used to call it the Sweet Cream Palace."

"Bartholomew's? Sweet cream? As in...?"

Chris nodded. "Cum. Yes. That sweet cream."

"But, I don't understand, what's the connection with a funeral home, and cum?"

"Not just cum. Sweet cream. The sweetest."

"Okay, sweet cream, if you like? I still don't see what one has to do with the other."

Chris sighed. "I swore I'd never repeat this."

"So, just tell me once. I'll listen carefully."

"I used to date this funeral director..."

"You dated an undertaker? I never knew that. You never said."

"This was before I met you. And they prefer funeral director."

"Okay, funeral director. Didn't it feel, well, kind of funny, though? You know what I'm saying? By whatever name you call him, it's still somebody who spends his time with dead bodies."

"Bodies, that's the operative word, as I quickly learned. They deal with bodies. They know all about them. He knew exactly where all the nerve endings were and where the blood flows and how every joint worked, to maximum effect, let me tell you. And, no, it wasn't like we dated, not really. It was more like a couple or three hot boom-boom sessions. There was nothing dead about his movements, I can assure you."

"Was he from Bartholomew's?"

"No, not when I knew him, but he'd interned there briefly. Turned out he was, well, not quite the right material."

"In what way?"

Chris frowned, and went on reluctantly. "Umm, this is where it gets a little, uh, not tricky, exactly, it's just ... there's things they don't like the public to know, you understand. They could cause trouble, big trouble."

"I'm not the public. I'm the closest thing you've got to a sister."

"Actually, I have a sister. Adele, remember?"

"We both know perfectly well she's less sisterly to you than I am. When did the two of you ever sit up all night bawling over some trick? Who loaned you his best hand embroidered cowboy shirt for the gay rodeo? When you thought you had the plague, did you call Adele?"

"All right, all right, you're my very best sister. And that trick we were bawling about was yours, as I recall."

"Same difference. Quit stalling. Come on, out with it. Tell the truth and shame the devil."

"Okay. But you've got to promise not to repeat this."

"We've already sung that chorus. I did the soprano part."

"Right." Chris paused, took a deep breath. "See, there's a certain kind of guy they like there. Good looking ... don't get me wrong, he was, plenty good looking, my friend, but things didn't quite work out the way he had planned, and ... oh, this is difficult to explain."

"Well, I already know they like good looking funeral directors, everybody knows that, who's ever been there. It makes sense. They cater to the gay community. Good looking

men are good for gay business. But, if this playmate of yours was so hot, what was the problem?"

"It's not just looks, though. They like guys who are, how can I put this? Remember Dick Devon?"

"Dick the dick demon?"

"Right. Man or boy, he never met one he didn't want. You know how he used to always say, any man, anytime, anywhere."

"He was the very definition of a slut. So? You're saying, what? That they're like that at Bartholomew's?"

"Not exactly. Well, sort of. In a way."

"In what way, exactly? You mean the funeral directors at Bartholomew's are like male sluts? We're talking about a funeral home. Practically next thing to a church. God could get you for making up stories. Plus, if memory serves, I think there's a goddess that looks over funeral homes, or maybe she's a fairy. Corpse-ichore, I believe. She's probably listening at this very moment to every word you're saying."

"I'm not making up stories. And, yes, they are. Male sluts. Only, no, not quite like that, not like Dick the dick demon. Or, well, but, yes, I guess they are, kind of."

"I'm going to pour my coffee over your head in a minute."

"Let me explain it another way. He and I, like I say, it was just one of those brief things. You know, sort of Noel Coward-ish. We got along well enough, but not long after we met, he met somebody else, Mister Right, as it turned out, and he dropped out of the game. But, this is the thing, not before he'd suggested someplace else for me to turn. Sort of like compensation for denying me the staff of life. A rich playing

field, as he put it, just waiting for some intrepid queen to discover."

"Which was ... you don't mean Bartholomew's, surely?"

"I do." Chris's head bobbed up and down emphatically.

"Tricking at Bartholomew's is one of the best kept secrets in the gay community."

"Tricking? At a funeral parlor?"

"Trust me. It's simpler than the baths. You just attach yourself to some funeral group, wink at one of the directors, all of whom, as you know, are deliciously decorative, and follow him down the flower-strewn path to some shadowy alcove, where the deed is done in a trice, no beating around the bush, not with these guys. Quite often, as a matter of fact, with not a single word of conversation, nothing but that lovely silken woosh of a zipper descending—the sweetest music to a queen's ears, isn't it?—oh, and the occasional slurp of pleasure."

"As I recall, you were always noisy. Remember that time at the movies? Although what got you so excited over a talking Volkswagen..."

"Plus, the selection is primo. There isn't a guy there who isn't to die for, so to speak. They get, pardon the expression, the cream of the crop from the mortuary schools."

"Apparently creamier than I imagined."

"But my friend, see, as I said, he had found his soul mate and settled down, and he didn't feel comfortable playing musical caskets."

Stanley stared at him in astonishment. "We've been best girlfriends for years and you never told me any of this."

"Oh, please, this is San Francisco. Can you imagine the feeding frenzy if this became generally known? Not to mention they'd be out of business in a minute. There's some sort of, you know, like an ethics clause in their license. I don't think it expressly addresses getting sucked off in a slumber room, but it's like, no hanky panky in the parlors. So, everyone who knows about it, and they are few indeed, keeps this very hush-hush. Which is why I couldn't tell you."

"I beg your pardon but you know perfectly well I am a veritable Sphinx when it comes to keeping a secret, especially if it means I'm going to get a crack at a crack nobody else knows about. Everyone knows I am not one to run my mouth."

"Stanley when your mouth gets going it's like a Singer sewing machine."

"Now just a minute..."

"Anyway, the point is, it isn't just you. I've never told anyone. I mean, like you just said, why spoil a good thing? Those who know this little secret, and outside of the industry, they are very, very few—even inside the industry, it's never talked about, but those who know, keep their lips sealed."

"Except, apparently," Stanley said, his voice dripping acid, "when there is something thrust between them."

"Well, there is an appropriate time to have your lips unsealed. A stiff wienie does it for me."

"Excuse me, I'm sure, I didn't know that's how the Chris news service works, or I'd have been plugged in for reception." Stanley glowered for a moment, but curiosity quickly got the best of him, and he knew if he ragged Chris

too much Chris would never share the rest with him, which he most decidedly wanted to hear. "I still can't get my head around the concept. Shtupping midst the stiffes? And you're telling me you've actually done this?"

"Had my lips parted at Bartholomew's? Absolutely. By some very much alive stiffes. It used to be my Saturday afternoon special. Like I said, this was before I met you, even. It isn't a forever and ever kind of thing, though. It's meant for the genuine mourners. It works the first few times, but after a while, some of the staff began to recognize me. Once they were on to me, pickings dropped off. Even then, though, there were still one or two who were happy to play the game as if they didn't know better. You know what guys are like."

"Men are beasts."

"Exactly. But, eventually it got to be a lost cause. It's not like they're running a gay sex parlor, actually, they're just offering solace and succor."

"Especially succor, apparently."

"Right. So after a couple of visits when I got succored not at all, I marked it up as one of those fond memories, and went on to other fields of play."

Stanley had to ponder all this. Who would have imagined? Just when he thought he'd heard it all. "You think it's still that way at Bartholomew's?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. The last service I went to there, they still had the drop dead cuties, and they all still had that special gleam in their eyes, if you knew to look for it. The 'I-

can-be-had-without-too-much-trouble' look. You know that look."

"Your usual bar expression."

"Exactly. My lips may say no, no, but there's yes yes in my low hangers."

Stanley thought back. He'd been to Bartholomew's maybe two months earlier, for a memorial service. And now that Chris mentioned it ... though at the time, he'd just thought maybe he was imagining things. The one director he'd noticed was so good looking, too good looking for him to really suppose he had a chance, he simply wasn't in that league, and he'd chalked it up instead to wishful thinking on his part.

But if what Chris was saying was true ... he was sorry now he hadn't smiled back a little more warmly. A slumber room in a funeral parlor wasn't perhaps the most romantic spot for a tryst, but considering some of the places he had done the deed in the past—like, say, the back seat of a car, particularly that young guitar player's little Mini-Cooper last summer—it wasn't all that bad, either. At least in a funeral parlor you got flowers and soft music in the background.

Of course, the back seat of a car, even a Cooper, did offer certain advantages. Chief among them, to his way of thinking, was that it didn't really count. It was just an accident. It wasn't premeditated sex until you went to their place or they came to yours. That way, say if you went home with another guy, you were definitely cheating on a boyfriend. If it happened in a car, on the other hand ... well, reasonable was reasonable, no one could hold you responsible for happenstance.

Of course, that business with the car had been BT—Before Tom, who was his partner now. These days he lived the life of a veritable saint. Still, it was important to keep points like these clear in your mind. One never knew when an accident might happen.

Although now that the possibility occurred to him, he'd have to think about where a slumber room fell on the accident versus premeditated scale. If you stumbled and, say, fell into a coffin ... But if you knew in advance someone was immediately going to fall in on top of you ... it was definitely an ethical dilemma that needed to be thought through carefully. He had always seen sex in philosophical terms." Do you think if it happens in a coffin it's an accident?" he asked aloud.

"Hmm. If your fly's already unzipped, it's on purpose. On the other hand, if the zipper's broken, I should think it's an accident." They'd had conversations on this subject in the past.

Solange came by to lay their check on the table. "Is the echo problem better?" she asked. "Maurice adjusted the vents."

"I think the problem's been solved," Stanley said. He picked up the check and handed it across to Chris. "Here, Mister My-Lips-Are-Sealed, breakfast's on you, and no bitching."

"I don't mind," Chris said cheerfully, reaching for his wallet. "Like the old song says, Stanley, if my nose was running money, I'd blow it all on you."

"That is disgusting," Stanley said with a grimace. "You know, sometimes I think you're the one who should be married to Tom. That's the kind of gross humor he likes."

"Hmm." Chris gave him a speculative look. "I'd be glad to try him on for size, if you think..."

"Not if you don't want a return visit to Bartholomew's, and not on your knees this time. Wasn't there a noir movie a while back, *Dead Men Don't Suck*? You're seeing him this morning?"

"Tom? I'm going directly there from here. We're going to try some makeup. How is he?"

Stanley's partner in their detective business, Tom Danzel, had been badly burned a few months earlier, one side of his face still scarred. There were scars on his left arm, too, and smaller ones on his leg, but the worst were on his face. Stanley still blamed himself. Tom had been burned while he was rescuing Stanley from a deadly fire, and the tragedy had left a barrier between them that, so far, they seemed unable to surmount.

Chris was a nurse in a burn ward, and his friendship had proven invaluable in the weeks since Tom had come home from the hospital. Sometimes Stanley didn't know how either of them would have managed without Chris.

Stanley sighed wearily. "Not good. He won't go outside the apartment. So far as I can tell, he doesn't do much of anything, just sits and mopes. I've tried talking to him. Maybe he'll listen to you. He likes you. I'm not sure how much he likes me these days. I know he loves me, but I don't think he likes me. If that makes any sense."

"Ah, he's just still freaked out. It's understandable. It'll take some time, is all." Chris gave him a thoughtful look. "You want to know something weird about his scars? I know he's horribly self-conscious about them, he thinks they disgust people. But, to tell you the truth, after I got used to seeing him like that, I think they make him sexier, in an odd kind of way."

Stanley laughed, but without much humor. "You know, it's funny you should say that. I agree with you. Sort of like it brings out the beast in him. When we do it, it's kind of like making it with a wild animal. Of course, he was never particularly tame when it came to sex. But I think he's wilder than ever." He sighed wistfully. "Which, I'm sorry to say, isn't that often anymore. He's self conscious with me, too."

"He's self conscious with everybody. But, honestly, what I was saying, I never actually found him attractive before, sexually. I mean, he was always good looking in a Marlboro man way, but he never personally did anything for me. Now, though, that messed up face, I keep wanting to kiss it, you know. And, knowing what happened, how it happened—saving you. Gosh, it can't get more romantic than that. The proverbial knight in shining armor. Doesn't it make your heart beat fast when you think of that?"

"Yes. Yes, of course it does, only..."

"Only?"

Stanley paused, looking into space. There was such a muddle of thoughts in his head. But not clear enough thoughts that he could share them, not even with Chris, with whom he was in the habit of sharing most things. "If only..."

He shook his head. "Oh, never mind. I'm just worried about him, that's all. I think you're right, it is very romantic, what he did. It's like something out of a romance novel, isn't it? The dashing hero risks everything to rescue the one he loves."

"Well, that's what I think of, anyway, when I see his face. Who wouldn't want a man like that?"

"Hmm. Maybe I should be there when you go."

Chris laughed. "No, it's just something I think about, not something I'm going to do. Besides, Tom has eyes for no one but you, luv, as you well know. No one male, anyway, though I expect he still gives women the eye. Believe me when I tell you, there are no sparks in his eyes when he looks at me. Besides," he tilted his eyebrows, his smile mocking, "who are you to complain? You're off to your own little rendezvous this morning, aren't you?"

"Yes, I guess you could say that. But I've told Wayne I'm finished. This has to be the last one. If Tom found out ... you know how he is. I'm stopping by the office first, to check the mail and stuff." He got up, slipping on his windbreaker. "I don't know about the makeup, though. Somehow I just can't imagine Tom applying foundation."

"Uh, Stanley, aren't you forgetting something?"

Stanley glanced at the table and saw that he'd left his cell phone there. "Oops," he said, picking it up, "I promised Tom I'd be more careful about carrying it."

"And it's charged up, I assume."

Stanley glanced at it. "Yes. Well, sort of. I'll plug it in when I get to the office."

Chris gave him a measuring look. "So, sweetie, how are you, by the way?"

"I'm okay." Stanley avoided his friend's eyes.

"No more nightmares?"

Stanley had recently killed a man, despite his aversion to guns and violence. Not just any man, either, but his own brother. It had been necessary. His brother had been on the verge of murdering Tom. Stanley had had no choice but to shoot him. It had taken a heavy emotional toll on him, nevertheless. It was just one more giant stone in the bag of weighty troubles he was carrying on his back at the present.

He managed a wan smile. "I'm okay," he said more insistently, "Mister Therapist."

"I worry about you, you know."

"And I appreciate it. Really, I do. Even if I sound ungrateful sometimes."

Chris smiled up at him. "That's okay. You're entitled."

Stanley glanced down at the check in Chris's hand. "Do you want some money? I can do the tip."

"Nope, it's on me. So if I should get lucky and manage to seduce your husband, you'll be in my debt."

Stanley snorted and left.

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Chapter Three

"Jesus, you look a mess."

"Thanks. I like you too," Tom said. He swung the door wide for Chris to come in and led the way back to the front room. The television was on, some old game show rerun, the sound muted. Tom sank into a recliner.

Following him into the room, Chris saw a beer can sitting on the chair's arm, and a pack of cigarettes. "Please don't tell me you've taken up smoking."

Tom looked at the cigarettes as if he'd never seen them before. "I don't know," he said. "Haven't made up my mind yet."

"Well don't, please. You stink bad enough as it is."

Chris took a moment to look him over. Tom was bleary-eyed and unshaven. Unshowered, too, it smelled like. He was wearing some brief gym shorts and nothing else. His arms were massive. His chest, broad and hairy, was still splendid—the guy was built like the proverbial brick outbuilding—but just at the moment he had about him a general air of slovenliness.

"I've got a new makeup I want to try on you," Chris said. "But you're going to have to shave."

"Let's skip it, why don't we?"

"I made a trip here expressly for this purpose."

"So? Have a cup of coffee. Have a beer. Sit, why don't you? We'll visit."

"I didn't come to visit. I'm a nurse. I came to do nurse things. In this instance, to try a new make up on some burn scars. Go shave."

"Fuck, you're as bad as Stanley," Tom said, but he pushed himself up from the chair and went into the bathroom, slamming the door after himself.

In the bathroom, he stood before the sink. The image in the mirror over the sink glowered back at him. The scar that ran down the left side of his face looked like raw liver. It would fade, the doctors told him, but it would never go away completely. He tried not to look at it, but his eyes went there of their own accord, and he felt his anger rise up within him like bile.

It was undirected, though, that anger. He wanted to be angry at Stanley, had actually tried to be angry at Stanley, but he couldn't, quite. It wasn't Stanley's fault. Stanley had been, not dumb, exactly, just impulsive. He'd said often that Stanley was a magnet for trouble, but the trouble was, Stanley could never look ahead and see the train wreck coming at him. That was just Stanley. He was always convinced that the train would miss him. He was never going to change. Tom knew that.

Which was why he had appointed himself Stanley's protector. It was sort of like his mission in life; because, for sure, the guy needed someone to look after him.

That was how Tom had gotten burned, saving Stanley's butt once again; but, how could he blame Stanley for that? Anyway, hadn't Stanley turned right around and saved his ass? They were even, if anyone was keeping score.

So, who was he supposed to be angry with over what had been done to his face? Himself, probably, but that didn't make him feel a whole lot better.

He turned away from the mirror, found his electric razor on the shelf. With that, he could shave and not have to watch, not have to see himself.

Really, there was no one for him to be angry with. Sometimes Life just handed you a dog-turd taco, and gave you no choice but to eat it.

That didn't mean you couldn't be pissed about it, though.

* * * *

Chris turned off the television, opened the window blinds to let some sunshine in, and, on an impulse, opened a window to let some fresh air in as well. He carried the unopened pack of cigarettes—daintily, by his fingertips—into the kitchen and dropped them into the trash container, contemplated the beer can, lifted and shook it and, discovering it was empty, decided to let it be. He didn't want to seem pushy.

Tom had donned a pair of sweats when he came back. He sat down in the same chair, picked up the empty beer can and sat it down again. He looked in the direction of the refrigerator.

"Later," Chris said. "Business first." He'd brought a straight-backed chair in from the kitchen. He pulled that closer, adjusted the shade of the floor lamp to shine it on the left side of Tom's face.

"This is mineral powder," he said, opening a small jar. "The best thing for covering up scars, they say. And this," he held it up, "is a camouflage brush."

"Am I supposed to be learning all this? Like, am I going to have a test later?"

"You're going to have a camouflage brush up your backside if you don't stop giving me a hard time."

Tom grunted. "I'm not a makeup kind of guy, you know."

"Give it a rest, Dorothy. Some of us have always had to work at what you enjoyed naturally for all those years, so you're not getting any sympathy from me. I for one buy industrial strength Oil of Olay in huge drums, and I still never made prom queen, so I will skip your complaints, thank you."

"What's that, oil of whatever? Some kind of lube?"

Chris swatted him with tip of his brush. "Hold still." He swirled the brush lightly in the makeup, drew an experimental line along Tom's cheek, and leaned back to study the effect. "Hmm. Too light, I think." He opened another jar.

"Stanley's found someone else," Tom said.

"I don't think so. Hold still, I said." Chris's lips tightened in a frown. He made another dab at Tom's face.

"He leaves every day for the office, but he's not there. I've called. I even went by one afternoon. The door was locked up tight and there was a note on the door, back at four, it said. This was like, at one o'clock. So, where is he sneaking off to all afternoon, if he's not fucking around?"

Chris sat back on his haunches. "You arrogant self pitying son of a bitch. Are you really so tied up in feeling sorry for

yourself that you don't have a single moment to think about Stanley?"

"I am thinking about Stanley. I just want to know where he's going when he tells me he's at the office. If he's stepping out on me, I have a right to know."

Chris slammed the makeup jar down on the table with a bang. "Okay, I'll tell you where he's going, Mister I'm-Drinking-Lots-Of-Beer-And-Thinking-About-Smoking, since you seem to want to know. He's been working for Wayne Cotter."

"Who? Doing what?"

"Inferior desecration, in gay lingo. Decorating, to you."

"Decorating? But, why?"

"Why? Why do you think? Because Stanley's got balls, unlike some people I could mention. Because your detective agency is bringing in nothing, and neither are you, sitting around here on your butt all day drinking beer and singing 'Poor, poor, pitiful me.' In the meantime, everything's been left on Stanley's shoulders, and this was his solution, the best he could come up with. This job will pay him enough to keep the office afloat for six months or more. And keep you in beer and cigarettes, which if you start smoking I am going to mess up the other side of your face, I might mention."

Tom stared open mouthed at him, but when Chris attempted to go back to his makeup work, Tom shoved his hand aside. "Jesus. Why didn't he tell me what he was doing?"

"Because he knew that you'd object, or ridicule him, that you didn't want him to go back to 'fag decorating,' as you so

eloquently put it. Sugar, you're so busy feeling miserable about what happened to your face, to these..." He made a gesture that took in the burned side of Tom's face, "you haven't given a single moment's thought to what happened to Stanley. Yes, you saved his life, in that fire, and you got scarred. Well, tough. Life's a bitch. In the meantime, Stanley saved your life, too. He shot his own brother to do it. Stanley, for Christ's sake, who wouldn't hurt a fly. And it left him with some scars too. His just don't show as badly as yours, but they're there, if apparently invisible to you. You just have to love the guy to see them, is all. So why should you notice?"

Tom stared into the distance for a long moment. He felt the anger draining out of him, to be replaced by a feeling of overwhelming shame. "Fuck," he said finally. "I feel like an asshole."

"I'd say that's a reasonable assessment. Where are you going?"

"Right now, I'm going to take a shower and pull myself together. Then I'm going after my baby."

"And?"

"And kiss his ass, if I have to."

"What about the makeup?"

"Stanley's ass doesn't need any makeup, it's pretty enough as it is. Make yourself at home," Tom said, disappearing once again into the bathroom.

Chris looked at the closed door. After a moment, he smiled and began to pack up his things. He knew perfectly well that there were people with a psychological need to love the vulnerable, the damaged. It was a subtle and subtly insulting

way of boosting one's own ego: "Look at me," they proclaimed to the world, "at how gracious and kind I am."

If he'd thought for a moment that this was the case with Stanley, he'd have been the very first to bop him on the head with a bedpan; but to his surprise, he had come to believe that Stanley, who had always been such a flibbertigibbet in the past, really did love Tom Danzel, the damage to his face notwithstanding. Even more surprising, he believed now that Tom loved Stanley as well. Love, it seemed, sometimes really did find its way.

Only, sometimes it helped to stir things up a bit. That's what friends were for, wasn't it?

* * * *

The plump gray mouse sat, seemingly without fear, staring up at Stanley with eyes that might have been made from glass.

"No, I didn't forget," Stanley said. He took a piece of plastic wrapped cheese from his pocket, broke it into bits, and scattered them on the floor a few inches from the mouse, who looked at him suspiciously until Stanley sat back in his chair. Then he hurried forward to take one of the larger bits in his mouth and disappeared with it behind the file cabinet.

Stanley sighed. It was probably too much to hope that he was taking it to share with a mouse boyfriend. Still, it was obvious that he had family priorities. Which, at the moment, was more than he could say about himself and Tom.

It seemed to him that he and Tom had lost their way, and he didn't know what to do about it. He felt, day to day, like he

was floundering, at sea, unable to think of the words to say, the actions to take.

For a time, it had appeared as if things were going to be all right. Tom had finally reached the point of declaring his love, an event for which Stanley had waited with barely controlled impatience through the early days of their partnership. That declaration, he thought, should have signaled a wonderful new phase in their sometimes stormy relationship.

This had come, though, at considerable cost. Tom had been left with that scarred face, and since he had come home from the hospital, he had grown increasingly taciturn, ever more distant.

He couldn't blame it all on Tom, though. He knew that he was a different person from who he had been just a few months ago. That horrible moment, in Tom's hospital room, when Stanley had shot his brother. Stanley had no qualms about the fact that he'd shot Andrew to save Tom's life. He'd have done anything that he had to do to save Tom's life.

You couldn't just kill someone, though, especially not a blood brother, without its taking a toll on you. *I waive the quantum o' the sin*, as Burns put it so eloquently, *The hazard of concealing; But, och! It hardens a' within, And petrifies the feeling!*

It had indeed hardened all within. Before that moment, he'd always thought himself too civilized a man ever to take another's life. He had, in his innocence, looked with condescending disapproval on those who had.

He had learned in a single instant, however, as others had before him, that there must always be in life one moment

when the mirror of reality is held up to us and we see ourselves stripped of pretense. For anything that you want badly enough, there is ever a price to be paid. He'd wanted Tom that badly. He had gladly paid with his innocence, and he did not regret it.

He could not now pretend, however, that his innocence wasn't gone, that something hadn't petrified within him. He was no better than a thousand, a thousand million other men. "The world's slow stain," someone had called it, a term he had never quite understood in the past, but did now. To keep and to hold what was his, he had joined the ranks of violent men. He no longer inhabited the world in which he had lived before. Whatever the reason, whatever the rationale he gave himself for what he had done, he too was a murderer, guilty of that most irreversible of crimes. You could ask forgiveness—of God, of the universe, of yourself—for any other act, you could undo much of the harm that, inevitably, you did to others in the course of your existence—but you could never bring someone back to life.

He had discovered that this was a painful thing to know of oneself. It seemed as if he could not look in the mirror without seeing the stain of his sin written across his face, as visible to his eyes as Tom's scars were to him. Both of them, marked now.

And how did they get back to that uncomplicated love that had existed before? They had lost something, something perhaps indefinable. He wanted it back. Or was that like your virginity, like your innocence—once gone, it was gone forever?

* * * *

He was at the office of Danzel and Korski, Private Investigators, just getting ready to leave for his part time job at Wayne Cotter, Interiors. He'd checked the mail, put the bills to one side. He'd pay them with what he expected to get from Wayne today. Hopefully, anyway.

The mouse was back. Having done his duty by whoever waited for him at home, he seemed content now to sit and nibble his own share of the cheese that was left. When the office door opened suddenly, however, he darted once again behind the cabinet.

Stanley looked up, surprised, was even more surprised to see Tom framed in the doorway.

"Tom. I was just..."

His voice faded. For a long moment Stanley was frozen into immobility. He could see in the expression on Tom's face that his mental state had changed from what it had been only earlier that morning. For the first time in a long time, Tom was seeing him, not just looking at him.

This should have been a moment for instinctive emotion on his own part, sunshine suddenly bursting through a nightmare of dark clouds. He had waited for, hoped for, this moment; but with the waiting, he had grown wary, too. That, perhaps more than all the rest, troubled him. Now that the moment was at hand, he could only wait for Tom to give him his cue.

"Just getting ready to head over to Union Street, right?" Tom said, his voice carefully neutral, impossible to say what he was thinking behind it. "The fag decorating shop."

Stanley sighed. "So you know about that?" Tom nodded. "Chris told you. The big blabber mouth."

"No, I'm glad he did. It's a good thing. I should have known what you were doing, and why."

"I know how you feel about my decorating..."

Tom came closer, put his hands on Stanley's waist. "I know you do. Do you also know how I feel about you?"

"I ... yes..." Stanley hesitated. "I think so."

Tom's grin was rueful. "I don't blame you for not being sure." He paused for a long moment. "Is it okay if I kiss you?"

Stanley had to fight against tears. It was incredible to him that anyone as strong, as macho as Tom, could possibly be so vulnerable, but he knew that Tom was. Especially now, with what had been done to his face.

Done, Stanley could never forget, *to save my life*. That burden, too, that stain of guilt, Stanley had to bear every day. Never mind that, in return, Stanley had saved Tom's life as well, at an equally high price.

He knew that Tom thought of him as his to protect. Stanley would never tell him that he felt the same way about Tom. He felt as if before, he had lived his life in some kind of underground world, that he had never known daylight until he experienced the radiance of Tom's smile.

Of the two of them, Stanley was the one with the homosexual experience. Tom had never been with a man before him; yet Stanley could not help feeling that sex with Tom was a revelation for him too, that it was like nothing he had ever experienced before—maybe because he had never known love like this before. But he had learned with it that

love wasn't all about hearts and flowers. Love could be troubled, too.

Without a doubt, theirs had been an often troubled courtship. The moment when Tom had finally said, "I love you," had exalted Stanley. He had felt like an agent of God. For the first time in his life, he had experienced the full power of love. From that moment, everything in his life had changed. And everything should have been fine for them after that.

It hadn't, though. Happiness, as others had noted before him, was not a possession to hold on to. It was a state of mind, and one that they no longer shared. Something thick and dark and sharp as a gunshot had come between them. He could see the shadow of it in those times when Tom, for a brief moment as he had always been, confident to the point of swagger, would suddenly look puzzled and lost, all the expression dying from his face as if erased by the unseen hand of some master painter. He did not speak then, or if he did it was of nothing at all, as if he were grasping at straws to keep the truth at a distance.

Some people said that men were better and stronger after suffering. No doubt everyone had their moment of trial, through which they would come to some higher level of existence, of understanding. Every partnership, too—marriage, if you wanted to call it that—had to be tested before it could achieve its full strength.

So far, that hadn't happened for them. They had somehow wandered from the path they had surely been meant to take together. It had seemed at times instead as if they were lost

in a dense thicket from which they might never find their way.

Or—happiest of thoughts—had Tom found the path out?

"Okay? You big dummy." Stanley leaned up to kiss Tom's lips. "Why wouldn't it be okay? You're my man, aren't you?"

Tom smiled down at him, like a sailor smiles when he's caught the first glimpse of his home port over the sea's horizon. The smile quickly faded, though, to be replaced with a look of grave concern.

"A man with a face like a bowlful of vomit. Tell me the truth, does it turn you off? Do you get sick when you look at it?"

"What, this?" Stanley tilted his head and kissed the side of Tom's face, the scarred side. "Tom, you're not ugly."

Tom shivered at the touch of Stanley's lips. "Thanks, baby, I love you." He squeezed Stanley hard in a fervent embrace. "But yes, I am. Ugly. Scary ugly. Fuck, how could I possibly not know that? You think I don't look in the mirror?"

"But..."

"Forget it. I know everything you're going to say. But, that's not what it's about, the mirror part of it. It's way more than that. It's my whole life that's changed, who I am, even. I mean ... shit, this is hard to explain. I don't think anybody else in my life could possibly understand what I'm trying to say. I don't think I understand it. Hell, I know I don't, but, there's this thing, you know, being hot. It gives you, oh, a kind of pass in life. Things are easier. Doors open, and not just bedroom doors, either. Business doors. People want to do things for you. Maybe some of them want you to fuck them.

With some of them, it's unconscious. And some of them, well, they don't exactly want that, but there's like this, this glow that you have, this special quality, like you were born lucky, and they think it might rub off on them. It's your whole life, in a way, being good looking, attractive to other people."

Stanley considered what Tom had said. He knew what he meant. People reacted differently, taking pleasure in your good looks, feeling compassionate regret for the ugly. Plain looking people, and especially the unattractive, got used to that because they had no choice. You could outlaw any other kind of discrimination, based on age, on race, on ethnic background; but you could do nothing about the instinctive reaction to another's looks. The attractive always had the advantage, the unappealing came in second. It was one of the laws of life.

Stanley wanted to ask, now, if Tom blamed him for the damage to his face; but he didn't ask. He was afraid of what the answer might be. He was afraid that, in some little corner of his heart, Tom hated him for what had happened.

He couldn't say, either, something he had admitted to no one, not even Chris, and would never under pain of death say to Tom, that there had been a time—it had been brief, but that was of no significance, even a minute of it would have been telling—when he really had felt revolted by the way Tom looked. For a day, two perhaps, it had been an effort to look directly at him, to make himself smile, and pretend that it didn't matter.

In the end, though, he had thought that this made him uglier than Tom. It was the face in his own mirror that he

hated when he experienced these feelings, not Tom's. Luckily, it had passed, and what he had come to realize in the weeks since was part of what he and Chris had discussed earlier, that in some mysterious way it seemed to have made Tom more attractive, not less. His face was a paradox. The scars gave him a life-battered look, they made him look older, wearied, but at the same time they gave him the look of a savage, an animal heat beyond the normal range of civilized men—the wild man he had spoken of to Chris. A man, they said, who had literally been tested in the fire and had come through it triumphant. Tom had always had a sex appeal that was evident to the eyes, but now it registered on some more visceral level, seemed to go straight to the crotch like an electric spark.

He felt sure, though, that Tom would not welcome hearing this just now, not at least in so many words, maybe never. He was still suffering from the awareness of the change in his appearance. He wouldn't want to hear it confirmed, even in a positive way.

So, once again, here he was skirting the issue instead of facing it directly. And feeling guilty for the failure. "I can see what you're saying," he said instead. "Being good looking gave you a leg up in life. But, honestly, didn't it ever get in the way,—?"

It was Tom's turn to consider. And probably, Stanley thought, Tom was just as glad as he was to stay on the outskirts of their problems. "I guess. It must have, sometimes."

"I mean, it's like money, isn't it? If you're rich, you never really get close with people unless they're rich too, because you can't know if they really like you, or if it's the money. Didn't you have the same thing with your looks? Like, how would you know, if someone liked you for yourself, or if it was the sex thing?"

"I'd never thought about it that way, but you're right. I think my relationships in the past were all that way, based on my looks. Or my big dick. Maybe that's why I was always a loner. I think I always knew that none of it went any deeper than that. I never felt like anybody cared about me, the real me—before you."

"Here's how I see it, if you want to know. Remember that splinter I got in my butt, that first day here at the office?"

"I remember how you got it. I fucked you on top of your desk there."

"Right. And then I got this splinter, and it hurt like hell, and for a while that's all I could think of, it was everything—until you got it out."

"Fun work," Tom said with a grin. "I got all those close up shots of your little tush."

"Um hmm. As I remember, you bit it while you were back there."

"Tasty it was, too. If you should get another splinter..."

"We could work on it. But my point is, when you got it out, when you showed it to me, I thought, 'that's all it was?' I mean, for a while, for five or ten minutes maybe, it had been the most important thing in my life, I couldn't sit down right, I couldn't even think of anything else, and all it was, was this

little bitty piece of wood. It really wasn't all that important at all, it had just seemed that way because at the time it had taken over my thoughts. Then, you tossed it in the wastebasket, and that was the end of it, and my life was back to normal. Everything was fine."

"So that's how you see me? Like a splinter in your butt?"

"Well, maybe something a bit bigger than that."

"A bit?"

"Okay, a lot."

Tom laughed, but quickly grew serious. "Stanley, it's different for you, you look in the mirror and you're still beautiful..."

"Tom, you don't have any idea what I see these days when I look in a mirror. And, I'm not beautiful."

"You are to me."

"Uh, didn't I just say something like that, kind of in reverse?"

Tom scowled. "Maybe so. But, you're not the one who has to face people, to see what's in their eyes..."

"Not everybody is going to see you that way."

"Some will. A lot of them. Not everybody has your sense, Stanley."

"Sometimes I think you just have to love life without quite trusting it. But that doesn't mean we can't live it, and love it, whether we've got a splinter in our butt or a burn on our face. We've got each other. Hey, that's a lot more than most people ever find."

He tilted his head back and looked long and hard at the scar on Tom's face. He took a deep breath. "Besides, to tell

you the truth, I think it's kind of sexy. It makes you look, I don't know, even more ferocious than you did before."

"Scary, you mean?"

Stanley smiled and leaned up for another kiss. "Not to me. Never scary to me," he said gently.

After a moment, Tom said, "What you said, about this savage look—it really turns you on?"

"Totally. Why?"

"Because if you were to check, I think you'd find that the savage has got half a hard on."

Stanley checked. "Only half. Tsk. We'll have to do something about that, won't we?"

He was actively doing something, Tom seated bare-assed on the edge of the desk, Stanley kneeling between his spread legs, when the phone rang.

"Let it ring," Stanley said.

"Might be business. We could use some." Tom picked up the phone, said, "Korski and Danzel."

"Danzel and Korski," Stanley muttered from below.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Tom said, and, "no, ma'am, I didn't mean you. Uh, Stanley? Actually, Stanley's having lunch at the moment. No, ma'am, it's not too early. Matter of fact, I think it was almost too late. Can he call you back? Or can I help you with something?"

He put a hand over the receiver. "She can't find her pussy."

"Huh?"

"You sure you've searched thoroughly, ma'am? I mean, isn't there a usual place where you find it? I see. And he's not

there. Your pussy has a name?" He put his hand over the receiver. "She calls him Mister Bootles. She wants you to look for him."

"Aren't pussies more your line?"

"She wants you. Don't stop, I'm getting close."

"Mmm, mmm, uh."

"Say again."

"Tell her I'll call her back as soon as I finish lunch."

"Uh, yes ma'am, I'm sure we can find your little Bootles. Stanley's just about to ... oh, yeah ... like that ... look, ma'am, Stanley'll call you back. No, really, he couldn't possibly talk now. Twenty minutes, I swear it." The receiver dropped from his hand and somehow landed in the cradle.

"Twenty minutes? It's not going to take that long to finish this," Stanley said, pausing.

"Don't talk, suck. And it will, if we go for seconds."

* * * *

"No more decorating. Okay? We'll work things out without that. I'm back in the saddle again."

"I was going to quit this morning. Only, well, rent's still got to be paid, and we're short on business here."

"There's the missing pussy."

"Bootles? That's something, I guess. I'd suggest the pound. And I may have a job lined up. I've got a meeting set up for later today. I don't know yet what it involves. Some kind of job, for sure. I'll know more after lunch."

He told Tom briefly about the call from Bartholomew's, and the information he'd gotten from Chris.

"Christ. They're fucking in the caskets?"

"Not quite in them, I don't think."

Tom thought for a moment. "What about this suicide? You think there's something there? What's your instinct tell you?"

"There might be. That's the one thing that stands out in what Chris had to tell me. The rest of it all started after that."

"Tell you what, why don't you go talk to this Bartholomew guy. I think you'll get more out of him alone than if I were there. You said you knew him from before, right? Anyway, coffin fucks aren't my thing. Meantime, I'll get in touch with our friend at homicide, Bryce, talk to him about that old man's suicide. If there was any question about the death, homicide will have looked into it."

"Do you think he'll talk about it with you? You know the regulations. If there's an ongoing investigation..."

"If you want the truth, I think Bryce has got the hots for me."

Stanley sniffed. "I think you're right. Still..."

"Hots trumps regulations any day. I'll get him alone, dangle my dick in front of him."

"I hope you mean metaphorically."

Tom grinned at him. "Baby, you know I don't understand those big words."

"Don't give me the 'Baby' routine. You understand exactly what I mean, you beast."

"Beast," Tom repeated. His smile faded and his face darkened. He lifted a hand to the side of his face. "Fuck. For a minute there, I almost forgot..."

"And so you should. Trust me, Inspector Bryce won't even think about that when you're dangling your dick." He paused, rolled his eyes upward, added, in a firm voice, "Metaphorically."

Tom's blood had begun to quicken, however, with the mere thought of a case to solve. Since he'd been burned in the fire, Tom felt as if he had been living on pills, pills for the pain, pills to boost his immune system, pills, he suspected, to help him forget the ordeal through which he had suffered.

Now, suddenly, he realized that he and his doctors had overlooked the one medicine most likely to effect his healing—detective work. A mystery to sort out. His pulse was already beating faster just thinking of it.

And, he wanted Stanley working on it with him. Fuck the fag decorating. Fuck the shit they'd been through in the past. Sure he had some hang-ups from it all. It was hard, living with what had happened to them. Hard for Stanley, too. Didn't matter, though. Stanley was a lot tougher than people thought when they first looked at him. They'd get through all of this. Stanley hadn't quit on him, and he wasn't going to quit either, just because things got tough.

"Korski and Danzel," he said aloud. That's how it was, and how it would stay. "Partners."

"Partners," Stanley said too, and added, "Danzel and Korski."

"You got your cell phone with you?"

Stanley checked his pocket. "Yep."

"And it's charged?"

Stanley took a fraction of a second longer to answer. He had forgotten to charge the phone, but surely it had enough juice for a call or two. That counted, didn't it? It wasn't exactly dead. "Of course," he said.

"Good. You get into trouble too easily. New rule. You need to have your phone with you and ready at all times."

"So Hopalong Cassidy can ride to the rescue," Stanley said with a smile and immediately regretted the words, remembering the last time Tom had come to rescue him.

"That's right," Tom said, not smiling. No doubt he was remembering too. He nodded and started from the office. "That's my job."

He wanted to ask Stanley about his gun, the Beretta Tom had given him when they first opened their office. He felt sure Stanley wasn't carrying now, after what had happened. He understood. But Stanley was a magnet for trouble. He'd feel better knowing Stanley had it with him.

Only, he couldn't bring himself to ask. Instead, he glanced down. "Uh, Stanley, why is there cheese on the floor?"

"It must have fallen out of my sandwich."

"Where's the sandwich?"

"I ate it."

"You should clean that up. We'll get mice."

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Chapter Four

Black birds—grackles, he thought—circled noisily overhead as Stanley paused outside the gates to Bartholomew's. Omens, he wondered, harbingers of fresh trials to come? Surely they had been through enough trials already, hadn't they?

Something startled the pigeons on the roof, and like elderly maidens frightened into movement, they fluttered briefly in silly agitation before settling once again at their perches. The blackbirds had vanished from the sky. They might almost never have been there. For a singular moment there was no traffic on Dolores. The silence sounded loudly sinister.

He had an inexplicable urge to look over his shoulder. He resisted it and pushed his way through the gates.

Bartholomew's had always fascinated him. He knew a little of its history, and every time he stepped inside those bronze clad doors, he found himself imagining it as a bordello in its glory days. It was easy to imagine some haughty madam spiraling down that grand staircase.

In this instance, however, it was not a madam, but a stunning exemplar of gay male porn fantasy. Six foot two, jet black hair, eyes the color of sable, good sable, too, and—hard not to notice as it descended past eye-level—what surely must be a flashlight tucked into the front of his trousers.

"Can I help you?" the vision of loveliness asked.

"I'm meeting Cyril. I'll just have a seat," Stanley said, and had to bite his tongue to keep from adding, "yours, if it's available."

"My name is Armando." He smiled, a flash of teeth so white and perfect one had to assume an orthodontist had made a considerable down payment on a new Mercedes as a result of them. "If there's anything I can do for you, anything that you'd like, I'm here to serve."

Involuntarily, Stanley's eyes dropped downward. Apparently, funeral directors at Bartholomew's all wore boxers, or nothing under their trousers. He quickly raised his eyes. Was that a sparkle of amusement in the ones regarding him? A *willing* sparkle of amusement?

"Thank you," Stanley murmured, and sighed with genuine sadness. "But, I think I'll just wait here for Cyril, thank you."

"As you wish, I'm sure he'll be right along. I know he wouldn't want to keep you waiting." He emphasized the 'you' and with what could only be described as a courtly little bow, he added, "I'll just pop back by a bit later, in case you've thought of anything you want."

Stanley watched him go with regret. He still hadn't decided whether tricking at a mortuary counted as accident or premeditated sex. But, why, he asked himself, was he even thinking this way? From the time he and Tom had become partners, he hadn't thought seriously about anyone else. True, that was in the past ... before he had discharged his innocence in the firing of a single bullet; but surely that did not erase all the rules of marital behavior.

It wasn't like he'd actually come here this morning looking for action, though, was it? If you subscribed to the accident-versus-premeditation theory of sexual happenings, then it certainly wouldn't be his fault if some unfortunate circumstance befell him. If he fainted, say, and a handsome funeral director knelt down to give him mouth to mouth, and...

On the other hand, would Tom see this as the accident it absolutely was? Or, would be. If it happened. Because he really did feel in danger of swooning, watching Armando walk away, his beautiful buns flexing in seeming invitation. Stanley's legs were actually going weak, imagining...

"Stanley."

He gave a guilty jump and turned to see Cyril Bartholomew practically at his elbow. "Stanley, so good to see you," Cyril greeted him with a smile. They shook hands, shared air kisses—the appropriate greeting for two gay men who were, in essence, friendly strangers. When Stanley glanced over Cyril's shoulder, he saw that Armando was gone, if not altogether forgotten.

"You're looking good," Cyril said. His eyes went up and down, a light in them that Stanley might once have been glad to see.

"And you," he said. At one time, he'd found Cyril reasonably attractive. And had once or twice nearly done something about it. Now, though, after Tom, Cyril looked just a shade too effete. Lots of gay men did, he'd discovered. Only, not quite all of them, and not quite lately.

* * * *

An elevator whisked them to the third floor.

"This isn't my office, exactly," Cyril said, ushering them into a wood paneled room, "It was my Uncle Percy's. I've just been doing a lot of the routine business work the last few weeks, while things get sorted out."

"Uncle Percy? He of the late suicide?"

"So you've heard of that, have you? Yes, as a matter of fact, it was here I discovered him, on that very sofa there. Does that make you uncomfortable?" His expression said he hadn't even considered that possibility until now, that he dealt with bodies every day as a matter of course and hadn't imagined others might feel differently. "We can find another room."

"No. I might feel a little squeamish if he were still lying there. Tell me something, though, it was suicide, wasn't it? No question about it?"

Cyril took a moment to open green velvet drapes. Bright sunlight poured in, dispelling the shadows. "The police seemed satisfied that it was suicide," he said finally. "I've made some sandwiches, tomato and cream cheese, I thought that would be simpler than going out. Are you hungry?"

Actually, remembering Chris's remark, Stanley was glad to hear that the sandwiches contained no meat. Still ... "Not really. I had a, well, I guess you'd say, a substantial snack a little earlier." He smiled, remembering.

Seeing the brief but self satisfied smile, Cyril said, in both innocence and curiosity, "Apparently one you enjoyed. It must have been tasty."

"Very. Anyway, for the moment, I'm good." He squelched a burp.

"Some coffee, then? It's already made, I just have to turn it on." He went to the coffee urn sitting atop a credenza and switched it on without waiting for a reply.

"But, that suicide, you're not, is that what you're implying? Satisfied it was suicide, I mean?"

Cyril looked at the oversized wooden chair behind the desk, and at a pair of chairs grouped before a fireplace on one wall. "Let's sit here, shall we?" He flipped a switch and an electric flame began to flicker. "And, to answer your question, the truth is, I have no idea. I hadn't really even thought of it. It seemed straightforward enough."

"Did your Uncle have reason to kill himself?"

He shrugged. "Who knows what goes through someone else's mind. He might have. I suppose in a sense, we all might have, mightn't we? Hasn't each of us contemplated suicide at some point, if only fleetingly? Say, over the breakup with a boyfriend, for instance."

"I guess so. Personally, I'd be more inclined to wring the boyfriend's neck. But, Uncle Percy, there were no nasty circumstances? Bad debts, romantic entanglements? He didn't show any signs of, I don't know, depression, say?"

"Not that I noticed. But I can't honestly say we were close. He didn't encourage closeness. He wasn't the sweetest of men. To be perfectly frank, he could be a real bastard. He liked to think of Bartholomew's as his own private little kingdom. Plus, he was a bit too fond of recreational drugs, it seemed to me. I don't know that he was actually in debt, but

I suppose he might have been. And after his death, it turned out he had AIDS."

"Might be a clue there. To why he'd commit suicide, I mean."

"I suppose that's possible." Cyril made a dismissive gesture with the tips of his fingers. "But, to be honest, he wasn't the reason I asked you to come here. Or, at least I don't think there's any connection, but since then, we've been plagued with a string of odd mischief. One of our directors, our lone woman director, got this note a week or so ago."

He took a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Stanley. Stanley read, frowning, and handed it back. "Ugly. No idea who sent it?"

"None. For the most part, relations among the staff have always been cordial, so far as I knew, at least. And then, just two days ago, someone switched bodies. The body of a young man was placed in the casket and the viewing room for an elderly lady. Someone had even knotted a drapery cord around his neck—strictly for effect, let me add. He died actually of a drug overdose, not strangulation. Luckily, the switch was discovered in time, some delivery men bringing flowers, and the bodies swapped back."

"But, whoever made the switch in the first place must have known there'd be people in and out before any actual visitation began."

"Meaning, he didn't really intend for the family to see it, only to upset the staff? Yes, I thought about that. There are always people in and out of a slumber room before any service or viewing begins. And, of course, we try to make

sure that everything is perfect. It's unlikely this would have slipped by. Still, you see the problem. Someone is trying to upset people."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing that major. We got a prank call, a body to be picked up at Saint Alonso's, and there was nothing there for us. Of course, that might have been an accident. Mistakes do happen."

Stanley thought for a moment. "Or, someone with a grudge, it sounds like. Do you think there could be a sexual connotation? Maybe a jealous trick, or ... well, might a couple of your directors have gotten intimately involved? I understand that there are sometimes sexual favors extended."

Cyril got up and went to pour their coffees, his back to Stanley while he filled cups, placed them on a tray, brought them to the little table between their chairs.

"You've heard about that, too?" he asked in a cautious voice.

"Some."

Cyril's expression was worried. "Please tell me this isn't common knowledge?"

"Far from it. A closely guarded secret, I should say. It is true, though?"

Cyril stirred some sugar into his coffee, lifted the cup to his lips and took a careful sip.

"Understand, it's the sort of thing that could quite ruin Bartholomew's, if it got out."

"Mum's the word. And, I have to say, probably there are people who wouldn't believe if they did hear. I almost didn't. It sounds so, I don't know, like a porn fantasy. Admittedly, a bizarre one. But, it's not a fantasy, right."

Cyril sighed. "It happens, if that's what you want me to say. Yes. Although everyone looks the other way, pretends to be unaware. But, if one of the directors and a client happen to go into an unused parlor alone together, everyone is very careful to avoid that room while they're there. That sort of thing. Nothing said about it."

"And it's not just one or two of the staff who are likely to take these little journeys?"

"No. I'd say it's fairly common. Of course, not everyone here has any direct contact with the public. Nancy Latimer, say, she's the accountant. Once she's in it, she rarely comes out of her office. Besides, if you saw Nancy ... No, we're talking here about the funeral directors. Anyone else ... well, the interns, of course, but they don't have a great deal of interaction with the clients."

"When it happens, then, it happens only with the funeral directors, if it happens at all. But, surely, they can't all be gay?"

"Not at all. Take Armando, the handsome Italian who stopped to speak to you downstairs just before I came in, he's our grief counselor. Armando is not only heterosexual, he's a certified womanizer, which is very much in the Bartholomew's tradition also. Old man Percy—not old, old man Percy, that is, but Percy Junior, the one who committed suicide, was a certified womanizer as well. It was said he'd

jump anything that would hold still long enough. I've no doubt a cocker spaniel in heat if someone would hold her for him. A female cocker spaniel, in any event."

"But he still dropped his pants for the boys, too?"

"Uncle Percy could be said to have the virtue of his flaws. His drawers came down for any and all who expressed their need for that sort of comfort, and I'm told it was considerable comfort he offered, too. I can't say from actual experience, but I'm told when it was poking out that the glans was sometimes in a different zip code from the rest of him."

"It must have been very comforting indeed."

"I'm sure it was. What I started out to say, though, is, it's the same with Armando. I don't mean size, necessarily, though he doesn't seem to be deficient in that department either, but he's probably no less enthusiastic in his heterosexual pursuits than old Percy. It's how he spends his free time, jumping women, live ones, so far as I know, and if his reputation is anything to go by, he's very successful at his avocation."

"I shouldn't wonder," Stanley said. He found himself comparing Armando and Cyril. Of course, Armando was younger, but even had they been the same age, Cyril would have come in a distant runner-up in any beauty competition.

"And yet," Cyril was saying, "it seems that it takes little more than the asking to see Armando bent over a casket in one of the unused parlors. The asking, at any rate, by one of his mourners. I don't think he makes himself available that way otherwise, and I'd wager he'd be quite offended if anyone suggested it was in any degree homosexual. Even,

most likely, if someone suggested it was something he does for the sake of his own enjoyment. I doubt that his personal pleasure enters into it at all. He sees it, I'm sure, as a matter of professional service rather than sexual pastime."

"It gives a new meaning to easing one's pain."

Cyril looked momentarily embarrassed by the tone of the conversation. "I hope you don't think of them, us, as a bunch of degenerate latches."

A vision of young Armando, bent over a casket, his trousers about his ankles, magnificently sculpted cheeks spread wide, flashed across Stanley's mind. A lovely vision, really.

Would that be an accident? What if, say, you saw him like that, and your knees grew weak at the sight—which was, after all, entirely believable—and, say, you more or less fell against him, and before you knew it, you'd slipped inside without a conscious intention of doing so, simply the circumstances of how you had fallen ... and you couldn't just leap back in horror without giving offense, could you, not when he was being so very courteous himself? Miss Manners would almost certainly forbid it.

And suppose, moreover, that you now found yourself more or less imprisoned within some tight space, and it took several tugs and pulls and pushes to extricate yourself gracefully. He'd once or twice found himself ensheathed in places quite that tight and it had taken him the longest time, and considerable effort, before he could comfortably and safely free himself without offense to anyone.

Surely if it happened like that, no one could hold you at fault, could they? It would be no more significant than finding a dollar bill lying on the sidewalk and bending down for a moment to pick it up, it seemed to him—or, in this fantasy case, it was Armando bending over. Still, it would be just one of those lucky circumstances that sometimes came your way.

"Not a single thought of disapproval crossed my mind, I assure you," he said aloud.

Cyril gave him another look, but he seemed satisfied that Stanley's remark wasn't meant to be facetious. "Yes, well ... you have to see it in light of the business we're in. We contend every day with one of the fundamental facts of life, perhaps the most basic element of all. The sort of person who'd be attracted to this business is, almost by definition, a pragmatist. We deal with cold realities. The most important requirement for a funeral director is to possess both the desire and the ability to comfort people in a time of sorrow. Our job is to ease the bereaved through a difficult period. We're interacting here for the most part with gay men, but, gay or straight, it doesn't matter, really. There's something programmed into the human brain. You see death, and a message flashes, 'Do it while you can, tomorrow that may be you in the box.'"

"I'm not sure it's uniquely human. Animals do it, too. Probably always did. Ensuring the survival of the species."

"Exactly. So, as I say, our clients are mostly gay men. You must understand, our directors are not just the best looking in the business, they are the *best*." Said in the voice of a groundskeeper whose ducks are all swans. "We're here to

give comfort, and for some of them, the cold truth is, sex is the most effective form of comfort, the simplest way of all to finding relief, and I mean more than just orgasmic relief. These men, our directors, they see providing this relief as just another part of our repertoire, very little difference really from having a fresh handkerchief handy for someone's tears."

"Or other bodily fluids, I suppose."

"Exactly. A handkerchief, a willing derriere, not so very different, if you think of it that way."

"Well, really, a snotty old handkerchief? I certainly know which I'd prefer. In my time of grief, I mean."

"So do we. That's what I've been explaining. There's a certain camaraderie that exists in our business. Not unlike what exists among gays. Facts of our common existence that are so thoroughly understood, there's no need even to speak of them. It's just how things are."

"Gay bonding. Yes, sometimes it's on an almost psychic level, isn't it? You meet someone else gay, they might be part of an entirely different culture, a country thousands of miles away, but there are certain things you already understand about one another, without their being mentioned. It's how gays can sometimes communicate without a common language. A common spoken language, that is to say. You meet someone in Bangladesh, say, or Ulan Bator, and things happen sometimes without a word being spoken."

"Exactly. People in the funeral business, well, most people tend to be a bit, shall I say, distant with us. For many, what we do is distasteful, if not downright sinister. There are some who suspect us of some weird psychological bent. No one in

this business is entirely unaware of that stigma. So, we bond with one another in a way not common in most professions. It's not the same as mere friendship, and rarely about love or sex, though all of those may grow out of it. It's more like a family thing, in a sense. And of course, here at Bartholomew's, we're both funeral people and gay. And, many of us, blood family as well. It both separates us from others, and binds us together."

He frowned thoughtfully. "That's what's so peculiar about these goings on of late. As Pollyannaish as it may sound, funeral people are rarely unkind to one another. Gentle kindness is a part of our daily discipline, our stock in trade, if you will, but we're also kind, especially kind, I might say, among ourselves."

Stanley thought about Bartholomew's funeral directors, offering comfort to their clients in their own special way. Of course, he saw no reason to point out to Cyril that they were also getting their rocks off while they were at it. It wasn't all benevolent kindness to strangers. You woke up this morning feeling horny, carrying about a heavy burden and wanting to spill it? No problem. You work at Bartholomew's. In the course of your typical workday, someone was almost certainly going to come along who was willing, even eager to wring that big load out of you. If you wanted to be whimsical, you might even call it the fellowship of the wrings.

It occurred to him, though, that Cyril's rationalization was not so very different from what he had done a short while back. Cyril, too, at some point in time, had been forced to

look into the mirror of reality. Who but he himself could know what innocence that had cost him.

"So, this fellowship of yours," he said finally, suppressing a smile, "it all sounds very three musketeer-ish, but it's not all that lovey-dovey, is it? And then there's your uncle's suicide—assuming it was suicide. I can't help thinking there is some connection. All of this started after his death."

"You're saying ... what? That he might have been murdered?"

Stanley did not answer immediately. Something in his subconscious looked with suspicion at Percy's suicide. On the other hand, even in his brief stint with the San Francisco Homicide detail, he had learned one peculiar thing, an occupational hazard, as it were. When you began to investigate mysteries, you soon tended to see mysteries everywhere, to become suspicious of even the most natural circumstances.

"Maybe," he said aloud. "Or maybe I'm just looking for trouble where none exists. Still, suicide or not, it does look as if there might be a connection."

Cyril shrugged. "If the police had any doubt about his suicide, they kept it to themselves. Maybe you could ask someone?"

"We're looking into that at this very moment, as a matter of fact."

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Chapter Five

Tom had arranged to meet Inspector Bryce of the San Francisco Police Department at a little coffee shop only a few blocks away from the Hall of Justice, where the Homicide Detail was housed.

When he arrived there, Tom stood for several long moments on the sidewalk outside, trying to screw up his courage to go in. Since the burn that had left his face damaged, he had shunned public appearances. The first few times he'd ventured out, to doctors' offices and clinics, he had been all too aware of the looks he got from people, their eyes going instantly to the scar that ran down his left cheek, like blood boiling over. Generally, they looked away quickly, embarrassed. He didn't have to have Stanley's gift for reading people to know what they felt when they saw him.

Despite Stanley's assurances, he was altogether and painfully aware that his face, which had once earned him admiring glances wherever he went, was now more likely to frighten or repulse people. He couldn't remember ever in his life being scared before, and now he was—scared to let people see him. He'd been cowering in their apartment since he'd come home from the hospital. He'd been a bastard with Stanley, too. He knew that. How in the name of Heaven had Stanley endured him?

Especially with all that Stanley had on his conscience. He knew that Stanley blamed himself for the scars. The truth

was, there had been a time, a brief time, when he had blamed Stanley, too.

He'd gotten past that, though. Stanley wasn't to blame. Tom had done what, in one fleeting moment, he knew he had to do, and that was save Stanley's life. Given the same situation again, he'd do exactly the same thing. What had happened, had happened. He couldn't change it. Meaning, he'd just have to live with it.

Which didn't make things easier, of course. Now, for the first time, he was going to venture into a restaurant—a crowded one, he could see that through the door. All those people ... how many appetites would he spoil, just by walking across the room?

"Fuck it," he suddenly said aloud, startling a woman with a shopping bag just going by, who took the briefest look in his direction and, clutching the bag to her bosom, circled warily and hastily around him and all but ran down the sidewalk.

Let them stare. Let them gag on their food if they wanted. He gave the glass door an angry shove. He was Tom Danzel. And Stanley Korski loved him. If Stanley could deal with it, if Stanley could actually kiss that scar on his face as if he loved it, too, the rest of the world would just fucking have to get over it.

Bryce was already there. A perky blonde hostess led Tom to the table, giving him the benefit of a smile over her shoulder. The kind of smile, actually, he'd been used to getting from women in the past. Which surprised the hell out of him.

It was funny; he had never been what people would call handsome, in the conventional sense, but he knew women had turned on to him, had since he'd been thirteen or fourteen years old. They hadn't waited for him to grow up before they'd started climbing all over him. What they wanted was already big enough even back then to do the job it was called for. He liked to think that he'd rarely disappointed them, too. He'd learned quick.

It wasn't only women, either. Some men, too, though before Stanley, he'd been less aware of that, had really given it very little thought. Hadn't been interested enough to care, particularly. He had never been interested in men that way; still wasn't, in fact. It was Stanley the individual he loved, not Stanley the member of the male sex.

Stanley had done something to him, something he still couldn't fully understand. He'd resisted for the longest time, tried to pretend it was nothing more than hot nuts. He'd given up that pretense, though. He couldn't fool himself. He loved Stanley. He didn't know how or why that had happened, to him of all people, but it had. It was just a fact of life; maybe the central fact of his life.

So, Stanley had a point, as he often did—as long as they had that, who cared about the rest of it? If he didn't have women crawling all over him anymore, what did that matter, when he had Stanley? One thing he couldn't deny, the sex had never been better in his life with anyone than it was with Stanley, and he had plenty of experience to judge by. Who cared what anybody else thought about his face? His dick was still the same, and Stanley seemed plenty happy with that.

But, something odd happened as he followed the cute little hostess across the dining room, his eyes glued to her butt, pretending he didn't see the faces turning in his direction. Yes, just as he'd feared, as he had expected, he'd seen repugnance in the first quick glance the hostess had given him when he came through the restaurant's door; but now, that repugnance had given way to something else. He thought she looked intrigued by the mess that had been made of his face. Even, with the second smiling look she gave him, turned on, in the way he'd always been used to women turning on to him.

Maybe Stanley was right. Maybe. He grinned. It was meant to be a friendly grin, but with his dark unruly hair, his hard-chiseled features and the scar, it looked like the leer of a wolf. He didn't notice that several of the women watching his progress across the room saw that grin, and shifted a little in their chairs, for a moment forgetting entirely the men they were with. He looked, several of them thought, like wild sex incarnate, crossing the crowded dining room. The primitive savage. Tarzan. Belle's beast, come to life. The stuff of feverish sexual imaginings. And here he was, passing by the table, so close they could have tripped him just by extending one little foot an inch or so. One or two of them nearly did. Who cared about civilized manners when the thrill of a lifetime might be yours for the taking?

Bryce was at the table, drinking a beer. Tom nodded in greeting and made a point of turning so that his bad side was in Bryce's line of vision, so it couldn't be ignored. Bryce, too,

looked at it and quickly away. And then, almost as quickly, as if he were puzzled by it, back again.

"Thanks for meeting me," Tom said. They shook hands across the table, and Tom, dropping into a chair, asked the hostess for a Heineken. "Sorry I'm late," he said, glancing at the menu and setting it aside. "I had to find a pussy."

"Really?" Bryce was surprised out of his scrutiny of Tom's face. "And? Any luck?"

"Mister Bootles. He ran off. Turns out he was in heat."

Bryce puzzled over that for a moment. "And?" he said again.

"He came back. They do, it seems. Pussies in heat. After they've found what they went out for."

"Ah. So, case successful." Bryce looked at the menu Tom had set aside. "You hungry? They do a good Reuben here. I ordered two. Hope that's okay. I have to get back to the station."

As if on demand, a waitress appeared with two plates, set one in front of each of them. Tom looked up at her, found her staring at his face. She blushed wordlessly and hurried away. Feeling pissy, wondering if he'd ever get used to it, Tom took a tentative bite of his sandwich. He wished Stanley were with him. He had more courage with Stanley at his side. Funny. Everything was better with Stanley at his side. He should probably share that discovery with Stanley.

"Good," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Yeah, best in town," Bryce said, eating a bit more enthusiastically than the sandwich might have warranted.

After a moment, he paused, sandwich in hand, and looked across the table, careful this time not to look at Tom's scars. "So, to what do I owe the honor? Are you working on something?"

"Sort of." Tom put his sandwich back on his plate, had a sip of his beer, wiped his mouth again. "There was a death at Bartholomew's funeral home a while back. That place in the Castro. A little birdie told me you were the investigating officer."

Bryce put his own sandwich aside, shifted uncomfortably on his leather seat. "I might have been," he said, wary. "Okay, yeah, I was. Why?"

"Suicide, I hear."

"Look, Tom, you know I can't discuss an investigation..."

"An ongoing investigation, yes. So you're saying that this one is? Ongoing? Was there some question about the suicide part?"

Bryce looked definitely uncomfortable. He picked up his beer, swirled it around gently, took a long swallow.

"Officially," he said, measuring his words carefully, "the case is closed. Suicide. Period."

"Only?"

Bryce set the beer aside, looked indecisively at some place over Tom's shoulder. "Look," Tom said, "I came to you because I thought, well, hell, I don't know, maybe it was just my imagination—I felt like there was this, what do they call it, this rapport, this thing between the two of us." He dropped his hand to his crotch, gave it a little pat in a seemingly unconscious gesture. *Dangle the dick*, he thought. Bryce's

eyes followed the movement and looked quickly away. "Like, you know, a special connection. I just had that impression. The sort of thing I didn't have with the other inspectors. Maybe I was wrong."

He paused, waiting. When Bryce still didn't say anything, Tom took the hand from his lap and put it up to the scarred side of his face. "Or is it this? Makes you want to puke, does it?" His tone was brutal, accusing.

Bryce looked then, directly at the scars. He blinked, and met Tom's eyes. "No, absolutely not," he said fiercely. "I always thought you were ... shit. Never mind. You've got a partner. Just leave it at that. No, I don't find you repulsive. Not at all." He gave Tom a shit-eating grin. "To tell you truth, that ... uh, the scars, they kind of remind me of the Phantom, you know, The Phantom of the Opera? Where he wears that mask on one side of his face."

Tom shook his head. "Stanley's the opera fan. I'm more a country western kind of guy. Or old jazz."

"Well, it's ... oh, he's just, sort of this romantic figure, is what I'm trying to say. Tragic romantic. It kind of turns me on. The Phantom, I mean. The Phantom turns me on."

"The Phantom of the Opera, huh? He turns you on?"

"Totally."

Tom gave him one of what Stanley called his "sun-breaking-through-the-clouds smiles," the kind he'd used for years to break down any woman's resistance to his advances. "I'm glad to hear that," he said. He paused for a heartbeat, pretending he didn't notice the reddening of Bryce's face. "So then," he went on insistently, "officially, the case is closed."

Only, unofficially, you're not completely satisfied it was a suicide. Is that right?"

Bryce sighed his defeat, began eating his sandwich again, talking around a mouthful of pastrami and sauerkraut. "Okay, you're right. It's officially closed, but, yes, I personally still have some doubts. Eat."

Tom did, but more gingerly. He had long ago learned to trust the instincts of Homicide Inspectors, the good ones anyway, and he knew Bryce was a good one. At the moment, Bryce's doubts were more appetizing to him than sauerkraut. "There was a suicide note, yes?"

"Yes ... but, not handwritten, it came off a computer."

"Meaning, anyone could have typed it out. What did it say?"

"Not much. Something like, umm, 'there are some betrayals that only death can atone.'"

Tom chewed and frowned, thinking about that. He suspected Bryce's recall of the note was nearly word perfect. He took a long swallow of his Heineken. "What kind of betrayals, do you figure?"

"I've got no idea. But, there were two things that were significant. One, the autopsy showed he had AIDS. Apparently nobody knew about that. Nobody at the funeral home, I mean."

Tom took a minute to digest that. "That would support the idea of suicide, maybe. Although I don't think it's quite the scandal it was a few years ago. People have kind of gotten used to it." He chewed again, drank another draught of beer. "But, you said there were two things."

"His sister went missing. Alice. At almost the same time."

"His sister? You think there's a connection?"

"Hard to say. She was the other big shareholder in the company."

"No explanation for her disappearance?"

"She left a note for her husband. Said she'd fallen in love with someone else, and don't bother to try to find her."

"Let me guess—the note was written on a computer?"

"Yes. Probably the same one, but that doesn't mean much, it's there in the office at the funeral home, so it's not surprising that they might both have used it. Everyone does, apparently."

"And no clues as to where she went?"

"Nothing. But there's no indication of foul play, either. She's married to Bartholomew's embalmer, Horace Davros. We checked their apartment. There was nothing to be seen there, or at the funeral home, nothing to suggest violence, anyway. No blood stains, no bullet holes in the walls. Plus her husband's kind of a cold fish type."

"What's she look like?"

"She's no beauty, but she's not a dog, either. Plain looking, I guess is what I'd call her. A woman like that, kind of shy, they tell me, maybe married to a husband who didn't appreciate her or, say, he likes the boys ... there's stories about that place, that funeral home. Well, if she met a young stud, one of those guys with a thing for older women, you know. Taught her what she had been missing all this while. It happens."

"Wouldn't be the first time, for sure."

"Right. She's of age, there's no reason why she couldn't just walk away, if she felt like it. And, she sent a message to her husband a few days later, said she was in San Diego and she was on her way to Mexico, she'd be in touch."

"Sent—how?"

"E-mail. From her laptop. Which she'd taken with her."

"No way to know, though, where it was actually sent from. Could have been the next room."

"Right. She never got back in touch, either. Plus, her car is gone, too. We've alerted the authorities in San Diego and in Tijuana. It's a gray Honda though. Not the most distinctive car, and that border crossing, San Diego-Tijuana, if that's where she was, is the busiest border crossing in the world. It's like looking for a needle in a haystack. So, for the time being anyway, all we've got is a missing person, and the indications are she left on her own steam. There isn't enough to warrant an investigation, unless something further turns up."

"Like a body."

"Right. That would definitely change things."

They sat in thoughtful silence again, sharing a homicide detective's kind of thinking session. Both had forgotten about lunch.

"Could it have been an accident?"

"Which? Her disappearance?"

"The suicide."

"Possible. The guy, this Percy, he was a known boozier, and there was an empty brandy bottle on the floor nearby. Plus,

he liked his drugs, and there was a bottle of Nembutal too, nearly empty. A roach in the ashtray."

"Anything in the autopsy?"

"Liquor and Nembutal. Some pot." He paused, added in a tone that suggested significance, "and a little ether."

"Ether?" Tom lifted an eyebrow. "Ahh. Let me guess. That roach was a sleeper, right?"

"Right. It had been laced with ether. And he had the ether in his lungs. Along with the pot. So, apparently he'd smoked the sleeper."

"Or somebody could have used ether to knock him out, and left the roach to throw you off."

"Possible. Either way, he'd breathed the ether in. Hard to determine how he got it into his lungs. Like I say, the guy was fond of recreational goodies. Sleepers aren't that common, but they're not unheard of either. Nothing is, in San Francisco. But, the big thing was the Nembutal."

"Enough to kill him?"

"That's an interesting question. Why do you ask?"

Tom shrugged. "My experience was, Nembutal attempts don't usually work. You have to take a lot, say, sixty pills. But by the time the individual has taken maybe ten of them, he's already passing out. Usually they fall asleep before they take a fatal dose. A guy smoking a sleeper, I'd say it would happen a lot faster. The booze speeds things up, of course, but still..."

Bryce sighed. "I probably shouldn't tell you this, we didn't let it out to the press, but he mainlined the Nembutal. Most likely had a couple of tokes from the joint, took a few pills, to

make himself drowsy, and dissolved the rest of them in some water, shot them up. He probably didn't know what hit him."

Tom thought about that. "Interesting. It's like the suicide note, though, isn't it? Anybody could have shot him up. Given him a few, maybe in that brandy, to knock him out, or done it with ether, or both, and then finished him off when he was asleep."

"Exactly. It probably wouldn't have taken such a big dose, either. His system was weakened with the AIDS. On the other hand, it could have been an accident. The guy liked to play around with drugs, apparently. He was squiffed, might only have meant to get high, or just to put himself to sleep, and he miscalculated. But that leaves the note unexplained."

"Unless someone came along, found him dead, and typed out the note."

Bryce stopped in the act of taking a bite of his sandwich and stared at it as if the answer could be found between the slices of rye bread. "I hadn't thought about that. But, why would they? Just to be ornery?"

"People can be, sometimes," Tom said. He drank from his beer, muffled a belch. "So, what do you make of it all, then?"

"Like I said, it was ruled a suicide. But, let's face it, it would be an easy way to off somebody. And hard to prove."

"And the missing wife?"

"There's no reason for anyone to kill her. No obvious reason, anyway. Her brother? Why would he, especially if he was planning to off himself."

"The husband?"

Bryce shook his head. "He'd be an obvious suspect, but again, there's no evident motive. She's only missing, not dead, so he doesn't inherit anything, not for seven years. And everybody said they were devoted. He idolized her, the way I hear it. Of course, it could be just what she said, that she ran off to be with a boyfriend. Women have been known to do that. And everyone describes her as kind of spacey."

"Or she could have been the victim of foul play. Say, a stranger. Maybe when she was getting in or out of her car. A random."

"But a stranger with access to the funeral home, which doesn't sound random. There is the note." He frowned. "So, what's your interest in all this, anyway?"

"We got a call from someone at the funeral home. There's some funny stuff going on there. Poison pen letters, pranks. Nothing really serious, apparently. But that's what made me think that maybe someone had come along after, found this guy dead, and typed out the suicide note. Just to muddy the waters. It sounds like a prank kind of thing, if you think about it."

"Nobody said anything to us. Poison pen letters and stuff like that."

"You know how it is. People sometimes see cops as the enemy. Especially gay people."

"Are they? Gay? I got the impression a couple of them were light in the slippers, and like I said, there's rumors about the place, but, hell, that's the Castro. It would be more of a surprise if none of them was gay. Odds would be against it. But, not all of them, surely."

"No, not all, from what I hear." Tom debated how much he should share of what Stanley had told him about the funeral home, and decided that so far that was more in the nature of gossip, the kind of gossip that could cause real damage if it got around. He finished his beer, pushed his half eaten sandwich aside. "Look, thanks, if I find out anything interesting, I'll let you know."

"Uh, Tom..." Bryce reddened again, looked down at his own half-eaten lunch. "Listen, about what I said, earlier. You know, about, well, being kind of, well, attracted..."

"The Phantom of the Opera?" Tom stood, leaned across the table to clap a hearty hand on Bryce's shoulder. "Don't worry, buddy, that'll be our little secret, just the two of us. Hell, you want to know the gospel truth, I'm kind of jealous of the guy. But that's just between us, too, okay?" He scratched at his crotch again, apparently unconsciously, winked, and strode away.

Bryce turned his head to watch him go, savoring the way Tom's trousers fitted across his buns. The meeting hadn't gone anything like the way he had imagined in his sexual fantasies ... many of which featured Tom Danzel these days.

"Are we finished?" The waitress had come unnoticed to stand by the table. Looking up, Bryce saw that she was taking in the cut of Tom's trousers as well. Apparently she had gotten over the shock of his face.

It was a shock, too, at first glance—but, almost as quickly, the shock faded. What came through was still Tom Danzel. Maybe, even, more Tom Danzel than ever—like the burns had turned up some inner heat. He'd always been sexy. Bryce had

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the hots for Tom from the first time he'd laid eyes on him. Now, what should have made him sickening to look at had made the bastard sexier than ever. Go figure.

"Yes. I guess we're finished," Bryce said despondently.

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Chapter Six

"There are some betrayals for which only death can atone." Stanley read Percy Bartholomew's suicide note aloud and contemplated it for a moment. "It's computer generated. Anybody could have written it."

"That's true. But Percy rarely wrote anything out long hand, his writing was like a chicken's scrawl. If he left notes for anybody, any of the staff, say, he always printed them out on the computer. The poison pen note to Leslie was computer printed as well. But the computer is in the break room. Everyone had access to it."

"Tell me, who benefited from Percy's death, if anybody?"

"His sister, Alice, I suppose. She was the other chief owner of shares. She'd become managing director at his death. Only," Cyril hesitated. "She's missing."

Stanley raised an eyebrow. "Is she? I didn't know that."

"It wasn't publicized. The story is, she just walked out on her husband, Horace. She left a note, saying she'd met someone, a younger man, I believe it said, and had decided to go away with him. Of course, no one wanted that in the newspapers."

"Was there any suggestion of foul play?"

"None that I am aware of."

Still, it was a remarkable coincidence, wasn't it? The brother a suicide, the sister missing. Or was that the former Homicide Inspector thinking, seeing a mystery where maybe there wasn't one. "Okay, women do walk away from their

husbands. But, just for the sake of discussion, let's say, she didn't. Say there was foul play. Who'd be her likely heir? Her husband?"

"Yes, I suppose—but, he couldn't actually inherit until she's known to be dead, could he?"

"I think that's true. As I understand it, if a body's never found, that means seven years before she could be legally declared dead. So, he wouldn't really get anything until then."

Cyril made a tent with his fingers. "Not her estate, no," he said, "but he would take control of her shares, here at Bartholomew's. It's in the bylaws. If a partner is incapacitated, his or her spouse assumes control of the shares until such a time as, well, say, a will is probated, or until the situation is resolved in some other way. I should think the partners will interpret Aunt Alice's absence as being incapacitated."

"Which means, in effect, that her husband is now, what exactly, the managing director?"

"Yes. Or will be, after the next partners meeting. Presumably, they'll name him as such then. In the meantime, I'm sort of muddling through. I suppose in a sense you could say I benefited, then, but only temporarily, until Horace takes over. They'll be rather short on the board. Unless they elevate me to partner."

Something in the way Cyril said this made Stanley think that he was rather looking forward to this possibility.

Cyril screwed up his face thoughtfully. "But I don't see where that leaves us. Do you know anything about what's happened with the funeral business in the last few years? No,

I suppose you wouldn't. But, it's much like what's happened in other businesses—big corporate concerns taking over the older family enterprises. In this case, it's often SCI, that's Service Corporation International, out of Houston. They've been buying up the small, family owned mortuaries for years."

"Same thing is happening in a lot of businesses these days. It's harder for independent concerns to make it today."

"Yes. The gay bookstores are a good example of that. But the funeral business is no more immune to it than any other. When the AIDS crisis hit, Bartholomew's struck a gold mine, so to speak, we could barely keep up with the business. But that's kind of dwindled down in the last couple of years."

"It's funny, you think of the funeral business as one of those immune to the vagaries of the economy."

"To a certain extent, that's true, yes, people continue to die, after all. But our circumstances are a bit different, catering as we do to the gay community. The number of deaths in the gay community has definitely decreased as they've gotten AIDS under control. People who had been arranging for their own deaths now find themselves arranging their lives. Accordingly, our income has decreased as well. Don't get me wrong, I'm not bemoaning that fact. I lost my share of friends the same as everyone else. I'm glad to see the number of deaths decreasing."

"We all are."

"Absolutely. Nevertheless, the point I was making is, the result for us has been fewer funerals. We've had to cut back. Our cemetery in Colma, Le Fontane—the fountains—we ceded

that to the city in lieu of the taxes. A shame, really, it was a beautiful place. Our crematorium is there, too, but it's no longer functioning. It suffered structural damage in the last earthquake, leaving it with some serious leaks, and there simply hasn't been money to repair it. For some time now, we've been farming out our cremations to Petersons."

"The insurance didn't cover the damage?"

"Earthquake insurance is very expensive. Uncle Percy had let ours lapse." Cyril screwed up his face as if he'd just tasted something unsavory. "I may as well tell you the truth: Uncle Percy had not done such a good job managing things. Financially, Bartholomew's is in a shaky position. Anyway, a year or so ago, SCI approached Bartholomew's—this is strictly confidential, you understand, only the partners and the directors who are members of the family knew about it and they were all sworn to secrecy."

"I wouldn't think it would be good for morale, if it got around."

"No. And as it happens, it made for a rift in the company. Money is bit tight of late. And of course, there's this white elephant." He waved a hand in the air to encompass the entire palazzo. "It's outrageously expensive to maintain, and the land alone is worth a fortune. Percy wanted to sell, either to SCI, or sell the building and the property and move into something further out, a bit smaller and a bit less expensive to maintain. Others didn't want to sell, though, in either option. The arguments got rather heated at times."

"So, Percy's death could be said to benefit the don't-sell contingent."

"Yes. Only, the chief opponent was his sister. She felt, and probably correctly, that if SCI took over, they would turn away from a predominantly gay clientele. Nor did she favor moving the business elsewhere, partly for the same reason—we'd lose much of our local business, but more importantly, she thought this building, this location, was a large part of what made us Bartholomew's. And, I think she may have feared what would happen to the money from the sale, once Percy had his hands on it. He had a gift for going through money. In the end, we could have ended up with nothing. I think she wanted to ensure that wouldn't happen. But, now she's gone missing, so that kind of negates that don't sell advantage, doesn't it?"

"Does it? What about her husband? Horace, is it?"

Cyril sighed. "That doesn't help much either. Horace tends to play his cards pretty close to the chest, but as I understand it, he was on her side. He didn't want to sell, at least not to SCI. He said some rather unflattering things about them. He might have been more agreeable to selling the building and the property outright; I wasn't really privy to his thoughts on that, but he'd certainly have gotten his share of some considerable money. But, if you suppose either Horace or Alice, or both of them in cahoots, for that matter, did Percy in, then what happened to her? Horace might have wanted to see Percy dead, I don't think they were overly fond of one another, but he wouldn't have done Alice in, too. Anyway, that's one thing he can't do in her absence, is sell. That takes an agreement among the partners, and he's not a

partner, even if they elevate him to the board. He's only managing her shares by proxy."

"Who are the other partners?"

"At the moment, only my father and Nancy—Ms. Latimer. But the way the bylaws are written, major decisions require at least a two out of three majority among the partners. So, with Aunt Alice missing, selling the place is out of the question, for seven years, anyway. Or until a body shows up."

"Unless," Stanley pointed out, "they make you a partner."

"Yes," Cyril said, as if that had not occurred to him before, "then we'd have enough for an agreement."

"And you'd be in favor of selling?"

"Absolutely."

"And Mrs. Latimer?"

"Miss Latimer." Cyril took a long time answering. "I can't actually speak for Nancy, of course," he said finally. "I suspect she'd be in favor of selling. She's pretty much always voted with Percy."

"So, if the intent were to stop the sale of Bartholomew's, Uncle Percy's death would have been helpful, but disposing of Aunt Alice would have been counter-productive. Two entirely different motives, then."

Cyril gave him a thoughtful look. "Yes, although I'd never quite thought of it that way. That really rather supposes that someone did dispose of her, doesn't it?"

"I'm just thinking aloud." Stanley bit at a lip. "And Horace Davros—we don't really know where he stands, do we? He might have disagreed with his wife. Maybe as you say he really wanted to see the business sold."

"I expect he'd like to see the money. But, Horace is the last person I'd suspect in that case. He was devoted to Alice. It's such an old fashioned way of putting it, but I think he worshipped the ground she walked on."

"Was Horace one of the drop-the-drawers-at-will set?"

Cyril looked surprisingly shocked. "Horace. Good Heavens, no, he was resolutely heterosexual. Well, some of the others are as well, or mostly so, but I suspect Horace may be a bit homophobic, although he's always been careful not to show it. Well, he would be, wouldn't he, marrying into Bartholomew's? And whatever Aunt Alice married Horace for, it wasn't his looks, let me assure you. In any case, he's also always had very little contact with the public. He's our chief embalmer. He was a pathologist before he came to Bartholomew's. He joined the firm when he married Alice. We like to keep things in the family here."

"Apparently not one big happy family, though," Stanley said. "At least, not at the present."

Cyril said, thoughtfully, "No, at the present, someone seems to be decidedly unhappy. But I've got no clue who, or why." He paused, staring into the electric fire as if it were a real one. "Something is happening to us, something that greatly worries me. It's not just the individual incidents, though they are worrisome enough. It's that the camaraderie we've always shared has been strained. These days, people are wary with one another."

"I wonder, maybe that's the whole idea. Of these practical jokes. Just to make people distant from one another."

"But I simply can't see what the point would be." Cyril sighed.

"Unless it was just that, to cause mischief. Like Halloween pranks. Or, the phone calls. You know, 'do you have Prince Albert in the can?' Which sounds like something one of those young men might do."

"The interns?"

"Yes. How many are there?"

"Five, at the moment. Cody, Robert, Gregg, Todd and, let me think ... oh, yes, the most recent, David."

"And they live here?"

"Yes. There's a dormitory on the fourth floor."

"What exactly do the interns do, by the way?"

"Pretty much whatever anyone tells them to do. They assist with services, carry things around, arrange the flowers, wheel the caskets, act as pallbearers if necessary, assist in the embalmings. A lot of work, some of it manual."

"Sounds like slave labor."

"It is, almost. But, after two years at Bartholomew's, they're ready for a directorship anywhere in the industry. An internship at Bartholomew's is worth its weight in gold, to someone interested in a future in the mortuary business."

"Are they gay? The interns?"

Cyril smiled. "That varies. I should say the current ones are, though I can't say from actual knowledge. The rest of us could hardly engage in any hanky panky with them, and we make it a point to turn a blind eye to whatever might go on in the dormitory at night. But, that's among the boys themselves. It's unlikely, as I say, that they'd bring a client

up there. Besides, they work a long hard day; they'd have little time for that, even if they were so inclined."

"Is there anyone else here at night?"

"There's a little studio on the first floor, behind the offices. We have to have someone available through the night and the holidays, and the staff takes rotation. In most mortuaries, the duty person merely takes any calls at home, but we prefer to have someone immediately at hand, it's quicker, and it suggests a more personal level of service. Whoever is on duty stays in the studio. Otherwise, everyone goes home at night. But, there's a different person there every week."

"Which kind of rules them all out—unless we imagine an Agatha Christie kind of thing, and they're all in it together."

"Sounds pretty far-fetched."

"I agree. So, let me think ... I'm obviously going to have to spend some time at Bartholomew's. What about if I wanted to stay over for a few nights? I could sleep in the dorm with the interns, I suppose."

"Yes." Cyril brightened suddenly and snapped his fingers. "Or, now that I think of it, there's an apartment up there, too. It was the old man's. That is to say, old, old Mister Percy, who started Bartholomew's. Everything was done then on a shoestring, and he saved money by actually living here. The apartment's been closed up for years, we mostly use it for the odd storage, but I suppose it wouldn't be that difficult to get it in order. That would be more pleasant for you, I'm sure, than sharing a dorm with a bunch of young students. Plus it will give you a little more privacy."

Thinking about the kinds of students that were likely to be interning at Bartholomew's—without a doubt, all of them good looking, and presumably gay or at least gay friendly—Stanley wasn't at all sure about the "more pleasant" part of it and if he wasn't going to play in and out the intern, he didn't know what he was supposed to need the privacy for.

On the other hand, all things considered, it would probably be safer if he slept somewhere other than the dorm. Safer in terms of his relationship, certainly. Tom was definitely a one-man kind of guy. It would be hard to sleep in the dormitory with those attractive young men and justify anything as an accident. That was almost certainly premeditation.

"And I'd like to interview the staff, if I may. How many are we talking about?"

Cyril tilted his head, gazed up at the ceiling while he counted mentally. "Fifteen. Well, our other embalmer is on leave, so make it fourteen."

Mentally, Stanley groaned. Obviously only one of them was likely to know much about the strange shenanigans of late and he was unlikely to burst into confession. Or she, he amended.

Still, you never knew. One of them might have seen something without quite realizing what he had seen. One thing he had learned as a homicide inspector, you could never skip the little details.

"How many members of the present staff are actually family?"

"Blood family? Not so many now. My father, Mathew, is no longer active in the firm. He's still a partner, he attends

meetings, and votes, but otherwise he takes no part in the business. My brother, Matt Junior..."

"Older? Younger?"

"Older." Something in the clipped way he said that gave Stanley pause. Some family resentment? That wasn't unusual with siblings, with brothers in particular. Could that be a clue?

"Luke, he's Percy's son." A pause. Stanley got the impression there was something Cyril was about to say, and changed his mind about. Something about Luke? The relationship between father and son? "Luke's mother, Carmela, passed years ago, when he was just a baby. And Nancy Latimer, our accountant, I've already mentioned her. She's a cousin, on Carmela's side. That's it, I think. Aunt Alice, of course, but we don't know what's happened to her. And Horace, but only by marriage."

"Has Percy's will been probated?"

"Not officially, no. The original, of course, is with his attorney, but there was a copy with his papers and I took the liberty of reading that. I suppose that makes me sound rather calculating."

"You'd have good reason to want to know," Stanley fairly purred, thinking privately that Cyril certainly didn't leave much up to chance. No doubt he was thinking ahead to the possibility of being named a partner, but that was reasonable enough, surely.

"There's fifty thousand in a stock portfolio, that goes to his brother, my father. To compensate, one supposes, for essentially leaving Bartholomew's, his own share of it, to Alice. A small bequest here and there—a thousand or so, I

think, to Luke. But nothing I'd say of any significance. He wasn't a rich man. The life he lived ... frankly, that fifty thousand surprised me. Percy could go through money. I'd have expected him to dip into that, but apparently he saw that as inviolate. Except for that, though, the gist of the will is that things pretty much go to Alice. Wherever she is."

"I have to wonder what did happen to Aunt Alice? Do you believe the note she left, that she had met someone and run off with him?"

"On the surface it seems unlikely. I'm not aware that she had much of a life outside of Bartholomew's. Except for my father, no one does, much. I certainly can't picture Aunt Alice as an impulsive romantic."

"Interesting. Would you describe their marriage as a happy one? Horace and Alice's, I mean."

Cyril took a moment to consider that. "I should say so. On his part, at least. As for Aunt Alice ... well, she kept herself very much to herself. She was, withdrawn, I guess is what I want to say. She always had been. There was something almost unworldly about her."

"They had no children?"

"No." Cyril hesitated. "If you'd known Aunt Alice—it's hard to imagine her in the role of a mother. Frankly, it was hard enough imagining her as a wife. She was so absorbed in herself, so, I don't know, so shut inside herself. You had this sense of someone with grave secrets that she wanted no one to share. Not even her husband, I would say."

"You don't sound as if you were particularly fond of your Aunt."

"Oh, I loved her, of course, the way you do, with an Aunt. I can't say that I was ever close to her, though. She wasn't a woman who invited you to get close, if that makes any sense."

"And now she's missing." Stanley thought for a moment. "What about the rest of the staff?"

"There's five funeral directors at present. The family, which is to say, myself, Matt and Luke. Non family, there's Vincent, and Leslie, the woman of the poison pen letter. And Armando, our grief counselor, but he doubles as a director when needed. The interns, of course. The two embalmers I've mentioned already. In the office, there's Nancy, and Molly O'Neil. Mrs. O'Neil, she's a widow, she manages the office in general. I don't know that any of them will have much to say, to be honest."

"Probably not." Stanley thought for a moment. So far, nothing that he had learned pointed him in any particular direction, but maybe he wasn't asking the right questions. "Are there any pictures? Of Aunt Alice, in particular? For some reason she piques my curiosity."

"Well, I'm afraid you won't find her all that intriguing." Cyril got up and took a photo album from one of the shelves. He pulled his chair next to Stanley's, their knees touching, and opened the album across their laps. The fingers of his left hand, beneath the album, rested, maybe by mere accident, on Stanley's crotch. With his right hand, he leafed through the pages.

"That's Aunt Alice," he said, indicating a large eight by ten color photo. "She was a little sparrow of a woman. And that's Horace with her."

It was obviously a wedding picture, although the bride was dressed not in an elaborate wedding gown but in a simple daytime dress of white. She held a modest bouquet of roses in her left hand and she was unsmiling, pale, almost frightened looking, her eyes downcast. Not a particularly pretty woman, her features angular, falling just short of mannish, though he could imagine, if she were smiling, and with a little attention to her hair, her makeup ... Really, he'd thought often, every woman needed a gay boy to advise her on things like that. This was California, after all. Someone ought to make it a law. The world would be so much more beautiful.

Her husband, holding her other hand in his, stared directly at the camera. He looked rather too businesslike for a man at his wedding—or, perhaps for him, it had been entirely business.

Stanley's eyes went back to the bride. Somehow, Alice Bartholomew seemed to be the heart of the mystery here, although he didn't yet know how. There was really nothing remarkable about her—except for the enormous green stone hanging at her throat.

"That's quite a lavalier," he commented. "Emerald? Surely it isn't real. It's nearly as large as a pigeon's egg. A stone that size would be worth a small fortune."

"It is." Cyril turned the picture so that he could look at it right side up. "It was her mother's. Uncle Percy was after her

all the time to keep it locked up somewhere, but she insisted on wearing it full time. She said it was too showy; no one would ever suspect it was genuine. She insisted it was the safest place for it, around her neck."

"Hiding it in plain sight? Reminds me of Poe and his purloined letter. But she was right. I'd have dismissed it as just cheap glass if I'd seen her wearing it day to day. I'd never have imagined for a moment it could be real. Still, I'm no expert. If someone who knew about those things saw it ... well, like I said, it's probably worth a fortune." He flipped through a couple of pages and paused at another photo.

"Uncle Percy," Cyril said.

Not, Stanley thought, a particularly good looking man. Still, there was something very alpha-male in the way he gazed at the camera, a self assurance, arrogance, even. There was a hint of that air some men have. The best maitre d's and doormen and a few old newsmen, spot it at once, an aura of unlimited resources—financial, physical, perhaps even spiritual, or perhaps all three at once—to be called upon at will. That sort of attitude in a man could be exasperating, but it could be sexy, too. Even in the black and white of the photograph, he exuded color, vitality. A woman's man—although not, apparently, women exclusively.

"He looks like a big man."

"Fairly so. Six one, I'd say, hefty build."

"Meaning, if he was murdered, it would have taken someone of considerable size to manage him."

Cyril grinned. "Not necessarily. We're funeral people, remember. We study the human body. For instance," he

leaned closer to put the tips of his fingers at either side of Stanley's throat, "these are the carotid arteries. It takes very little to shut off the supply of blood to the brain. If I were to apply pressure here and here, for even a moment or two, you'd be out like a light." He squeezed slowly, as if he meant to demonstrate.

It was surely only his imagination, the power of suggestion, but Stanley felt lightheaded already. "Umm, I think, Cyril..." He gently removed Cyril's fingers from his throat and closed the photo album. "I'll want my partner to assist in the interviews." Stanley glanced at his watch. "It's a bit after twelve. Let's say, I'll come back with him at three. Will that be convenient?"

"I'll see that it is." Cyril stood, looking pleased. "I'm very grateful, Stanley, for your help. And, if there's anything I can do..." Cyril's expression seemed to emphasize the "anything."

Stanley thought about Armando, and the lustful thoughts Armando had inspired earlier; but there was a difference between imagining a quickie with a handsome stranger—who didn't have the occasional fantasy?—and having the reality of a little fling dangled under his nose. And he felt sure that Cyril was offering him just that, and none too subtly.

Cyril was good looking, too, if not quite in Armando's league. Six months ago, a year maybe, on the right night, anyway—say, one was horny and it was getting close to last call—Stanley might have welcomed that melting look in Cyril's eyes.

He had Tom now, though, and for that he was profoundly grateful; but he thought it nothing less than hubris to shout when giving thanks to God.

"I'll be sure to let you know," he said, and pretended he didn't notice Cyril's disappointment. He wondered, however, with a twinge of guilt, if he'd have turned down the same veiled pass from Armando. It was awfully easy to be virtuous where you weren't interested.

But why was he even thinking of these things, of the attractiveness of other men? Stanley tried to entertain few illusions about himself. In the past he had always found attractive men tempting, maybe too much so.

"Everyone has a right to try to find happiness," as Chris put it. "You're not to blame if you try just a bit harder than others."

It was true, he had all too often been guided by his sexual desires. He was okay with that. Everyone had faults and weaknesses. They were like house-guests who would not be turned away.

To give them warm welcome, however, only made them arrogant, and more demanding. Best to permit them their rooms and ignore them as best one could.

In the time since he and Tom had first linked up, however, had become partners, he had not been tempted by other men. So, why now? Did it, he wondered, have to do with all that guilt that was eating at him? Did some base part of himself now think he could toss all the rules aside?

It wasn't a pleasant thought to think—but it was there, that weakening of moral fiber, temptations that sapped the

resolve from his relationship with Tom. It had been at the start he who loved, Tom who had been uncertain.

Now, Tom loved him, he was sure of that. And he loved Tom, too. He had no questions on that score. He couldn't pretend, though, that his love for Tom was enough to keep him free from temptation. Certainly not lately, anyway. Which said, what, about him, about his love, about his moral character? Nothing good, of that he was certain.

He was preparing to leave when one further question occurred to him. "The father," he said, "Percy's father, and Alice's."

"Old man Percy? My grandfather?"

"Yes. How did he die anyway?"

"In a fall. On the stairs here. He broke his neck."

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Chapter Seven

"But none of it adds up to anything," Tom said when he and Stanley had swapped information. "A suicide that might not be. A missing woman, who may or may not have run off with a boyfriend. And a prankster stirring up shit at the funeral home—which may or may not have anything to do with the other two. Not much of a case, baby. There's nothing to hang the facts on. Just a lot of maybes."

"I did learn one thing. The missing woman, Alice, she was in the habit of wearing a lavalieré."

"Which is?"

"Umm, like a necklace. In this case, a chain with an emerald big enough to choke a horse. Apparently she wore it as an everyday thing."

"A real one? Wasn't that kind of nutty?"

"Yes. And no. She said, according to Cyril, that the very fact she wore it full time was the best security she could have for it, that no one would suspect it was the real thing. Which is probably mostly true. Still, it would have been worth a fortune. A half million, maybe a million, I don't really know. If someone who knew gems saw it..."

"Plenty of motive to steal it—but, kidnap her? Kill her? Because if someone snatched her, and she hasn't come back, that means she's dead, for sure. A necklace? Hell, how hard would it be just to yank it off, break the chain, whatever? Snatch and run. You wouldn't normally kidnap a woman to

get a chain from around her neck. Unless there was something more to it than that."

"We can't ignore it, though."

"No. But at best we can add it to that list of maybes." Tom gave Stanley a searching look. "Are you okay?"

Stanley avoided his eyes. "Yes, of course. What makes you ask that?"

"I don't know. You seem ... funny, somehow. Like you had something bothering you."

For a moment, Stanley thought about confiding in Tom, talking openly about all the crazy thoughts chasing one another through his mind. He hadn't yet got a handle on them himself, though, how could he share them with someone else? And they were such guilty thoughts—he was ashamed even of thinking them.

"Bartholomew's, is all. Look, maybe we can resolve some of those maybes by interviewing the employees. I know you're not going to want to do these interviews with me..."

"But I do," Tom interrupted him. "I'm a detective, I like detecting. Plus, this has me intrigued. That place is weird. I want to find out what exactly is going on there. I just didn't want to get into all that other stuff, you know, everybody humping everybody else."

"Hum. I think we're going to find that whatever is going on there, that's a big part of it. Just at a guess. I think the sex angle is somehow mixed up in all of it. Isn't it usually?"

"I think you're right." Tom shook his head. "You guys have some weird ideas of fun."

"You guys?" Stanley lifted an eyebrow.

"I've never fucked anybody in a coffin."

"There's always a first time."

Tom looked at him for a long moment. Looking back, Stanley saw the light of love in his eyes. Sometimes it was there. Other times—a lot of other times over the last few weeks, it wasn't, or it was all mixed up with other stuff till where you couldn't clearly make it out in the darkness.

This was going to be one of the bright times, then. He welcomed them, of course, but more and more he found that he needed them. The shining moments between Tom and him were more important now than ever. He wondered, fleetingly, if some day those gleaming interludes might run together, like beads sliding down a string, until they had melted again into one gleaming mass and concealed completely the dark strand that held them, that for now, at any rate, separated them. He hoped that would happen, but, assailed as he was by confusion, he sometimes doubted it.

"You making a suggestion?" Tom asked aloud.

"The coffins?" Despite his preoccupations, Stanley giggled. "They're silk lined, you know."

"Hmm. I like silk. Reminds me of panties."

"I don't wear panties."

Another long look, and a fully mischievous grin, the sort that always made something start to glow way down in the pit of Stanley's belly. "Tell you what, I'll make you a deal..."

"Uh, Tom..."

"Hey, like you said, there's always a first time."

* * * *

They started with the interns, in two shifts because work still had to be done downstairs in the mortuary. As Stanley had suspected, however, none of the five young men were able to shed any light on the things that had been happening. It was reasonable to assume that whoever their mischief maker was, he was mostly active at night, and none of the interns were about in the mortuary after they'd finished their work for the day; or at least, none of them readily admitted to it.

"It's a tough job," Greg, a baby faced blond, said. "We're expected to be on deck early, and it's generally a non-stop day. Services are mostly over by nine, but then there's clean up to do, prep for the next day. We're rarely done before eleven. By then, speaking for myself, I'm pretty much ready for bed."

"Your own, I presume," Stanley said.

"Well, sure."

Cody, another of the interns, giggled. Greg blushed. Rather fetchingly, Stanley thought, and shot Cody a quick scowl.

"What about nights off?" Tom asked, ignoring that exchange. "You don't all of you work every evening, do you?"

"No, we're in rotation," Cody said. "I don't know about the others, but when I get a night off, I may go out for a drink with friends, or a movie, but I generally don't make a night of it. Same issue. Early morning, and we don't get weekends off. The funeral business is every day. Weekends are usually the busiest, as a matter of fact."

"The rest of you?" Tom asked. Everyone glanced at David Solomon, the newest of the interns.

"Okay, true confession time. I'm kind of the late night guy," David said with a sheepish grin. "My folks live near here." Cody muffled another giggle, leaving David looking somewhat abashed. "And, all right, sure, sometimes," he added, "I stop for a drink on the way home." He glowered at Cody before he could make another comment, and added, "Or whatever. So, yeah, for sure, I'm usually the last to hit the sack most nights. But, generally speaking, by the time I come in, I'm kind of hurrying to get upstairs."

"Do you get in trouble coming in late?" Stanley asked.

"No, not exactly. I mean, it's not like we've got to clock in our out, or anything like that. It's only, well, like the others said, we work long days. Staying up too late, too many nights, isn't a good idea."

"But you've seen nothing out of the ordinary when you come in?"

"Nothing." His eyes darted toward Greg and Cody.

"Nothing that would have anything to do with this other business." Stanley thought he had a good idea what David might have seen, coming in late. It was pretty obvious that Greg and Cody had a thing going. David was right, though, that almost certainly had nothing to do with the present subject. If those two were getting it on, they were unlikely to be thinking of anything but one another and what they were doing. And too occupied to be getting up to mischief elsewhere.

He found himself sort of envying David, walking in on them. It must, he thought, be an inspiring sight.

Still, he thought when they left the break room after the last of the interviews, they had learned nothing but the fact that the next generation of funeral directors at Bartholomew's was going to be even hotter than the current one—which, if asked earlier, he'd have thought an impossibility.

* * * *

They spent the next hour interviewing the funeral directors in Cyril's office, and learning little more than they had from the interns. And like the interns, the directors were a spectacularly good looking bunch. If anyone had seen anything suspicious, however, no one was mentioning it.

Except, for all Cyril's talk of the camaraderie of the staff, it was clear that there was some dissension among them.

"I'm wondering," Stanley said, somewhat tentatively, "there's always a motive to these things. Money, jealousy..." he paused and raised an eyebrow, "sex."

Matt—Cyril's older brother, and darkly handsome, said, "I think Cyril's been talking. But, you know, whatever he told you, about the directors here at Bartholomew's, you don't need to take it altogether literally."

"You mean the business with the clients?" Stanley asked, at the same time wondering what had prompted Matt to bring it up so bluntly.

The directors exchanged embarrassed glances. Clearly this was not a subject they were comfortable with.

"It isn't true, then?" Stanley persisted. "You don't slip away from time to time with the clients?" A couple of the directors shifted uneasily in their chairs.

"Not all of us," Matt said defensively.

"Meaning, not you?"

"Oh, come off it, Matt." That was Luke—Percy's son, if Stanley had it right. "Stop trying to paint yourself the innocent. Whatever the rest of us have done, you've done too."

Matt gave an apologetic shrug. "Well, not as a rule, let's say. But I couldn't swear it's never happened."

"Between the sins of the world and mine, I find the differences of degree, not kind," Stanley quoted.

"More like, the rest of us don't keep score," Luke said in a frosty voice. "Things just happen, that's all. It's not like we *do* anything. We just let things happen. It's just the way it is here." Stanley looked around at the others.

"The boys aren't interested in me," Leslie said with a smile. "But there have been a couple of dykes. It's different for them, you understand. A quickie is a little more complicated. Just the logistics, I mean."

"Really," Tom said, sounding altogether too interested.

Stanley glowered at him and quickly said, "We don't need clinical details." Tom looked disappointed. Stanley looked at the other two directors. Vincent, the black man, was grinning openly, not at all embarrassed by the subject. All in all, Stanley suspected he'd be the first to stroll off with a client. At the moment, he looked ready to stroll off with whoever

asked. Stanley was tempted to ask. He and Vincent seemed to be exchanging a lot of smiles.

Stop that, he told himself, angry that the thought had even entered his mind.

"I think it's more that we all do whatever we think it's essential to do," Vincent said. "We're here to comfort people."

"Yes," Stanley said dryly. "To solace and succor." Involuntarily he glanced in Armando's direction, but the grief counselor's expression was one of studied innocence.

Still, even discovering that there was friction among the staff, did it really tell them anything? Stanley wondered. It was a pretty slim motive for the things that had been happening.

Someone had a motive, though. Only, on the surface of things, it was kind of hard to imagine who. Or even what the motive was.

More on an impulse than with any thought of learning something useful, he asked, of the room in general, "Does anyone have any idea what happened to Alice?"

The reaction to his question was puzzling. The directors looked at one another in some embarrassment. It was evident this question too had made them uncomfortable, Stanley would have said, and he couldn't think why.

"Alice was a very unusual woman," Vincent said. Which Stanley thought was a bit of a non sequitur. No one appeared willing to add to that assessment, however.

"It's said she ran off with another man," Stanley persisted. "A younger man. Does that jibe with your impressions of Alice?"

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This time the directors avoided looking at one another altogether; avoided looking at Stanley too. It was clear the subject of Aunt Alice made them more ill at ease, even, than their sexual high jinks with their clients.

"She was your aunt, wasn't she?" he asked of Matt.

"Aunt Alice wasn't an easy person to know," Matt said.

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Chapter Eight

"Office staff next?" Stanley asked when they'd finished with the directors.

Cyril, who had appointed himself their tour guide, said, "If I may make a suggestion, Horace Davros—as I said, we're short an embalmer for the present, and once Horace gets started on his day's work, it'll be difficult to interrupt him. Maybe you should get him out of the way first, before he gets tied up."

So, they went to meet Horace Davros in his office. Stanley was thinking that he'd never met an embalmer. He found himself wondering what to expect.

* * * *

Horace turned out to be a tallish man, with a long, beakish nose, a prominent Adam's apple and sooty eyelids. He peered at the detectives through thick horn-rimmed glasses, his large and powerful looking hands shaking noticeably. His long bony fingers actually beat out a tattoo on his desktop as they spoke. Fear, Stanley wondered, or some sort of physical tic?

The desktop upon which his fingers pattered was littered with dark stained coffee cups, a pencil with its end chewed, even the remains of a cheese sandwich that had perished of old age. Did funeral people never eat meat? Stanley wondered.

"I know nothing about poison pen letters or bodies being switched," Horace greeted them without preamble, in a voice

that said he was peeved at their interviewing him. "I'm perfectly happy to answer your questions but I'm afraid we will all three find it a waste of time."

"Maybe, maybe not," Tom said, unintimidated. He'd run into reluctant witnesses plenty of times in the past. Sometimes, in their reluctance, they told you far more than they intended.

Davros made a dismissive gesture that showed his irritation, and took up the chewed pencil from his desk, holding it before him in both hands as if it were a weapon. The eraser end beat out a faint staccato rhythm on the desktop.

"Very well," he said, "Let's get it over with, shall we? You're here because someone has been making mischief. Someone, or something." His tone of voice underlined the latter.

"*Something*? You're thinking what?" Stanley said. "That Bartholomew's is haunted?"

Davros looked slyly at him from under his brows. The *tup-tup-tup* of the pencil's eraser intensified. "A funeral home. All those dead bodies over the years. It might be haunted, mightn't it?"

"Maybe. Maybe by the ghost of Percy Bartholomew. What do you think of his death?"

That surprised the shaking hands into stillness. "Percy? What does he have to do with anything? I thought this was about our mysterious mischief maker—the poison pen letter and the bodies moved about."

"It is. But it's reasonable to suppose Percy's death may in some way tie into those things. And if, as you suggest, someone or something is haunting Bartholomew's, well, he would be the logical suspect, wouldn't he? These troubles began, didn't they, after that? Which is why we're interested in the how and why of his death."

Horace thought about that. "Does it really matter?" he asked. "The how and why, as you put it?"

Stanley looked his surprise. "Doesn't it?"

"Not to Percy, surely. The dead are just dead. They've nothing to trouble them."

"... And wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth," Stanley quoted.

Horace looked a bit startled by the quotation. "Exactly," he said after a moment. "Wuthering Heights, isn't it? Emily Bronte had it right. Percy's sleep is hardly unquiet, I should think. He's beyond troubling about anything now."

"But something did. Did trouble him, I mean. If, as people say, he killed himself..."

Horace's eyebrows lifted. "If? Surely there's no question about that. I thought the police were satisfied with that verdict."

"There's some question," Tom said.

Horace was clearly surprised to hear this. He looked from one to the other, waiting, it seemed, for some further explanation. When none came, he shrugged philosophically. "Even so. What does that signify? Suicide or murder, he's just

as dead either way. He can't escape his death now. None of us can."

"If he was murdered, then it's more a question of his murderer," Tom said. "Escaping justice."

Horace's smile was sardonic. "That's police talk. I can't see that the same way you do. Working here, doing the work I do, you come to see issues such as that as of less importance. When a man's laid out on my table, it is of no concern to me whether he was a murderer or a saint. Or rich or poor, or kind or mean. It's just a body."

"That's rather cold, isn't it?" Stanley said.

"Is it? Death is the great equalizer, you know. The end to which we all come, good and bad alike. Live your life how you will, it won't change the outcome. In the end, all those titles and labels people pursue throughout their lives with such passion, they are all of them reduced down to two essential details: the day you were born, and the day you die. Both of them etched on your tombstone. All that future generations need know of you."

He paused, and his next words were uttered with a slight tilt of the corners of his thin mouth, that might have been a smile, and in a tone that suggested a challenge. "Have you ever seen an embalming? I'm performing one shortly. The body's waiting for me now, as a matter of fact. Would you like to watch?"

"Totally," Tom said without hesitation.

Stanley, less enthusiastic, saw that they were both of them looking at him, waiting for his reply. "I'd love it," he said, wondering not for the first time how he got himself into these

things. He didn't like looking at dead bodies; the last thing he wanted to see was one being operated on.

"I'll arrange it with Cyril. You might find it instructive," Davros said, reaching for the phone on his desk.
"Philosophically, at least."

"Doctor," Stanley started to say, but Davros interrupted him.

"I'm not a doctor," he said. "Doctors save lives. I only save memories."

His hands, Stanley noted, had stopped their shaking.

* * * *

Cyril was waiting for Tom and Stanley outside the embalming room. "Horace is ready for us," he greeted them. He looked at both of them frankly. "Nobody likely to pass out on me, I hope? Horace doesn't like disturbances when he's working."

"No sweat," Tom said, and Stanley added, "I worked homicide. I've seen dead bodies before." No need to mention, as he saw it, that he had several times come close to fainting. He'd stand close to Tom while they watched. If his legs gave out, Tom would save him from falling face first across an embalming table. Just in case Davros was inclined to start slicing up the wrong body.

Cyril paused to look frankly at Tom's face, at the scars. "Forgive me for speaking out of turn," he said, "but there are things that can be done, with makeup. If you'd like me to work on that..."

"No, thanks," Tom said curtly. "I'm cool with it."

Cyril looked as if he wanted to say more, but the expression on Tom's face, fiercely defiant, discouraged him.

"Well, then," he said, opening the door for them. "Fasten your seat belts." He stepped back and ushered them inside.

The embalming room was a long rectangle at the very rear of the first floor, running the full width of the house. The white tile everywhere reflected back the brilliant overhead lights so intensely, that at first Stanley had to blink to adjust to the glare. The squalor of Horace's office had vanished here—the room had the look of a hospital operating theater. Stanley wasn't sure quite what he had expected—something gothic, maybe, out of an old horror movie, Marty Feldman with rolling eyes and fake hump. Whatever, this wasn't it.

Only the smell fulfilled his expectations, though he was unsure either of the expectations or the smell. Formaldehyde? Something antiseptic, so antiseptic it was almost a no smell, but that nevertheless assaulted the nostrils fiercely.

Horace Davros was already there, waiting for them. He gave them a brief nod of recognition, the expression in his eyes challenging, but he said not a word. Two interns stood nearby. Stanley thought one of them was the newest, David Solomon, but gowned and masked and wearing caps as they were, it was impossible to be certain.

Cabinets and counters lined the wall opposite the door. Cyril opened a small closet next to the entry door, and handed around aprons, masks and gloves. Stanley was grateful for the mask, though it seemed to him that the room's smell slipped right through it undeterred.

"Initially, when AIDS first hit," Cyril said, "everyone was pretty scared. They wore all kinds of masks and heavy duty aprons and gloves. Now, though, we know that the virus lasts only a very short period of time without a living host. Today, an embalmer is more worried about hepatitis."

If Horace Davros was worried about hepatitis, however, or any other kind of infection, he showed no sign of it. He wore no mask, only a light apron and a pair of rubber nursing gloves.

He waited with visible impatience until they were appropriately gowned, then turned to one of the two long, white porcelain tables that stood in the middle of the room, bright lights shining overhead. A body covered with a sheet lay atop one of the tables. He removed the sheet and handed it to an intern, who folded it neatly before dropping it into a laundry cart.

The naked body of an elderly man, long and lank, lay exposed. Naked and, Stanley couldn't help noticing, generously endowed. Davros waved his fingers impatiently in the direction of one of the interns.

"Sorry," the intern muttered through his mask, and quickly draped a towel over the dead man's genitals.

"Modesty towel," Cyril explained. "Whenever someone other than staff is present for the embalming."

"Needn't have bothered on our behalf," Stanley said.

"It's customary. Even the dead are entitled to some dignity. If the deceased were a woman, understand, and a member of the family were present, she'd remain covered to her chin with a sheet."

As if to distract Stanley from the dead man's anatomy, Cyril indicated the rectangular white porcelain receptacles, like large toilets, at the end of each embalming table.

"To collect and dispose of the fluids that come from the embalming procedure. Those faucets above them supply the water to wash the bodies on the tables, and to fill the embalming machine as well."

"Our client today was a bachelor farmer, in his late sixties," Cyril explained in a low voice, as if fearing to disturb the man on the table, "who lived alone in the East Bay, had no family so far as could be determined. He called 911 to complain of chest pains. They picked him up but by the time they arrived at the hospital, he was dead, heart infraction."

"You'll notice that the face of the deceased already has the gray pallor of death, and that he did not get around to shaving before he died. Neither of these is a matter of concern. The embalming fluids will correct the first problem, and one of the interns will see to the other."

On cue, an intern set about attending to the stubble of beard on the dead man's chin. He quickly lathered up the farmer's face and began to shave with practiced expertise. In no more than a minute or two, the corpse was clean shaven. The intern wiped away the traces of lather with a damp towel and added the towel to the laundry cart.

"Like a baby's bottom," Cyril said. "A dead baby's bottom, to be sure." Davros scowled at his facetiousness, but Cyril went on without notice. "These are the embalming machines." He indicated the large silvery-looking bases with big clear cylinders that sat on shelves above the toilets. "The tubes

connect to the body's arteries and veins. They remove the blood from the body, and inject the preservative fluid into the tissues."

While he was explaining, the second intern opened a cabinet and took out several bottles. "Embalming fluid," Cyril said. "We use Perma-Glo, to give the body, according to their brochures, 'a healthy, natural appearance'."

The intern filled the glass cylinder atop the embalming machine with water. While the cylinder filled, he added the embalming fluid and turned on the machine so the Perma-Glo would mix with the water.

"Once the body has been embalmed, its expression is fixed. For that reason, the embalmer arranges the features before he begins the procedure."

As if he'd been given his cue, Horace Davros leaned over the body to set the face as he wanted it when finished: eyes closed, mouth set with just the hint of a smile. He toyed with that until it was exactly as he wished.

He stepped back, studying the effect briefly. Satisfied, he took a scalpel from a tray offered by an intern and made an incision on the right side over the neck, somewhat above the collarbone, and began working a pair of forceps into the incision, separating the layers of muscle and tissue, working slowly and carefully.

"He's looking for the jugular vein and carotid artery," Cyril said, dropping his voice now to a whisper.

Stanley remembered Cyril's remarks earlier about the carotid arteries, and how they could be used to render a man unconscious. He could see now how a mortician would be well

aware of their locations, and might make use of that knowledge. Instinctively, one hand went up to his throat.

"The embalmer must be very careful at this stage," Cyril went on, not noticing Stanley's involuntary gesture. "The jugular vein will be full of blood and its walls are almost paper thin. He has to be very delicate in separating it from the carotid artery, which lies close by."

Horace had apparently found and separated vein and artery. He took what looked like a long piece of ivory and slipped it underneath the vein, after which he threaded strands of suture at the top and bottom of the vein, then did the same with the carotid artery, making sure that the two were kept apart from one another.

Reaching again for the scalpel, he made a small cut in the vein and thick, dark blood oozed from the opening, and made its way down the neck, onto the shoulder where it dripped down onto the white table.

"In someone living, whose heart was still pumping, such a cut would unleash a torrent of blood. In that case, death would occur quickly. Even more quickly if the cut were in the artery. Of course, the heart is no longer working here, so the blood comes out more slowly."

For a moment Stanley's legs felt weak. He glanced at Cyril who was watching him carefully above his mask. Stanley swallowed, nodding that he was okay, and glanced briefly at Tom, but Tom might have been watching someone assembling a model train. His eyes were glued to Horace's hands.

The big galoot loves this stuff, Stanley thought, not sure why he felt annoyed by the idea.

Horace took a long steel tube with a pointed end and holes around it, then slid it into the vein, securing it with a suture. The top of the tube had a plunger attachment, along with a smaller tube on the side, to which a rubber hose could be attached, allowing the blood from the vein to be channeled directly to the bottom of the table.

He made a small cut into the carotid artery, inserted a curved steel tube, securing it as well with more sutures, and then attached the line from the embalming machine to the top of the arterial tube.

"Everything is ready now for the process by means of which the embalming fluid will gradually replace the blood remaining in the veins," Cyril told them.

The delicate part of his work done, Horace stepped back from the embalming table, took a deep breath, the first indication he had shown of any tension. He took one last careful look at the body, and motioned for an intern to turn on the embalming machine.

They stood in respectful silence for a long moment, looking not at one another but at that long, lean body on the table, as if expecting some comment from him on what he was experiencing: "Well done, doctor."

The comment when it came, however, was not from the corpse, but from Tom, and it was succinct. "Fuck," he said.

Stanley stared at him in surprise, and then followed the direction of Tom's gaze, to the dead man's crotch. Beneath the little modesty towel, his penis had begun to swell and

lengthen, until the head of it was peeking out above the towel. And still it grew. As they watched, the towel fell aside and dropped to the floor beside the table. No one noticed.

"He's getting a boner," Tom said, earning him a frown from Cyril and an unreadable look from Horace. One of the interns coughed—smothering a laugh, Stanley suspected, but couldn't be sure.

And what a boner, Stanley couldn't help thinking. All six of them stared as the appendage filled with embalming fluid, growing and growing, larger and larger still, until it stood straight up in the air, nearly twelve inches tall. It looked, Stanley thought, as if someone should attach a flag to it. Where was Old Glory when you needed it? Finally it fell over on the man's stomach, *kerplop*. Still stiff.

Everyone had stood in silence, gaping while this transformation took place. Finally, an intern asked, in an awe-filled voice, "Will it go down?"

"Well, the means by which that is normally affected is no longer available in this instance," Horace said, his voice entirely businesslike. "I'm afraid we shall have to fasten it to his leg. Tape, please, and some gauze."

When Stanley looked, he saw that Tom had left the embalming room. He took off his own mask and followed Tom into the corridor outside.

"I was afraid one of them might decide to sit on it," Tom said.

"Don't be silly," Stanley said. "They wouldn't do that."

They looked long and hard at one another. "I think I'll just step outside for some air," Tom said. "Are you going back in there?"

Stanley looked at the door to the embalming room. "No," he said after a moment. "I think I've seen as much as I want to see."

* * * *

It seemed that Stanley was not yet done with their old farmer, however. "You really should check out the viewing," Cyril told him a bit later.

"But I thought he had no family," Stanley said. "Who's going to be there?"

"There's quite a crowd of them, actually," Cyril said. "They started gathering nearly an hour ago."

Stanley could not resist temptation. He stole into the slumber room that Cyril had indicated, to find that it was indeed crowded, all of them women, perhaps thirty or more of them, ranging in age from mid-forties to one dear old thing who must have been eighty.

They stood in small groups around the room, and five or six of them were clustered by the coffin. Stanley came nearer, ostensibly to peek at the man laid out there. Horace had done a terrific job. The farmer did look, as the cliché had it, like he was sleeping, and the bottom half of the casket was closed, so there was no evidence of the peculiar problem they'd had to deal with in the embalming room.

"Such a loss," one of the women nearest the coffin said, shaking her head, and another said sadly, "No one will ever be able to take his place."

Which, Stanley thought, was probably true. Maybe, after all, the farmer's life had not been as lonely as they'd first supposed.

When he turned to leave the room, he saw Horace Davros standing just inside the door, apparently judging the success of his work. His hands, Stanley saw, were trembling again.

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Chapter Nine

"Stanley, if you're going to stay overnight at that place, I'm staying with you. You know what you're like. You're a magnet for trouble."

They were lying across the bed, having just shared a shower together—"saving water," as Stanley put it.

"No, I think I should do this on my own."

There was a long silence. Stanley didn't look at Tom, afraid of what he would see in his face.

Now, he thought, was the time for them to talk it all out, get the air cleared between them once and for all. He wanted to say he didn't want to put Tom in harm's way again, not after the last time, but he knew that wasn't something Tom would like to hear. He couldn't think what else to say, though. His own thoughts were such a muddle. He doubted that Tom's were any clearer.

"It's your call," Tom said. It didn't take much sensitivity to hear the disappointment in it.

Stanley turned toward him for another kiss. Time to get away from an unwelcome subject. There was only one sure-fire way of doing that.

"Listen, big guy, here's what I'm thinking: I'm going to be spending the night with a houseful of hot looking and, it seems, terminally horny guys. Maybe you should be thinking about what to do before I go."

Tom's eyes quickly got a familiar and much welcome gleam in them. "If I drain the well..."

"Nobody will be lowering their bucket."

"Not their buckets I'm worrying about. Those guys are weird, you know. Like, that old guy, in the embalming room? If I'm going to give somebody a woodie, it'll be you, and that's not how I'd do it."

"If you'll check, you'll find mission is accomplished."

Tom reached down, found Stanley already hard. "Looks like you were thinking ahead," he said, scooting closer.

"I was." Stanley kissed him, hard, and pressed himself tightly against Tom's body.

"Whoa, you are totally hot," Tom said. "This is all for your old man?"

"Absolutely." Stanley pressed harder.

Tom rolled him onto his back, lifted Stanley's legs in the air. There was the business with the condom. Stanley helped him fit it on, impatient to get down to business. He sighed with something that might have been relief when Tom entered him.

Surrendering to Tom's eager thrusting, Stanley let go of all the rest of it. Easy to do at moments like this—if only he didn't know they would come back later, all the dark thoughts, the troublesome ones.

If only Tom didn't sometimes look at him in that speculative way, as if weighing him.

* * * *

The apartment that had once been home to the founder of Bartholomew's could be reached from the corridor that housed the dormitory, which took up most of the top floor, or

by the elevator in the staff wing, which oddly did not go all the way up to the uppermost floor, but stopped at a landing one flight of stairs below it. They took the elevator and got off at the landing.

"A difficulty with the installation of the elevator," Cyril explained, leading the way up the last, brief flight of stairs. "You understand, that was a later addition, not part of the original. There is a certain amount of machinery necessary, of course—more, I think, then than now. This being San Francisco, we have no cellar, which I think is where the machinery is usually housed, and Percy, the original Percy, declined to put a machinery shed on the roof. He thought, apparently, that it would spoil the building's lines, though one wonders how he imagined that possible. Here we are."

They had come to another landing. From this, the corridor ran down past the dormitory, to the circular staircase that rose from the ground floor. In the wood paneled wall before them, a narrow door now stood open. Cyril stepped aside and Stanley went in before him.

The apartment was claustrophobic even by the claustrophobic standards of Bartholomew's, where rooms were necessarily small. The miniature parlor into which they entered directly might have been designed for a children's playhouse. There was scarcely room for the two chairs in black leather, stiff with age, and a green silk covered settee grouped with a table before a small fireplace in which someone had lit a fire—a single pressed wood log, but it's dancing flames at least drove back the shadows that otherwise threatened to overwhelm the room.

"There's a gas heater in the bedroom, if you get cold," Cyril said, indicating the fireplace, "but I thought this would be nicer. And to be honest, that heater hasn't been used in years and years. Who knows how safe it is."

"This is fine," Stanley said, thinking that the fire, small as it was, added a much needed cheer to what otherwise would have been an unwelcoming chamber. The room obviously had been furnished in the thirties, maybe even the twenties, and not changed since. The air was stale, musty. Despite the fact that the few furnishings crowded the room, it had an empty look about it. It looked uninhabited; as of course it had been for years. There were none of those little touches that suggested a mortal presence: a cup of coffee grown cold, the book turned down on the table, the imprint of human form upon the cushions—the lowly detritus of day to day living. Even with the fire burning, this might have been another of Bartholomew's slumber rooms. Stanley wondered that it had ever felt comfortable. But, perhaps to old Mister Percy, living in a mortuary, so much alone with the dead ... perhaps to him it had felt like a welcome sanctuary.

The overhead light, hanging from a scalloped rose in the ceiling, was a glass bowl with miniature pink and green flowers of some sort painted on it, and the black specks of dead flies visible within. The light it threw was garish, but there was a floor lamp as well with a pink-fringed shade, standing between the two chairs. Stanley switched that on and the ceiling light off, and went to the windows on the far wall, draped in heavy maroon velvet.

He tugged the velvet aside to reveal two tall, many-paned windows that looked out, he discovered, over a small meditation garden to the rear of the palazzo. Stanley opened one of the windows. It moved begrudgingly, suggesting it had been many years since it had been used.

There was no kitchen, only a pantry with the sort of refrigerator found in mini bars, a sink, a cupboard. A coffee maker, looking as if it had just been removed from its carton, sat on a shelf, along with a toaster oven. A wooden tray held a bottle of wine and two glasses.

"You're welcome to use the staff kitchen, of course," Cyril said in an apologetic voice, "and the public coffee room is quite good. Nancy, that's Ms. Latimer, keeps it stocked with fresh pastries, sandwiches, and fruit."

The bedroom was hardly worthy of the name, not so big, Stanley thought, as his walk-in closet at home. A narrow bed, a postage stamp table with a brass Stiffel lamp on it. One could stretch out one's arms and touch both walls with the fingertips. He dropped his duffel bag at the foot of the bed and looked around. The gas heater built into one wall looked antiquated and decidedly unsafe. He decided he wouldn't be using that.

"It's not much," Cyril said. "As I said, it's only been used for storage for the last, twenty years or more."

"It'll do fine. It was kind of you to have it cleaned up for me."

"I did it myself," Cyril said, fussing at a lapel in a feminine gesture that was oddly out of character. "Though,

surprisingly, it didn't take much cleaning at all, considering how long it's been unused."

"Thanks nevertheless. Anyway, it's not like I'm planning on living here."

"Well, for a few nights. And for one person."

"There may be two in time." When Cyril lifted an eyebrow, Stanley gave him a shrug. "Depends on how long this takes. I've got a man at home. I don't want him to start thinking how empty his bed is, and who he might get to fill up the space while I'm gone."

Cyril gave the bed a dubious look. "Will you both fit in that?"

"We sleep close," Stanley said. He opened the single window above the bed.

* * * *

Later, after Cyril had gone, Stanley looked out the window again, at the meditation garden below. It looked inviting. On an impulse, he went down to seek it, quietly avoiding the muted chatter of voices from one of the slumber rooms where a service was in progress. At first, he puzzled over how to find the garden, and had to pause to get his bearings, but after a couple of tries, he found a door leading from the first floor chapel.

The garden was small and round, bordered by beds of herbs and box hedges against a high stone wall that ensured privacy, and from beyond which he could just hear the sound of a passing car on Dolores Street.

A statue of Triton stood in a shallow pond, surrounded by a quartet of rearing Dolphins, two of them spewing slim streams of water that plashed softly against the pond's surface.

He sat on one of the benches surrounding the pond, watching the play of the water in the moonlight. It was a peaceful place. It was hard, sitting here like this, to imagine the turbulence within the palazzo.

The peace was short-lived. A car drove into the alley beyond the wall. Rap music and the chatter of young voices shattered the stillness.

All of a sudden, he had the feeling of someone watching him. He looked around the garden but he was still alone. He tilted his head and looked up. Three floors of windows looked down on him, reflecting the light of the moon. For the briefest of moments, the silvery sheen seemed to shatter on one pane. He thought someone had moved a curtain. Or, it might have been nothing more than a trick of the light. A cloud drifted over the moon. Ominous shadows crept into the garden. The ivy that clung to the wall suddenly looked malevolent, devouring. The garden no longer felt as charming as it had a moment before.

Outside, a car backfired. For a moment, he thought it was a gunshot, and his heart jumped into his throat. He heard shots in his mind, felt the recoil of a gun in his hand. A dark moment, probably the worst in his life, replayed itself in his memory. He seemed to smell the hospital room, hear the canned music faint in the distance ... and the blood, blossoming suddenly, spreading...

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He shoved the memories aside, angry, and not exactly sure with whom. He got up and went inside. The funeral service was just breaking up, red-eyed people drifting from the slumber room. Two men in dark suits glanced in his direction curiously, wondering if he was one of their party. He smiled vaguely in their direction without pausing and took the stairs back to the apartment upstairs.

There was a note slipped under the door, "Leave, while you still can."

* * * *

It was late, nearly midnight. Probably, David Solomon thought, he should have been back to the funeral home an hour ago. They weren't exactly quarantined, or restricted in their comings and goings, as they had explained to the two detectives, but there was a certain attitude on the part of management. As an intern, you were expected to take your situation at Bartholomew's seriously. Coming home in the wee hours showed a certain lack of decorum, and he knew perfectly well he'd been too much in the habit of coming in late. He hoped none of the directors had taken note.

Tonight, at least, he hadn't been on the prowl, no quickies in cars or darkened hallways. This evening he had simply lingered over Sunday dinner—his mom's always wonderful brisket of beef—and a rehash of old quarrels. Tonight's quarrel had started with his announcement that he would not be attending his cousin's upcoming Bar Mitzvah.

"I don't even know Bernie," was his reason. "He probably won't even notice I'm not there."

"You know your Aunt Sadie. She'll notice."

Like most of their arguments, however, this one had soon enough circled back to their main one: his refusal to go to temple.

"I just don't believe anymore," David said, not for the first time.

"You don't have to believe to go to shul." His mother's argument was an old one, too. "We're Jews. It's about showing solidarity, about standing up together. It's saying, to the world, you will never again take us away one by one."

"Mom, I understand about that stuff. But this is America. No one's going to cart us off to camps."

"They thought that in Germany, too, Mister Smarty Pants."

"Jew isn't about what we do," his father said in his quiet but authoritative voice, "it's about what we are."

"The same as with queer," David had said, and immediately regretted it. This was a sore subject between the two of them. His father had glowered and closed his lips tightly in anger, ending the discussion.

So, David could be said to have gotten the last word. He'd fetched his jacket from the closet and kissed them both good night, pretending he didn't see the gentle reproof in his mother's eyes.

His emotions as he let himself in the front gate at the mortuary were decidedly mixed. He couldn't pretend otherwise to himself; he felt ashamed of offending his father as he had done. For more than a year since David had come out to them, he and his father had both carefully avoided the

subject of David's homosexuality, agreeing tacitly that it was one on which they would never agree.

He felt guilty too about refusing to placate his mother. What would it hurt him, after all, to find the time for shul, and surely, it would give her much happiness? He lashed himself with self-scorn. What a disappointment he must be to both of them. His brother, Saul, was the perfect son, just as Rosie was the sort of daughter to delight any parents. So what had his parents done to deserve him?

Even Bartholomew's—the other interns seemed to take everything so seriously, they worked so hard and were so conscientious, and most nights, even when he had a late shift, he was out catting around. He felt like a schmuck.

He used his key to let himself in the front door. Not so long ago, he had been informed, the door would have remained unlocked at all hours, but times were different. One incident of vandalism, and finding a homeless person one morning sleeping in a coffin in one of the slumber rooms had changed that. The importance of using a key, and keeping the door locked, had been impressed upon all of them.

The wall sconces were dimmed, as they were at night, the foyer thick with shadows that seemed more alive than the house itself. David turned toward the staff elevator and caught himself in mid-stride as he saw something at the very corner of his vision, something white, in motion, he thought. A woman, maybe? But when he looked, there was nothing there. He stared in the directions of the corner, lost now in shadows that seemed to stretch for fathoms, filled with things

unseeable. He might have been gazing into eternity. Which, he thought, was probably appropriate for a mortuary.

There was a faint noise to his left. He looked and found Vincent, one of the directors, at the open door to the little studio apartment where the night custodian slept. Behind him, a television show sounded faintly.

"Just getting in?" Vincent asked.

"Yes. I'm a little late. Sorry."

He waited to be scolded, but Vincent gave him a forgiving smile instead. "Nothing to worry about."

David glanced over his shoulder. "Is anybody else around?"

"Not that I know of. Why?"

"I thought I saw something."

"Such as?"

David sighed apologetically. "Oh, I don't know. Nothing, I suppose. What my Mom would call the heebie jeebies, probably."

Vincent nodded knowingly, and continued to linger in the doorway, his expression both eager and hesitant all at the same time. The look, David thought, though his experience was kind of limited, of a gay man on the make.

David was horny. He usually was. He was nineteen years old and at least once a day was his daily regimen. Usually, when he was out in an evening, it was his habit to find himself a quickie before he turned in for the evening, but there had been no trick tonight. His intention had been to do a quick tour of the Castro on the way back, to see if he could

find some action, but the evening with his parents had stretched later than expected.

Vincent was Bartholomew's one black director. "The token black," he sometimes joked, but it was evident at a glance that it was his smoldering good looks that had earned him his place on the staff at Bartholomew's, and not his rich, mahogany-hued skin, that looked just now almost luminous in the pale pink light from the wall sconces. He was tall, broad shouldered and long, loose-limbed, with just the slightest beard at his chin, and a wide mouth that seemed formed for kissing.

David had never gotten it on with a black man, had long wanted to, but the right opportunity had never come along. Just looking now at Vincent's voluptuous lips sent a shiver of desire up his spine. He could imagine them pressed against his own, those thick muscled arms crushing him in a fervent embrace. Vincent's hands were huge, his fingers long and thick. David could not see them without wondering if the old stories, about fingers and dicks matching, were invariably true. Seeing them now, his own dick stirred restlessly in his trousers.

He liked older men, too, and Vincent was probably thirty, maybe even older. David disliked the awkward fumbling and groping that too often happened with young guys, who were still learning the ropes the same as he was. He had no doubt that Vincent had plenty of experience. The warm gleam in his dark brown eyes seemed to promise much. David felt certain he would know exactly what he was doing, how to make a sexual encounter into an experience to be treasured.

A porn video of the two of them together fast-forwarded on the screen of David's mind. He saw them naked together, felt Vincent lowering him gently but firmly onto the surface of a bed, felt his legs lifted gently but authoritatively over those wide shoulders; felt the push of a huge cockhead against his hole, and the forceful, sure thrust deepening within him.

The vision was so real that his cock stirred in his trousers, threatened to rise up. David hoped it wasn't conspicuous—or, maybe he wished it was. Maybe it would give Vincent ideas.

He felt sure, too, that Vincent already had ideas, and that Vincent found him attractive. David found himself wishing Vincent would take advantage of the fact that the two of them were alone to make a pass, or simply make his desire more evident. He waited, but the invitation he hoped for was not forthcoming.

He even thought about making the pass himself, taking a step closer, opening his arms ... He could sometimes be brazen, but, that would hardly be seemly, a lowly intern coming on to one of the funeral directors.

Worse yet, what if he were rebuffed? It would certainly make things difficult in the future, wouldn't it? Even if Vincent accepted a pass from him, welcomed it, even ... sex could complicate things. He'd found that out after one quick interlude a month or so ago with an old friend from high school. A friend who, drunk, a little buzzed on pot, had seemed to welcome the offer of a friendly blow-job, had been astonishingly quick to shed jeans, jockeys, offer up a dick whose head was already glistening in eager anticipation with pre-cum; and who, once the desire had been sated, the full

load of cum drained from its fountain, roughly shoved away the exploratory finger that had been welcomed up his buttohole and that, clearly, was no longer wanted there. No repeats after that one time. No anything, really. He had assiduously avoided David since.

David could hardly afford the same sort of experience here. A funeral director, too, might feel particularly horny. Late at night, alone in his little room, he might well welcome some action—a young butt to fuck. Which instinct told him was what Vincent would elect to do—David's hole twitched at that thought—and later, he might also regret dropping his guard, or his drawers, with a mere intern.

Regret and resent. There were guys like that. Advice from a friend: "Never get your meat where you get your bread." Sadly, probably wise advice.

"Good night," David said with a nod, and went toward the elevator. He didn't look back. If Vincent looked disappointed, it might change his mind; and, if he didn't, it would certainly change his mood.

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Chapter Ten

He got off at the top floor and met the detective, Stanley Korski, in the hallway. He was standing just outside the closed door to the dorm, as if he might have been listening.

"Hunting for our little schmendriks?" David asked. When Stanley looked a little uncertain, he added. "Putzes. Mischief makers. Sorry. I've been with my folks for the evening. I find myself talking like them."

"Ah." Stanley nodded. "No, just sniffing around a little. I don't know exactly what to look for, to be honest. There's hardly anybody here at night."

"Mister Vincent's downstairs, on night duty. I ran into him on the way in."

Stanley tilted his head in the direction of the dorm. "And the interns. But no putzes—what did you call them?"

"Schmendriks."

"Schmendriks. That's a new one for me. Well, if there are any around, they're not skulking about stirring up trouble, that I can see. Not at the moment, at least. Everyone seems to be sound asleep."

"Except me." David, cracking the door to the dorm, heard the sounds of sleep from inside: baritone voices breathing deeply, a couple of faint snores. "Looks like I'm burning the midnight oil," he said. "Again."

"The two of us. You just got in?"

"Yes." He looked a little embarrassed to admit it.

Which, Stanley thought, eliminated him as the one who left the warning note under the door earlier—but almost anyone else could have.

He hesitated, glanced in the direction of his apartment. "Look, do you want to come in for a minute. We didn't have much chance to really talk earlier. I'd be glad to pick your brain."

David grinned. "I think the pickings are probably slim, but, sure."

"Unless you're too sleepy. It's after midnight."

"I know. I'm okay."

Leading the way into the small apartment at the rear of the building, it occurred to Stanley that David had not even suspected him of making a pass with the invitation. He hadn't been, in fact; well, not really, though he was hardly unaware of how attractive the young man was. Still, it made him feel old that the possibility hadn't even crossed David's mind.

"There's some wine," Stanley said, "Burgundy. Fairly good, actually. If you'd like a glass. Or would your parents disapprove?"

"Thanks. I would, I think. And we drink wine at home. It's always Mogen David though."

"I've had that. Could be worse. A friend of mine used to make wine coolers with it. A twist of lemon, some soda. Not bad, really. Refreshing on a hot summer day."

"I'll have to try that some time. Not sure if my mother would consider that a waste of good wine or not. Probably she'd say it was a goyim thing." He said, in a falsetto voice, "A Jew wouldn't waste good wine like that."

Stanley laughed and poured two glasses of wine. He gave one to David, and motioned to the two chairs by the fireplace. The old leather creaked when they sat. "Tell me," Stanley said when they were seated, "what's it like, actually living here at Bartholomew's. You've been here, what did you tell me, three weeks?"

"Nearly that." David took a sip of wine, contemplated the question for a moment. "It's strange. I knew when I decided on mortuary science that Bartholomew's was where I wanted to be. But, when I got the internship, and actually moved in—well, it isn't quite what I thought it would be."

"In what way?"

"I'd heard it was a friendly place." He grinned. "I mean, very friendly, if you follow me."

"The sex."

"Yes. I knew someone who interned here a while back. He said the dorm was buzzing all the time, musical beds."

"And it's not like that?"

"Well, I wouldn't say it was a nunnery, exactly. There's stuff goes on, there's a couple of the interns who keep things interesting..."

"Cody and Greg."

"Yes. Although at the moment, they're pretty wrapped up in one another. It's just, the whole atmosphere, it's a lot more subdued than what I'd been led to believe."

"What about the directors?"

David gave him a wary look, thinking of Vincent downstairs, and the almost-pass he hadn't made. "I wouldn't know about that."

"Surely you're not going to tell me it never crossed your mind. Some of them are awfully good looking."

"Some of them? Jesus, they're all to die for, if you ask me."

"And you've never done anything about it?"

The fake log in the fireplace popped, making David start. He was tenser, Stanley realized, than he showed. He sat for a minute staring at the flames. When he spoke, he did not look at Stanley.

"One of them called me 'the pretty Jew boy.'"

"One of the directors?"

David nodded. "I wasn't supposed to hear him, of course."

"Or maybe you were."

David did look at him then. "I hadn't thought of that, but, yes, maybe. Whatever. I don't think he meant it as a compliment. Oh, that's not it, though, that's not what turned me off, not really. I've heard stuff like that before. I guess every Jew does at some time or other. The funny thing is, I'm not much of a Jew. And, as far as the sex part, like I said, there's others, if I really wanted something ... but, you know, oddly, it's not as much a turn on as you might think. All these gorgeous guys here. They're ... I guess this is going to sound weird, but, I mean, it's like, going to a buffet expecting a nice hearty meal, and the table's got nothing on it but a tray of sweet desserts. Lovely to look at, delicious to taste, but not the kind of thing that leaves you satisfied." He gave Stanley a mischievous grin. "If you want to know the truth, now, that partner of yours ... what a brute. I'd make a meal of him in a minute."

Stanley smiled back. "Sorry, the brute is taken, for a long time. A lifetime, I'm thinking. At least, that's what I'm hoping."

"It must be great, finding someone special like that. The right one. Love at first sight, I'll bet, wasn't it?"

"No, I wouldn't say that. Not exactly." He thought for a minute. "Or, maybe it was, but it took a long time for us to get it. I guess in some ways we're still getting it. To be honest, it isn't what I thought it would be like. I was looking for a man, when I should have been looking for *the* man. If you follow me."

David gave that a moment's thought. "I think so."

"Oh, you will, when the time comes." Stanley sighed. "So, back to Bartholomew's, what it comes down to is, when you say you're disappointed in Bartholomew's, what you're really saying is, the sex doesn't live up to your expectations?"

David exhaled loudly. "No, that's putting it a little too bluntly. I mean, yes, I found that a little disappointing, but, there's more ... it's hard to put my finger on it. Maybe it's knowing where you are. We used to call this place "The House of the Dead," my sister and I, growing up on Dorland Street. I didn't think that would bother me, and it doesn't really, not working with dead people. But, I lie awake at night. Everything is so insulated, and so sound and light proofed. The darkness, the silence. It might almost be a tomb. Sometimes it really does feel as if I'm already dead. Like, I'm drifting away from the world of the living, sort of."

He'd been speaking distantly, as if thinking aloud, but he blinked now and focused his eyes on Stanley. "Fanciful, I

know. And probably, too, it had something to do with that first day, when I came to interview. I was with Mister Cyril when we discovered the body, old Mister Percy's body. You knew about that, of course?"

"Suicide, the police say."

"Yes. I suppose they're right. I thought that too, at first, but..." He shrugged. "Oh, I don't know, something about it didn't feel right, if you know what I mean. It was so, staged, I guess, is what I want to say. Somehow it reminded me of the high school play I was in, *Murder Most Foul*."

"In what way?"

"That's the funny thing. I don't know. It was just a feeling I got, but there was nothing I could put my finger on." He finished the wine and stood up, setting the glass aside.

"Definitely better than Mogen David." He stretched his arms over his head. His tee shirt rode up, giving Stanley a view of a washboard abdomen, an innie winking at him provocatively.

"Crap, maybe I'm just feeling sorry for myself" he said, "I mean, the guys not climbing all over me the way I expected. The old bruised ego. And probably some of it really does have to do with my being a Jew. I guess that turns some of them off." He scratched at his belly, his fingers slipping under the waist band of his trousers. Stanley's eyes followed them closely, but they remerged after just a second or two. "Not a very good Jew, I confess. I haven't been to shul in two, three years. Temple," he added, in case Stanley didn't know the less familiar word.

He said it with such diffidence, Stanley thought he could more than likely give you the hours and minutes since he'd last been to temple, shul, if he chose. "Does that matter?"

David looked surprised and then thoughtful. "To my parents, it does. They're old school. Reform, but old school nevertheless."

Still seated, looking up at him, Stanley found himself seriously doubting whether the inmates at Bartholomew's would decline an opportunity to make whoopee with this handsome young demi-god for no reason but his Jewish inheritance. His undisciplined curls, raven black, spilled over his brow, nearly to his eyes, shockingly ice-blue. His oversized mouth was voluptuously shaped, and his skin had the sheen and the color of his Mediterranean roots. And of course, beyond all that, he had the most excellent of cosmetics, his youth.

Pretty Jew boy indeed. Stanley felt an almost overwhelming urge to lean forward and put a hand on that nicely padded crotch. Only, he had the disconcerting feeling David would probably think of him as a dirty old man.

"I guess I'd better head to bed," David said. "I've got early shift tomorrow." He paused for a moment. "You know, when I think about it, about Bartholomew's. It isn't the sex thing that bothers me, honestly. It's just there's something here, I can't explain it and I don't know exactly what to call it, but it's like something festering, under the surface. Like a stink you can't quite smell, but it irritates your nose just the same. Does that make any sense?"

Stanley grinned up at him. "You know, I think you may be more Jewish than you realize."

David looked genuinely puzzled. "Really? What makes you say that?"

"Oh, that's a Jewish kind of thinking, isn't it? Most young men would help themselves to the dessert tray and fret not at all over the rest of it."

David thought about that. "My mother," he said with a wry grin. "She's always looking for the worm in the apple, as she puts it. I suppose she's infected me."

"Mothers do." Stanley thought fleetingly of his own mother, who'd scarcely seemed aware, most of the time when he was growing up, that he was alive. Had her disinterest infected him, the way another mother's love might? The absence of love could be as powerful an influence as its presence, it seemed to him.

Despite the fact that he had been grumbling about her, David's affection for his mother shone through. And though he had never met her, her affection for her son was evident to Stanley, too. The realization made him feel oddly empty.

David yawned and stretched again. The belly button winked conspiratorially at Stanley. David gave Stanley an uncertain look. "Why are you looking at me like that? All funny like. Did I say something dumb?"

"I was just thinking about accidents," Stanley said, wondering that anyone so beautiful could possibly be so naïve. He was struck, not for the first time, by the discrepancy between reality and how people saw themselves.

Or, maybe he, Stanley, really was too old to seriously register with the young man as a possible sexual outlet.

Which was not the happiest of thoughts. He set his own wine glass aside and said quickly, abruptly, "Good night, David."

* * * *

Lying in bed after David had gone, the lights out, the bedside window opened notwithstanding the ceaseless whisper of the air conditioning, Stanley found himself wondering what had prompted the young man to point out his lack of religious practice to someone who was really a stranger.

He'd just come from his family, of course. Maybe he simply needed someone to talk to, someone sympathetic and gay. And maybe guilt was a part of it, too, a need for expiation? For the Jew, perhaps more than for others, blood told. All those generations, going back through the centuries. He was infected, as he put it, by far more than his mother's way of expressing herself. A young man growing up Jewish could surely not help that Old Testament sense of things. They had learned the hard way not to trust the smiling faces that they might see every day; had developed the habit of always looking over one's shoulder.

Nor, he thought, could a young man like David altogether avoid an Old Testament sense of morality, however much one might, on a conscious level, ignore, even disdain it. It was interesting, really, David's sense of something festering

beneath the surface of Bartholomew's. A kind of Jewish radar, a survival gene, sensing when things weren't right?

He sensed it too, and could no more put his finger on it than could David, but he trusted David's instinct. Trusted, really, David's Jewish heritage, no matter how much David himself might scoff at it. The Jews had been sniffing out the ugliness beneath the surface of things for centuries, hadn't they? Was there any kind of sin or misbehavior that wasn't covered in the Old Testament?

So, yes, David was right, there was something wrong here at Bartholomew's, even if neither he nor David could say yet what it was.

He thought of Tom, saying in astonishment, "They fuck in the coffins?"

Maybe Tom's view was the clearer one, though it was difficult to think of Tom and that young man who'd left twenty or thirty minutes ago having much in common.

Not as much, certainly, as handsome young David Solomon would like to share with Tom Danzel.

He checked to make sure that his flashlight was on the floor by the bed. "You can put your name on the list," he thought, turning on his side, drifting toward sleep, "but it's a long list. And I'm at the top of it."

Sleep eluded him, though. He kept picturing David Solomon in his mind, the T-shirt riding up to reveal that hard abdomen. He suspected David was horny. At his age, guys were always horny. Probably, he'd have only had to ask to see much more than his belly ... probably, his libidinous mind

added, at this very moment, David was jerking off before he went to sleep. Which more than likely he did plenty of nights.

That picture came to vivid life in his mind's eye, so real he could see the hand gliding up and down, the dark bush ... he rolled over on his stomach and was almost surprised to feel his own hand on pushing against the mattress. Now where had that come from, when he hadn't been expecting it? He twisted and shoved it against the bed, willing it to go soft, and felt it grow stubbornly harder.

He turned over and half rose from the bed. It was only a short distance to the dorm. He need only open the door there. If David were awake, as surely he still was...

He sighed aloud, and loudly. How on earth could he possibly justify that as an accident? He rolled over again, but sleep had slipped away from him. He ran his hand down over his belly. Decided he'd have to take care of business himself.

He focused on Tom as he did so—but images of David Solomon kept creeping in where they didn't belong.

* * * *

Stanley woke with a start. He lay in the darkness, trying to think what had awakened him. Some sound ... the elevator, maybe?

He turned on the lamp by the bed, sat, listening to the silence. After a moment, he got up and, dressing quickly, let himself out into the corridor.

The dorm was quiet except for sleeping noises. Everyone, the living and the dead, at slumber. Still ... he considered the elevator and decided against it, thinking of the noise. If

someone were abroad, the noise would surely alert him. He walked quickly instead to the stairs and circled silently downward.

Nothing to be seen on the third floor. He descended to the second, stood at the landing for a moment, half convinced that he must have dreamed whatever had awakened him.

He thought about what David had said, about the nighttime silence of Bartholomew's. It was eerie, so utter. The old house had been built solidly, however flamboyant its design. He'd noticed before, sound did not carry from one floor to another; even, it seemed, from one room to another. On the top floor, there were the predictable but faint nighttime sounds of the dormitory, but on the second floor, he might have been in one of the tombs for which people were here made ready.

Still, he had a feeling of something amiss, though he wasn't sure what. It felt as if someone were watching him, waiting as he was waiting, holding breath. The nightlights were on, the corridor dim. The heavy carpet swallowed up the sound of Stanley's footsteps as he started along the corridor.

Something flickered in one of the slumber rooms as he passed. Stanley paused and stepped through an open doorway, and saw that there was a candle burning on one of the little tables.

Why should there be a candle burning there, though, in the middle of the night? He stepped closer. It had not been burning long; it had hardly burned down at all. He frowned. A coffin sat on a bier in a niche at the far wall. He went to it,

feeling a little frisson of expectant fear, but it was empty, its satin lining gleaming in the faint candlelight.

Something moved behind him. He turned quickly, and caught no more than a glimpse of someone darting out the door. His first thought was that it was a woman, all in white, trails of chiffon billowing behind her.

Shades of Wilkie Collins, Stanley thought with grim amusement. He ran after her, caught another glimpse of her near the end of the corridor. Maybe not a woman after all, but a man, and not chiffon, either, just a mundane white bed sheet, it seemed. He was too far away, though, and the lights were too dim really to say. Someone playing ghost? That seemed eminently silly, but he had an impression this was more than mere play.

The corridor went dark all at once, even the pale wall sconces switched off. The heavily draped windows allowed not a single beam of light to penetrate from outside.

Stanley stood in a smothering blackness. His own breath sounded loud in his ears and he almost fancied he could hear his heart beating. A door opened and closed somewhere down the hall from him, creating the faintest draft. One of the chandeliers tinkled its crystals.

"Who's there?" he asked into the darkness. He thought he heard a faint chuckle of laughter, and the woosh of cloth, but that might have been only his enflamed imagination. He put his hands out, found the wall, and felt his way along it, in the direction in which he had last seen the white-garbed figure. If only he'd thought to bring his flashlight, but that was upstairs, still on the floor by his bed.

He was about to think he should go back for it when his fingers touched a light switch. He turned it on, restoring the dim sconces. He started to turn from the switch, had a fleeting vision of swirling white, and something hit his head, hard.

He sank to his knees, fighting against nausea and unconsciousness, while the floral pattern of the thick carpet swam before his eyes, huge red roses, elaborate swaths of green foliage against a mottled gray background. For a few seconds he seemed to sink into the swirling pattern, drowning in woven flowers. He shook his head and looked both ways up and down the corridor. It was empty.

He tried to get up but the effort was too much. He plunged face downward into the flowery carpet, and sank into blackness.

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Chapter Eleven

Consciousness returned slowly. He was aware first of the hardness of the bed on which he was sleeping, and only slowly did he remember that it wasn't the bed, it was the floor, and how he had come to be on it.

"You're awake?"

Stanley opened his eyes, to find Cyril Bartholomew bending over him. "Ah, that's better," Cyril said. "If I help, can you sit up?"

"I think so." Stanley struggled to a sitting position and put one hand to the back of his head, feeling gingerly. No blood, just a bump. He gave the crouching Cyril a puzzled look.

"Was that you? The woman in white?"

Cyril glanced in amusement down at the clothes he was wearing—neatly fitted jeans and a black turtleneck. Definitely a change from his daytime costume. "Afraid not. Were you having a dream, Stanley? It sounds like something out of an old gothic romance."

Stanley stood, dusting himself off. "No, there was someone here, all in white."

"A woman?"

"I don't know, actually. I thought it was at first, but maybe not. It wasn't exactly like a costume, either, not like a dress, I mean, more like somebody just draped in a bed sheet."

"That really does sound peculiar."

"I guess it does. She ... he ... was real, though. I followed her down this way and then something hit me."

Cyril looked up and down the corridor. "I didn't see anyone."

"How long have you been here?"

"I just came in. I was downstairs and I heard something, a thud, sort of, it must have been you falling, and when I came up to investigate I found you lying here. I was about to call 911 when you started to come around. Should I call them anyway? You might have a concussion."

"No, I'm all right, just a little shaky still." Stanley got to his feet, dusted himself off, felt here and there. Everything seemed to be working fine. "What are you doing here anyway, Cyril? It's the middle of the night. It must be one o'clock in the morning. I thought Vincent was on duty."

"He is. I just got here. I came by ... well, to be honest, to check on you. I thought..." he made a sweeping gesture with one hand. "This place can be a bit intimidating, if you're not used to it."

"So you came by at, what, one o'clock, two in the morning? What were you going to do, peek in on me?"

"Something like that." Cyril smiled a bit too generously; a smile, Stanley felt sure, that had often been used to melt resistance. "I thought ... well, I thought you might want some company."

"As you pointed out earlier, that bed upstairs is a bit small for two."

Cyril's smile faded. "It was big enough, apparently, for you and the Jew boy," he said in an icy voice, his soothing charm vanished in a twinkling.

Stanley took a step back, astonished by the remark and then, more slowly, enraged.

"Whatever you thought you saw, Cyril, you were mistaken. David Solomon did indeed stop by the apartment earlier. We talked for a bit. He left, quite unmolested, and when I went to bed, I was quite alone. And, for the record, I don't need playmates. I have a partner."

Cyril's handsome face had turned oddly ugly. He opened his mouth to make a retort, and apparently thought better of it, and clamped his lips shut.

Which Stanley thought was very wise of him. He thought he knew what Cyril had been about to say: something caustic about Tom's face. Stanley had to resist the urge to punch the man standing in front of him.

"You might know everything there is to know about dead people, Cyril, but you know all too little about living people. And obviously nothing about beauty, or men. And for the record, Tom qualifies on both scores."

Cyril's smile was icy, superior. "Does he? Maybe it's you who doesn't understand beauty, Stanley."

Stanley snorted in derision. "Do you think that's beauty you see when you look in your mirror, Cyril? Take a closer look next time, why don't you? What you've got is just some temporary condition. It's already beginning to fade. Believe me, what Tom has going for him will only get better with time."

He turned and walked away, seething, but by the time he'd reached the stairs he had begun to wonder if maybe he wasn't out of a job now. Well, if he was, what of it, he asked

himself angrily? Cyril had called on him to look into the situation. If Cyril changed his mind now and fired him, it was no skin off his butt. The last thing he wanted was to have to put up with that petty, jealous queen business. As if his relationship with Tom was any of Cyril's business. As if he needed anyone to fan his guilt.

On the stairs, however, he found himself thinking instead about Cyril's remarks. If he'd seen David Solomon leave the apartment, and clearly he had, then he'd been here for a while at least, regardless of what he'd said. Obviously, he hadn't just come in downstairs in time to hear Stanley fall. And if he wasn't the mysterious figure in white, he ought at least to have seen or heard whoever it was.

There was something more, too, that crept into his thoughts more slowly—at their first interview, Cyril had spoken enthusiastically of the camaraderie among the members of the firm, that three musketeers "all for one and one for all" code he had described so convincingly—but obviously it wasn't his code. His "Jew boy" remark belied that possibility. Stanley had no doubt that it was Cyril whom David himself had overheard refer to him as "the pretty Jew boy." It wasn't a phrase that very many here—or anywhere else, for that matter—were likely to use when describing that breathtaking young man.

Petty jealousy on Cyril's part, of someone younger, better looking than himself? And, if jealousy of one, perhaps of others. Of all the good looking men here at Bartholomew's; and Cyril's looks were beginning to fade, if only just

beginning. Might that inspire enough pique to want to stir up trouble, with poison pen notes and switched bodies?

But, if that were the case, why would he then have hired Tom and Stanley to investigate? And write a note warning Stanley to leave? He puzzled over that.

The thought popped into his mind: maybe to cast suspicion elsewhere? If you want someone to look in a particular direction, you always point them in the other.

* * * *

Back at the apartment, Stanley took care to lock the door after himself, and to make a quick check that he had no visitors. He looked around, too, to see if anything had been disturbed, but he saw no evidence of anybody's presence. The fire had burned down to a few glowing embers. Stanley closed the screen over it, checked that his window was still open.

He went back to bed. The room was cool, but he didn't trust that gas heater enough to turn it on, and only wrapped himself more tightly in the blankets. It was a long time before he slept. The bed seemed to have gotten considerably larger. If it hadn't been so late, he'd have called Tom to come fill it.

Only, he'd have to explain that bump on the head. Tom would be sore because he'd wanted to be here with Stanley, and Stanley had nixed the idea. It would sound too much like he was asking Tom to rescue him again.

Which, the more he thought about it, wasn't such a bad idea.

* * * *

He woke to the sound of a bird singing. The sun was already beaming brightly through the window by his bed. For a moment, blinking his eyes, he was befuddled, could not think where he was, or why Tom wasn't beside him.

Then he remembered. He felt the back of his head. The bump was still there, though not as sore as it had been. It was real, then. He hadn't dreamed it. Nor that mysterious figure draped in a bed sheet. He got up troubled, wondering who he had surprised, at what, the night before, and if he still had a job after his sharp exchange with Cyril.

Whether or not Cyril might have been angry enough the night before to fire Stanley, he had apparently changed his mind by the time Stanley saw him half an hour later, in the coffee room on the floor below.

"Stanley, I must apologize," he said in the way of greeting. "I've been under a lot of stress, as I'm sure you can understand. Please forget everything I said."

"Apology accepted," Stanley said, and they shook hands. "I said some things, too ... I didn't mean..."

"Let's just forget any of it happened," Cyril said hastily.

Stanley had no intention of forgetting any of it, however. For one thing, he still had that bump on his head to remind him of the night's happening. And it raised too many questions about Cyril's real role here. He filed it all away in his memory. You never knew what might turn out to be a clue down the road.

He doubted that Cyril was going to forget any of it, either. Despite his gracious apology, Stanley could not help noting a certain chill in the air. Understandable. No one liked being

reminded they were getting older—least of all, by someone younger.

* * * *

Tom's reaction, when Stanley called to tell him what had happened, was entirely predictable.

"Damn it, Stanley, that's exactly what I was afraid of. Wherever you go, trouble follows. This isn't just some harmless mischief anymore."

"I agree."

"None of your silly arguments, either, I—"

"Sweetie, I said I agree."

"You always ... you do?"

"Totally. There's something more going on here than harmless mischief."

Tom harrumphed. "Well, I'm glad you see it my way. So, then, you're out of there, or what?"

"Or what, I think. I still want to keep an eye on this place during the night. That's when things are happening. Only, two pair of eyes will do better than one. I think you should be here with me. You can look over some of the staff, see if you spot anything that doesn't seem kosher. You're a detective. It'll give you a chance to detect." He did not add that he didn't see any danger for Tom, not the kind of danger into which he had lured Tom previously. No one was going to burn Bartholomew's down, and he couldn't see his mysterious figure in the bed sheet bopping Tom on the head. Pity him if he tried it.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to detect in a funeral home. If one of them's alive and still has his drawers up, is that kosher or not?" Stanley giggled despite himself. "You said that place was pretty small, though. You think it's big enough for the two of us."

"We'll have to sleep close. Very close."

"I'm packing a bag."

Which made Stanley smile. Whatever problems they had between them, sex wasn't among them.

* * * *

Yesterday's embalming had interrupted their interviews of the Bartholomew's staff. When Tom arrived, they resumed with Nancy Latimer, Cyril's cousin and the accountant.

"She's very clever," Cyril told them. "Her mind is the proverbial steel trap. A giant computer, really. The perfect accountant."

"And she is family," Stanley pointed out to Tom, "and a partner, which gives her a considerable interest in whatever is happening here."

Stanley could see at first glance why Cyril had brushed away the likelihood that Cousin Nancy was involved in any of the sexual shenanigans at Bartholomew's. It wasn't just that she was presumably heterosexual. Despite the preponderance of gay clientele, the mortuary surely must do some heterosexual business as well.

Even so, and even supposing that she interacted directly with the clientele, it was unlikely that any of them would be inviting her down the flower strewn carpets for the

Bartholomew version of a quickie. It was not just that Nancy, no more than five foot four or five foot five inches tall, weighed somewhere in the vicinity of two hundred and fifty pounds, maybe more, her desk chair groaning in dismay when she seated herself in it.

Stanley's best friend in high school, Claire, had been plump to say the least; she had also been the best dancer in school, seeming to defy gravity as she tripped about the floor as light as a feather. Whatever other talents Claire had, he couldn't vouch for, but he could say she had been particularly popular with the boys, who had been not at all put off by her generous figure.

Stanley was well aware that there were some people, overweight by conventional standards, who were sexually attractive nonetheless. It was his opinion that no one who'd ever seen Nell Carter in *Ain't Misbehavin'*, or Concheta Farrell in just about anything, could be unaware of that fact. Like his friend, Claire, both of them moved with the kind of elegance and grace that belied their size.

Nancy Latimer, however, had none of that bountiful beauty that transcended mere figure. She was not quite ugly, but she had fallen well short of the cliché, "she has a pretty face, though," so often the postscript to a mention of a large woman's size. Her unpainted mouth was too small for a round face that, with her pallid, almost ghostly complexion, looked rather doughy.

She did have beautiful hair, however, an ash color not quite pale enough to be blond, too light to be called brown. She had tied it back loosely from her face with a multi-hued

silk scarf that left it to fall in graceful waves nearly to her shoulders; and her eyes, set perhaps a little too wide, were nonetheless lovely, a blue so deep it was almost sapphire. They regarded Tom and Stanley now with something that might have been wariness.

There was one other thing Stanley noticed about her almost at once, a large Topaz ring, surely made for a man's hand that she wore, oddly, on her left thumb. He'd never known anyone to wear a thumb ring before—didn't, in fact, think he'd ever heard of such a thing—but the sight of it teased something at the back of his mind and flitted away before he could quite take hold of it.

She saw him look at it. Far from being embarrassed, his notice of it almost seemed to amuse her. She flexed her pudgy fingers as if inviting his attention, and something that might have been a smile flirted with the corners of her mouth for no more than a second or two before it vanished.

"You're looking into Uncle Percy's death?" she said, the chair protesting again as she leaned back in it. She spoke in low murmur, so that Stanley found himself actually leaning forward the better to hear her.

"Actually, we're looking into some of the odd things that have happened here of late," Stanley said.

"But, that's an interesting remark," Tom said. "What makes you bring up your uncle's death? Everyone else seems shocked if we even mention him."

She lowered her head, glancing up at him from under her brows. "It's just peculiar, isn't it?"

"In what way?"

She looked from one to the other, cautiously. "The police say it's suicide, as I understand it. Everybody seems to accept that it was."

"And you don't?" Stanley asked.

"Well, it's just, that's such an odd coincidence, it seems to me." Positively whispering now, as if sharing a great secret. "Aunt Carmela—she was his wife—she killed herself too, a few years ago. Do suicides run in succession like that?"

The news caught them by surprise. They had been told that Aunt Carmela had died, but no one so far had mentioned that it was suicide. And why not, Stanley wondered?

"Did she?" Stanley said. "How did she do it?"

"She cut her wrists. In the bathtub. Bled to death. Only..." and here her voice was less of a whisper, and her expression decidedly sly. Stanley thought she knew perfectly well her news had been a bombshell, and she was not finished yet with surprising them, "She didn't do it the way most people do. You know." She drew one finger across her wrist. "Which is far less efficient than," and drew it instead down the wrist. "Most people don't know that." She smiled, with her tiny mouth giving the impression of a clever Kewpie doll, and waited for them to draw their own conclusions.

A funeral director would know the difference, Stanley thought immediately. He remembered what Chris had told him early on about the funeral director he'd dated: "He knew exactly where all the nerve endings were and where the blood flows..."

"Are you saying," Tom asked, "you think she was murdered?"

Sapphire eyes went wide in studied innocence. "Goodness, how would I know that? The police were satisfied that time, too. They concluded it was suicide. It's just, as I said, two suicides. Husband and wife, though of course there were years in between the two deaths. Still, it makes you wonder, doesn't it? About the coincidence."

"Yes, it does," Tom said, already deep in thought. "Of course, two murders, no apparent motive. That would be a coincidence too. Perfect murders don't happen a lot, you know."

"Yes, I can see that," she said thoughtfully, whispering again. "Of course, if they were really perfect..."

"No one would suspect."

"Was there a suicide note?" Stanley asked.

Was it his imagination, or did she hesitate just a fraction of a second too long before she answered?

"The authorities never found one." Barely audible.

* * * *

"But what does that tell us?" Stanley asked afterward.

"Not much. It's a big coincidence, like she said. But coincidences do happen in real life. What do you think of Cousin Nancy?"

"I think if she'd just try with some makeup. And that dress..."

"I meant, Stanley, what did you think of her as a suspect?"

"Oh." Stanley thought for a moment. "Maybe. She's angry inside, about something. There's an intensity there. Sometimes, people with brilliant minds that are under used ...

I'd say there's more to Miss Nancy than meets the eye—though God knows there's plenty of that." He paused for another moment. "She's throwing sand in our eyes. Something she knows but doesn't want us to know. I can't see her dragging bodies from one coffin to another, though. What did you think of her?"

Tom took a moment to think about the question. "She likes to fuck."

Stanley gave him a surprised look. "What on earth makes you think that?"

Tom shrugged. "I can always tell. There's women who don't really like it at all, they do it for various reasons—control, mostly, or just to shut a guy up. And there's those that like it well enough, they enjoy it, without any great enthusiasm. And then there's the fuckers, the real thing. A guy looks for those, if he's got the knack, the instincts to recognize them. They're the ones that make the search worthwhile. They really appreciate what a man can do."

"Are you saying you'd actually fuck the woman?"

Tom started to answer, and hesitated. "Well, Jesus, I didn't say I was planning on jumping her bones. Don't get your panties in a knot, baby. I'm just saying, if I did, it would be one of those real roller coaster rides. She's not one of those who lays there like a zombie."

"But, she's fat. And homely."

"Uh huh." Which seemed to be all that Tom had to say on the subject.

* * * *

Molly O'Neil, the office manager, wasn't fat—far from it, she had the look of a farmhouse hen, scrawny from scratching in the dirt for provenance. And the same sharp, all penetrating eye that could spot a doomed bug from a great distance, long before the bug noticed her.

"Alice?" she said, surprised, her expression guarded, when they brought up Alice's name. "I know that she's missing, is all."

"Supposedly she ran off with a boyfriend," Stanley said.

She scoffed. "Alice? I can't imagine what for. I'd have bet money that where most women have genitalia, Alice had nothing more than a little patch of embroidered satin—taken, mostly likely, from a Bartholomew's coffin."

"At a guess," Tom said, "I'd say you didn't care a lot for Aunt Alice."

"I hated her." She fairly spat the words out. Stanley was surprised by her vehemence. His impression of Alice Bartholomew had so far been that she did not inspire great passion in people.

"Was there any reason for that?" he asked aloud.

"I could give you plenty of reasons." She nodded her head and smirked indulgently. "But here's one, a good one. Percy promised us all bonuses, big bonuses, when he sold the business. And overdue they were, too. In the last year, I missed three different paychecks. 'Just bear with us, Molly,' he promised. 'When the sale goes through, I'll make it up to you and then some.'"

"And Alice opposed the sale."

"Exactly. I even talked to her, or tried to talk to her. I said, 'Alice, look, I'm a widow,' I said, 'I need that money.' She wouldn't listen. She just shrugged and walked away. What did she care what happened to anyone else? She'd be all right. Percy would always look after her. Everyone did. She was like some kind of goddess. Nobody cared about the rest of us, though, the little people. Nobody but Percy. And Horace. He tried to talk to her, too. He told me so. Apparently she wouldn't listen to him, either. Selfish, that was Alice."

Stanley noted that she used the past tense. So, Molly O'Neil believed that Alice was dead, too. He wondered aloud to Tom, when they'd left Molly's office, whether she might have some particular reason to think so.

"She sure didn't like her," Tom said. "I could easily imagine her doing Alice in—but, not Percy."

"That's the big trouble, isn't it? Every time we find a motive, it takes another one away. One thing cancels out the other."

* * * *

They ran into David Solomon in the upper corridor, just finishing a call on his cell phone.

"Stanley, guess what," he said in greeting, flashing a dazzling array of white teeth, "I just talked to my mom. I'm going to shul with her."

"What's that?" Tom asked.

"Temple," Stanley said, and to David, "you know, I think you believe more than you believe you believe."

More white teeth. "I believe one thing. I believe my mom is turning cartwheels right about now," he said with a little laugh, and hurried off. They watched him go.

"That's the kid you were telling me about?" Tom asked. "The one that came by the apartment last night? And you didn't try to get into his drawers?"

"Of course not," Stanley said indignantly. "It never even entered my mind." He gave Tom a suspicious look. Tom's eyes were glued to David's shapely behind. "Are you saying you would have? First, Fat Miss Nancy, you practically had your dick out of your drawers thinking about her, and now you're all hot for little David? What are you, some kind of goat, fuck anything that holds still? Maybe you should get a job at Bartholomew's."

"No, I didn't say I wanted to poke him, her either, absolutely not. But, fuck, this kid's awful pretty, isn't he?"

"You saw him before. When we interviewed the interns."

"I was detecting. I didn't pay any attention to him then. Not how pretty he is. Anyway, I didn't see his butt."

Stanley glowered at him. "You aren't supposed to look at other guys that way. Or fat women."

"Well, crap, I've got eyes, haven't I?" He looked in David Solomon's direction. "Look at that ass. If that's not a beauty..."

Stanley did look. It was just disappearing down the stairs. And Tom was right. It was indeed something splendid to behold. Plus, David Solomon had obviously adopted the Bartholomew's school of underwear fashion: none.

Accidents did happen, he reminded himself. Of course, it was one thing if they happened for him, he was philosophically attuned to these subtle differences. Tom was not. He just fucked, without thinking about it.

"No accidents," he told Tom in an icy voice.

"Huh?"

"That was a premeditated look if I ever saw one."

Tom shook his head. "Honestly, Stanley, all this while we've been together, and half the time I still don't know what you're talking about."

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Chapter Twelve

Tom's thoughts had quickly circled back to their mystery, however. It occurred to Stanley, not for the first time, that Tom truly enjoyed playing detective—which was no doubt why he was good at it. Which probably explained, too, why he was so good in the sack. He enjoyed that, too.

"Where did your Uncle Percy live?" Tom asked Cyril when they were back in his office—a question that hadn't even occurred to Stanley.

"There's a condo, in the Avenues. The firm owns it, but he lived there. It was part of his compensation package."

"If the firm owns it, then I guess you could show it to us. Without our having to get a search warrant."

"Yes. I could," Cyril said without enthusiasm. "But I don't know what you'd be likely to learn. The police already went through it, when he died."

"Rule one of homicide investigation: If you want to know how or why someone died, take a look at how they lived," Tom said. "Incidentally, when you say 'the police,' do you know exactly who checked out this condo? An Inspector named Bryce?"

"No. He was here at the time, on the investigation. But it was his partner who searched the condo. Carter, I think, or..."

"Carlson?"

"Yes. That's it. Does it make a difference?"

"Maybe," Tom said, smiling. "Maybe." Carlson, who was homophobic, was not one of his favorite homicide inspectors. And not, in his opinion, one of the sharpest, either.

* * * *

Uncle Percy's condo was in a four unit building that had been apartments before conversion. It sat on a quiet side street three blocks off Geary Boulevard's commercial district. What traffic there was here was mostly Geary Street shoppers looking for street parking.

Cyril met them outside. The building provided not only garages for the owners, but a small guest parking area to the front of the building, where Stanley suspected there had once been a lawn and garden. Cyril directed Tom to a designated parking space, and led the way inside.

There wasn't much to be seen, they could tell that at first glance. The condo had that empty feeling that comes with disuse. "I suppose we'll sell this," Cyril said, looking around. "Uncle Horace will almost certainly be the next acting manager. He wouldn't need this, he has his own place."

Apart from its evident emptiness, however, Stanley thought that the condo lacked any feeling of home, of being lived in. If it had been furnished with a bit more style, it might have been a show model. Walking from room to room, he saw little evidence of any personal possessions, of any presence.

There was a sampler on one wall of Kipling's *If*, which didn't quite fit the picture Stanley had of Percy Bartholomew.

Nor did the upright piano in one corner. He went to that and looked at the sheet music on display: *Abide With Me*.

"Did Percy sing?" he asked.

"Not to me," Cyril said.

There was nothing else to be seen beyond the most basic of furnishings. "It's kind of Spartan, isn't it?" Stanley said aloud. "Did your uncle actually live like this?"

"I don't really know," Cyril said. "I was almost never here. I don't remember the piano. Aunt Alice played, though. Maybe it was hers." He looked around, puzzled. "Now that you mention it, though, it does seem a little bare, doesn't it? But I don't think Uncle Percy actually spent much time here. It was almost as if he lived at the parlor. Maybe..." He paused thoughtfully. "You know, when I cleaned up old Mister Percy's apartment for you, it seemed to me that it was in awfully neat shape for quarters that hadn't been used in years."

"You're thinking Uncle Percy spent his time there?" Stanley said.

"He might have done. If only to sleep there. But, he was a workaholic, among other things. Whatever time he spent in bed, I don't think much of it was for sleeping. I think that's where the drug problems began. Speed, to keep him going, and the downers, when he needed a bit of sleep. A vicious cycle."

"Judy," Stanley said. They both looked questioningly at him. "That's what MGM did to Judy and Mickey, when they were kids. Uppers to keep them working, downers to put them to sleep, then more uppers. Then they fired her because she was hooked on pills. Some rainbow, huh?"

It was clear that Cyril meant to stick close to them while they searched the apartment. He followed at their heels as they strolled slowly through the rooms. In the kitchen, Tom checked the refrigerator, to find it empty.

"We had cleaners in," Cyril said.

The cupboards were bare of food, and held only the basics for eating it. Two dishes, two bowls, three cups, one of them cracked. A tray held an assortment of mismatched cutlery.

Tom closed a cupboard door with a thunk and sighed. "Is there any kind of storage space besides what's in here?"

"Yes, each of the units has a storage locker in the garage. Did you want to see it?" Cyril's look included both of them in the question.

Tom tugged absentmindedly at his crotch, readjusted himself in his trousers, switched from left hanging to right. Cyril's eyes, with seeming reluctance, followed his movements.

"Yeah, why don't you show me," Tom said.

"Certainly." Tom continued to scratch at his crotch, apparently unaware of what he was doing. Cyril, however, was not. He stared as if hypnotized. Stanley, accustomed by now to Tom's impressive showing, bit back a smile. "It's out this way," Cyril said in a flustered voice.

Apparently Cyril had quite forgotten Stanley for the moment. He led Tom toward the back door out of the kitchen. As they went through it, Tom looked back and gave Stanley a wink.

Which meant, as Stanley interpreted it, "Look the place over while I keep him distracted."

He quickly began to look.

* * * *

There was a distinct advantage, detective-wise, to an apartment with so little in the way of personal belongings; by the time Tom and Cyril returned from checking out the storage area in the garage—and Stanley did hope that was all that got checked out—Stanley had finished a hasty but fairly efficient search of the apartment.

"Satisfied?" Cyril asked them both. Tom raised an eyebrow at Stanley, who smiled and nodded.

"As a matter of curiosity, Cyril, how old was Percy?"

"Not everybody is as hung up on age as you are, Stanley." Icicles in the voice.

"General area."

"Sixties. Young sixties, I should say. The Bartholomew men are said to age well."

"As evidence, present company," Stanley said with a big smile, which it seemed was wasted on Cyril, who only scowled back at him.

He noticed that Cyril waited to see them in the pickup and pulling away before he went to fetch his own car. Didn't trust them not to sneak back in? There was no question that things had been strained between him and Cyril since their late night confrontation. Stanley regretted the remarks he'd made about Cyril's looks fading. Not that they weren't true, but nobody liked being reminded of the march of time, or its little footprints on one's face. Anyway, Cyril had been cool toward him since.

"Odd place," Tom said when they were on Geary again, headed back to the funeral home. "I had the feeling that all the important stuff was missing."

"Like, someone may have cleaned it out."

"Exactly. And not the professional cleaners, either. Someone closer to home, I'd bet. Did you notice, there were no pictures anywhere?"

"There was one," Stanley said. He smiled smugly and removed a crumpled up photograph from the inside pocket of his jacket. He smoothed it out and handed it across for Tom to see. "That's sister Alice, and Horace. On their wedding day. Cyril has the same photo in an album back at the shop. It's interesting that Percy had his own copy, isn't it?"

"And you found it like that, all crumpled up?"

"Yes. There was an empty picture frame on the desk in his den, which made me suspicious. I looked all around, and finally got on the floor, and that's when I found it. He must have taken it out of the frame, wadded it up, and threw it at the wastebasket. But he missed and it rolled under the bottom of the drapes."

"Surprised Carlson missed it."

"He probably wasn't looking that closely. They had every reason to believe Percy's death was suicide. The search of his condo would have been routine, perfunctory even. He was looking for the obvious—probably, Alice's blood, say, on the outside chance that Percy had offed her."

Negotiating the traffic one handed, Tom studied the crumpled wedding picture. "Everyone says they were close,

Alice and Percy. Why do you suppose he'd take her picture...?"

"The only one of her he had, apparently. At least I didn't see any others."

"...And throw it away like that?"

"Anger, obviously. Violent anger. It's the kind of thing you do when you're pissed off at someone. Really pissed off."

"Pissed off enough, do you suppose, to do her in?" Tom wondered.

"She'd married Davros. And opposed him on the sale of Bartholomew's. The little sister he'd dominated for years, suddenly in revolt. It might have been more than he could endure."

"A betrayal that only death can atone?"

"But, in that scenario, if he killed his sister in a violent rage, then Percy's death really was a suicide."

"There's sure a lot more to this than shows on the surface," Tom said. "Little Alice, for instance. Everything seems to center on her, but she doesn't come across as that magnetic a personality, does she?"

"You think she might have been abused?" Stanley pondered.

"A battered wife? Now that you say that, everything we've heard about her fits the profile. But, Horace? He doesn't seem the type, does he?"

"They're not always that easy to spot, are they—the wife beaters? But, I was thinking maybe earlier than that. Her father was disappointed in having a daughter. Maybe he was more than just disappointed."

"So he beat her?"

"'A woman, a dog and a walnut tree, the more you beat them, the better they be.' It's an old proverb, but there really are men who think that way. Might makes right. More so back then, I think. Men were supposed to dominate their women. Often, that took the form of physical violence."

"Why the walnut tree?"

"Huh?"

"What is the point of beating a walnut tree?"

"Oh. To bring down the nuts, I guess. For that matter, what's the point of beating a woman?"

"There was this guy, in homicide. Made a habit of beating his wife, but nobody knew about that, it seemed. Until one day he made the mistake of doing it at the station, in front of a bunch of us. She'd come in about something, brought his lunch, if I remember, and it wasn't what he wanted, and he went off, punched her in the jaw, knocked her down."

"What happened?"

"He quit the force. Next day."

"Just like that? He just up and quit?"

"Well, he fell down some stairs, got pretty banged up. Broken arm, some ribs, a bunch of shit. So he couldn't work for a while, a pretty long while, actually. And after that, he just never came back."

"What happened to the wife?"

"She divorced him. Got everything, too. Married another one of the detectives. Happy ending."

"So you kicked this guy's ass, is what you're saying?"

"Me? Nah, he just fell down some stairs, is all. Should have taken the elevator, dumb shit." He paused for several seconds. "I can't stomach guys who punch out women."

Something flitted through Stanley's mind, was gone before he could grab hold of it. "So, maybe someone punched out Alice. Maybe her father. Maybe Horace. Maybe even her brother."

"I wonder." Tom focused on his driving for a moment, wheeling in and out of the thickening traffic as they turned down Divisadero. "Or," he said thoughtfully, "maybe she was the suicide."

"But, where's her body?"

"Funny, isn't it? We're focused on a funeral parlor. There's bodies all over the place, except for the one we can't find."

"Maybe she's there. Back to Poe, the purloined letter. If you want to hide something, hide it in plain sight."

"What? You think we need to start doing a search of the corpses at Bartholomew's?"

"It would be a good place to hide one, wouldn't it?"

"I was thinking more of Davros. Of his house."

"The police already searched it."

"They searched Percy's, too. They missed the picture. And the empty frame. Who knows what they missed at Davros's?"

"Only we don't have a search warrant."

"So?"

* * * *

There were no neighbors in evidence but in the yard next door a sprinkler swung back and forth, leaving an arc of

spray, and a little rainbow in its wake. The grass in Horace's own yard had grown brown and dry in the late summer heat. A small patio at the front of Horace's house was afire with geraniums in giant terra cotta pots, but weeds grew in profusion among the flowers. A jay flirted across their path, taunting them, as Stanley and Tom approached the front door.

Tom rang the doorbell, waited, rang again. Motioned for Stanley to follow him and went around the side of the house, to the back. Not a big house, and no porch in the rear, just two steps leading up to a glass-windowed door. Tom leaned close to the glass, peered inside.

"I don't know," he said, "looks to me like there's somebody on the floor inside. Take a gander."

He stepped aside for Stanley. Stanley put his nose to the glass, peered inside. "I don't see anything."

"Just past the door to the next room. A pair of feet. You don't see them?"

"I see a cheap imitation Persian rug."

Tom took his place, looked again. "Sure looks like feet to me. Could be someone hurt in there, unconscious. Dying even. It would be our civic duty to try to help him. See any open windows?"

Stanley looked right and left, up and down. "There's one open upstairs, but I don't see any easy way to get to it."

Tom glanced up at it. "Probably the bathroom. That's the window most people leave open. I could boost you."

"And, what? I'm going to climb through the window and find Horace sitting on the potty?"

"Yeah, you'd both shit if that happened, wouldn't you? Only, he's not home, remember? I rang the doorbell."

"If he's on the potty, he might not answer the doorbell. There's some things you don't like to interrupt."

Tom frowned, looked about to argue the point, and changed his mind. Instead, he took a set of lock picks from his pocket. It took no more than a few seconds of skillful ministrations before they heard the lock click open.

"We'll just check to be sure," he said. "In case anybody's been hurt." He leaned through the open doorway, called, none too loudly, in a voice that a man sitting on the john on the floor above might very well not hear, "Hello. Anyone home?"

No answer. He stepped inside. Stanley followed, looking nervously over his shoulder for any watching neighbors. There was no one that he could see. He closed the door softly but firmly after them. He disliked the idea of anyone sneaking up on them. Especially not while they were breaking and entering.

"Is this really a good idea?" he asked, speaking unthinkingly in a whisper. "Didn't they teach us that at homicide? Search without a warrant renders any evidence inadmissible."

"We're not with the force now, Stanley. We can't get warrants."

"So, what are we doing inside this house?"

"We looked in the windows," Tom said. "Appeared to me like there was somebody lying on the floor."

"Oh. Yeah," Stanley agreed without enthusiasm. "The mysterious vanishing feet."

"Besides, we're not homicide anymore, we're private detectives. Private dicks do this all the time in the movies, don't they?"

"Yes, sure, but..."

"Stanley we can't stand here arguing. Someone might come along any minute. Let's get to work."

They were in the kitchen. Stanley looked around. The sink was piled with dirty dishes. There was the scent of old grease and burnt flesh. A garbage can by the back door overflowed. As he stood there, a fly buzzed about Stanley's head, decided the garbage can was more interesting, and flew in that direction. His nose told Stanley the garbage had been there for a while.

"I've learned one thing already," Stanley said.

"What's that?"

"Judging from all the clues, I'd say, Horace Davros is not a meticulous housekeeper."

"We're not looking for his garbage."

"What exactly are we looking for?"

"Not sure. I'll know it when I see it."

Tom went through a doorway into a dining room, Stanley close at his heels, still glancing over his shoulder from time to time. An old fashioned, elaborately carved mahogany table took up much of the dining room space, with no fewer than a dozen chairs covered in faded damask crowding around it. The imitation Persian carpet on the floor looked even worse

close up than it had at a distance. It was also free of any feet attached to unconscious or dead men.

"No bodies," he said.

"Someone might have moved it."

"Who?"

"You said there was someone on the potty. Maybe he finished."

"I did not. I said..."

"Search, Stanley, search. Time's a wasting."

Tom led them through an archway into a small entry foyer. Straight ahead, the front door. Just to their left, a tall clock in gleaming cherry-wood ticked noisily, accentuating rather than disturbing the silence.

The sitting room was to their left off the foyer. Tom took a step in that direction and then, pausing and turning around, went to the front door. There were three slim panes of glass embedded high up in it. He looked out.

"Coast clear," he said.

He reversed his steps and went into the sitting room. The ticking of the clock seemed to Stanley to have grown eerily louder, as if sounding a warning. A board creaked behind him, but when he looked in that direction, he saw nothing. He felt eyes upon him, as if the house itself were watching him. If he'd seen anyone behind them he suspected he might have wet his pants. He'd always been a devout coward.

Tom was already in the sitting room. Stanley paused at the doorway, looking around slowly. It was, it occurred to him, a remarkably unremarkable room. A worn sofa covered in gray corduroy, a pair of mismatched chairs, bookcases along one

wall, a console television that must have been fifteen years old, maybe older. A pair of cheap framed prints hung over the television: ballerinas. They might have been cut from a calendar.

Blinds, yellowed with age, hung at the windows, but only cheap nylon curtains, without draperies, over them. He felt no breeze, but as he watched, one of the curtains gave a nervous shudder.

He thought of Alice Davros nee Bartholomew, heir to the company fortune, raised in at least modest luxury. It was hard to imagine that she had lived here in what, contrasted to the muted elegance of the funeral home, the stolid comfort, even, of her brother's apartment, was really not far short of squalor.

Or had she really lived here? Her marriage to Horace Davros had not seemed to be a particularly romantic one. He loved her, according to all reports, but everyone described her as withdrawn, wrapped up in herself. Perhaps she had really spent very little time here.

Tom was quickly sorting through the contents of a small writing desk. Out of habit more than anything else, Stanley went to the bookcase, running his eyes over the titles on the shelves. The books were mostly romances, of the more florid type, with here and there a fantasy novel. It was hard to imagine stolid Horace Davros reading these books. So, Alice's, then, but nothing that anyone had told him about her would have led him to imagine her a romantic.

But perhaps she had needed these, like sugar to sweeten an otherwise unappetizing life. Who had she been, this

woman who he had begun to suspect was perhaps the key to everything? Described as unlovable, yet loved by two men, brother and husband—but neither of them the loving sort. One, a profligate, the other a misanthrope. Leaving her to satisfy her longings in the pages of romantic novels?

Or, as the story had it, with a younger lover, who maybe saw something in her the other two had missed, who perhaps had tapped some depths of passion unsuspected by husband and brother.

But if she had wanted a lover, had been amenable to one, why, good Heavens, she'd had practically at her fingertips a crowd of devastatingly handsome men from which to choose. Not all of them gay, either. He frowned, remembering the odd reactions among the directors when he'd brought Alice up. Maybe she *had* made use of the resources at hand. That bunch was hardly puritanical in their sexual standards. It wasn't hard to imagine any or all of them accommodating Aunt Alice if she'd indicated the desire.

Except, there was nothing he had learned to suggest that Alice had that kind of libidinous nature. Only the note, saying she had gone away with a younger man, and that may have been a sham.

Still, one thing was certain: someone at Bartholomew's knew more about Alice's disappearance than had been let on.

Stairs led up from the foyer, presumably to the bedrooms. They were at the bottom of the stairs, Tom with one foot already on the first step, when they heard a car door slam outside. Stanley went to the front door, looked out. A late

model Mercedes, the entry level model, had pulled into the driveway.

"It's him," he said in a voice little more than a rasp.

"Horace. What...?"

Tom grabbed his arm, fairly dragged him back through the dining room, the kitchen, shoved him out the door, closed it after them.

"He'll see it's unlocked," Stanley whispered.

"He'll think he forgot."

Stanley would have immediately circled back around the house, to their car, but Tom put a hand on his arm, holding him in place, his head cocked, listening. For a moment the muffled sounds they heard were indistinguishable. Then, a sound from the open window above them, on the second floor, easy to identify: someone peeing loudly, followed by a flush. The bathroom. Tom had been right.

"Go," Tom said, giving him a shove.

Stanley went.

* * * *

"So, great idea," Tom said; they were in the truck, on their way back to Bartholomew's, "but it didn't pan out. We learned nothing."

"Umm." Stanley stared straight ahead through the windshield, lips pursed. "I'm not so sure."

Tom glanced sideways at him. "You learned something there? What?"

"I don't know, exactly. But something. Something about Alice. I just haven't sorted it out yet."

They rode in silence for a few minutes.

"She wasn't there," Stanley said out of the blue. "That's the most essential thing I noticed."

"Who? Alice? We already knew that, didn't we? That she's gone missing."

"Yes, but..." he hesitated, "it's like she never was. There, I mean. Not really. She left no presence, if you know what I mean, nothing to mark her passing. Nothing but those books, to while away whatever time she had to spend there."

"So, where was she then? With that young boyfriend? That would explain her disappearance. Just what she said. She fell in love with someone else, and ran off with him."

"Women have been known to," Stanley said.

"You don't sound convinced."

"I think the battered woman thing is more likely."

"Who, though? Her husband. The brother? The father?"

"Or, maybe all of the above."

* * * *

"You think we should do a search of this place, top to bottom?" Tom asked when they were back at Bartholomew's.

"Probably," Stanley said. "But not just yet. Uh oh."

They were approaching the door to the apartment. Stanley could see, before they even got there, the slip of paper that had been half-shoved under the door. Another note. "Looks like someone left us a *billet-doux*," he said.

He unlocked the door before picking the paper up and unfolding it to read. His eyes widened as he read.

"What?" Tom said. "If that's another threat, I'm going to start busting asses."

"No. It's a suicide note."

"Suicide? Whose?" Tom looked around as if expecting to see a body waiting for them.

"Carmela. Uncle Percy's wife. Remember her?"

"But, Jesus, that was a long time ago, wasn't it? Why is her suicide note just now turning up? How do we know it's hers, anyway?"

"It's signed with her name." Stanley held the note up to the light and read it aloud: "I can endure no more. I know that I am committing a mortal sin, but to remain alive is more now than I can bear. Forgive me, Father. Carmela." He held the note out for Tom's inspection.

"But that Latimer person, she told us there wasn't any note."

"No," Stanley said thoughtfully. "She told us the authorities hadn't found it. Someone did, though."

"And brought it to us. Which raises the question, why?"

"To give us a message of some kind, obviously."

"But, what message?"

"Good question."

Tom read the note again. "It doesn't say exactly why she killed herself, either."

"'I can endure no more.' Something awful happened to her."

"Maybe she was the battered wife."

Stanley sighed and took the note back, folding it and slipping it into his pocket. "It's funny, isn't it? The

Bartholomew men, then and now, getting their jollies all over the place, like medieval dukes in their little Italian palace. And the women such an unhappy lot."

"Women don't generally like their men fucking around on them."

"Yes. They run off, some of them."

"Or kill themselves."

"Or kill the men," Stanley suggested.

"Carmella couldn't have killed Percy. She died before he did. Offered herself, if we can believe this note."

"There's still the other possibility. Percy's death was ruled a suicide."

"Two suicides in the same family. Wife and then husband, years apart. We're back to an awful big coincidence."

"Well, if he didn't kill himself, who killed Percy?"

Tom regarded him for a moment. "Battered Alice? Before she ran off with the stud muffin?"

Stanley snapped his fingers suddenly. "I just remembered—that story you told me, about throwing the cop down the stairs..."

"He fell."

"Right. The thing it reminded me of is, Alice's father fell down the stairs too. Old man Percy. Broke his neck. That's how he died."

"You think someone pushed him?"

"It could have been an accident. But it's possible someone pushed him, isn't it? Only, it couldn't have been Carmela. Or Horace, he wasn't on the scene then. Maybe Percy?"

"Or little Alice?"

"Little, abused, Alice?"

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Chapter Thirteen

"You've talked to everyone now," Cyril said. "Except Jimmie, he helps out in the office, but he's not here at nights and he doesn't have a key, so that leaves him out."

"Everyone," Stanley pointed out, "except your father. Mathew."

"My father is no longer active in the business," Cyril said—a bit warily, it seemed to Stanley.

"He still takes part in the board meetings. And he gets a paycheck, yes? That makes him an interested party."

"Be interesting to see how interested," Tom said.

"Interesting only if you're supposing this all ties into Uncle Percy's death, and the sale of Bartholomew's."

"So far that's the only thing that does seem to tie everything together," Stanley said. "Why don't you see if you can set up a meeting for us, with your father."

For a moment Cyril looked as if he wanted to object. Then, he sighed and nodded. "He won't like it, though."

"Tough tittie, said the kitty," Tom said when Cyril had left them.

"But the milk is just as good," Stanley added.

* * * *

Mathew Bartholomew Senior lived in upscale Saint Francis Wood, in a home somewhere between comfortable middle class and mansion, and of so little architectural distinction that it might well have been a reaction to the overblown

fanciness of the family mortuary. Perhaps, Stanley thought, following the curving walk up to the front door, it was.

Mathew opened the door to them himself. He was a slightly smaller, older version of his eldest son, Matt, the dark hair turned to salt and pepper, the large gray eyes metallic and appraising. The oldest of old Percy Bartholomew's children, he must have been close to seventy, but still handsome.

"You're the policemen," he said.

"Private investigators," Tom corrected him, introducing them.

"This visit is entirely unofficial," Stanley said. "We're looking into some problems at Cyril's request. You may have heard about some of the difficulties they've experienced at the mortuary."

"I've heard about them. I don't know that I can help you much with them." He led the way down a short corridor. The room into which he ushered them was sparsely furnished but not uncomfortable. It had a bachelor look to it and Stanley remembered that Mathew was divorced—twice. The two sons were half brothers only.

Mathew motioned them to a large sofa. Tom and Stanley sat side by side. He took a lounge chair opposite them. A television set was turned on to a football game, the volume muted.

"You like football?" Mathew asked.

"I'm more a basketball fan," Tom said.

Mathew made a disparaging gesture. "African ballet."

Stanley bristled. Apparently Mathew Bartholomew hadn't gotten the musketeers memo from Cyril.

Mathew took his eyes from the television screen, looked at Stanley briefly, and then at Tom, what Stanley saw as a man-to-man look. "What exactly is it that you think I can tell you, that will explain anything?"

Tom shrugged. "We don't know, exactly. We thought if we simply asked a few questions ... if that's all right."

"Ask away." Mathew took a sip from a coffee cup that was already at hand. He did not offer them any, and his tone of voice suggested that he would decide whether he wanted to answer whatever questions they asked.

Stanley gave Tom a nod, signaling for him to proceed. Sometimes man to man worked better.

"For starters," Tom said, "as I understand it, you no longer take part in the business of Bartholomew's?"

"I attend the monthly meeting of the partners. I participate in the major decisions that are made."

"But the day to day business...?"

"I retired from the firm some years ago, except for my role on the board. So, to answer your question, no, I take no direct part in the day to day aspect of Bartholomew's funeral business."

"Would it be rude to ask why?" Tom said.

"It would. But I'll answer your question anyway." He thought for a moment. "Or, try to, at least. Things don't always resolve themselves in clear cut, black and white ways." He paused again, seemed to be sorting through his thoughts. He glanced briefly at the television screen, but

football had given way to a commercial. "Our business, the funeral business, is in its own way far more stressful than an outsider might realize. You're a private investigator, now, as my nephew tells me, but you were a policeman before, were you not?"

"We both were," Tom said.

Mathew looked at Stanley again, as if surprised to hear it, although, Stanley thought, Cyril must surely have told him that as well.

"Then you will understand," Mathew went on, speaking once again to Tom. "Police work, too, is stressful, I'm sure. Quite stressful enough without the additional difficulty of accommodating a partner, of making allowances. It was that question of accommodating, you see, that led me to distance myself from my brother and sister, so far as the funerary business was concerned. My participation in the partners' meetings is strictly about the business aspects, which in many ways are no different from any other business enterprise. The funerary part of it, I leave entirely in their hands."

"You speak of accommodating a business partner," Stanley said, "of making allowances. Was this a question of your accommodating them, or them accommodating you?"

Mathew did not look happy at Stanley's intruding himself into the conversation. "Need it be one or the other? We're back to that black and white business, aren't we? Life is rarely that simple, it seems to me. The best answer I can give you," and Stanley thought his manner had grown a bit frosty, "is that my brother and sister had a different vision of Bartholomew's, of how the firm would function as a mortuary.

I had no quarrel with that vision. It just wasn't mine. I withdrew. And before you ask, this was all done without any rancor, on anyone's part. The firm has done well in Percy's hands. I've had no reason to complain."

"Percy had plans to sell the building," Stanley said. He was thinking that, according to what Cyril had told him, the firm had not done so well, either; but oughtn't Mathew to know that? Or had Cyril exaggerated the financial problems, for some reason.

"We discussed the sale of the building," Mathew said, definitely cooler now. "There had been no decision reached."

"We've been told that your brother and sister clashed over that question," Tom said.

"They expressed different opinions. That is natural, I should think, when considering such a big step. This was a question of some importance. Bartholomew's had been in that building, in that location, since its founding. It wasn't as if we were debating new draperies, or painting the façade."

"Where did you stand on the question of selling?" Tom asked.

Mathew fixed steely gray eyes on him. "We had not reached a final decision," he said, his voice carefully neutral.

Which meant, Stanley thought, neither his sister nor his brother had fully convinced him one way or the other. And his, of course, would be the deciding vote. He wondered whether the arguments had really been waged without any rancor.

"How were these things settled?" he asked aloud. "I mean, does everyone have equal say?"

"No. That is, we're all of us equal, it's just that some of us are more equal than others. I'm older than they are, five years older than Percy, almost eight years older than Alice. You understand, from the time we were youngsters, Percy was fascinated by the funeral business, by everything to do with Bartholomew's. As it happens, I was not. I don't say I found it particularly objectionable, but, if you want to put it in romantic terms, my heart was never altogether in it, not the way his was. Our father recognized that. He and Percy shared more than a name. So, Percy's share of the business was somewhat larger than mine or Alice's."

"And you had no objection to that?" Tom asked.

"None." He said it firmly, decisively, as if that subject were finished. "It meant that between them, they were in control of Bartholomew's. But they did nothing, so far as major decisions, I should say, without consulting me. And I might add, in effect, so long as Alice agreed with him, Percy was in control. That is why he was the managing director."

"And did she?" Stanley asked. "Alice. Did she generally side with Percy?"

"For the most part, yes. They had their differences, of course. People do."

"But if, say, you and Alice were agreed in opposing the sale?"

"Then it would not have been sold. But you are supposing something that in fact never happened. As I've said already, the subject was still under discussion. No decision had been reached, one way or the other. You are looking for trouble where none existed, I'm afraid."

"Were they close?" Stanley asked.

Again, those gray eyes fastened on him, seemed to be trying to read something of his thoughts. "Alice and Percy? They were ... are ... brother and sister."

"She was your sister as well. Would you say they were closer than, say, you and she were?"

"Is," he said. "She is still my sister. As to your question, they were closer in age to one another. Yes, yes, I suppose you would say they were closer in other ways too. Percy and I ... well, brothers, there are often distances, aren't there? Especially with so many years between us. And our father..." He hesitated again, thinking. "He was a hard working man, he devoted himself to Bartholomew's. Fathers of his generation didn't lavish the affection on their children that fathers today often do. Or they didn't display it, anyway. I don't think any of us felt truly close to him. Percy, perhaps most of all, if only because they shared that love of the business. Or, not love, I suppose, but some fascination with it."

"Did Alice share that fascination?" Stanley asked.

"If Alice had a fascination—she was always a quiet child, withdrawn, painfully shy—if she had a fascination, I started to say, it was probably with Percy. Yes, they were close. In some ways, perhaps too close. I always thought she was too dependent upon him. By the time she came along ... and our mother, you see, died in giving her birth ... I always had a feeling our father resented Alice for that, or perhaps just for being a girl. He wanted sons, you see, sons to take over the business, sons for Bartholomew's sake. With him, everything came back to Bartholomew's. But a daughter ... in those

days, no one would have given serious thought to a woman funeral director. So, I don't say he didn't love her, in his own way. Quite the contrary, I know that he did, but he didn't quite know what to make of her. She was, at best, a disappointment to him. For the most part, I think he preferred to pretend she had never come along."

"And she turned to her brother for affection," Stanley said.

"I suppose you could put it like that. That's rather natural, isn't it? He looked after her, doted on her. I think she was more like a daughter to Percy than a sister."

"But Percy had a wife. At least he did for a time."

"Yes," Mathew said, definitely wary now.

"Who killed herself."

"Yes."

"Was there any explanation why?"

"I don't recall that she left a note. She was high strung, a nervous kind of woman. I always thought she might be a little unbalanced."

"Your brother seemed drawn to women who were, how to put it, frail, emotionally."

"If you mean our sister, Alice," his tone resentful, almost belligerent, "I don't think there's anything so odd about that. I've told you, she was neglected by our father. We all were, I think, emotionally, but Alice especially. Percy adopted her, if you want to look at it like that. It was a natural thing, it seems to me. I don't know that it makes her 'frail,' as you put it. Alice could be quite strong when she chose." He thought about what he'd said. "Quite strong."

"But, when Percy married—how did that work? Brother and sister, very close. And then, another woman in his life. How did the two women get along?"

"On a personal level? I'm afraid I can't tell you. Whenever I saw them together, everyone behaved in a pleasant enough manner. If there was any private friction, I did not witness it."

His eyes shifted to the right and up when he said this. Stanley had long ago realized that when people were appealing to memory, their eyes went left and up. When they were planning to fabricate a story, they went right. Mathew was lying. Whatever had been wrong between the brother, the sister and the wife, he had been entirely aware of it—and he had no intention of sharing it with them.

"What happened when Alice married Horace Davros?" Tom asked.

Mathew was so long in answering, Stanley had concluded he did not mean to; but, finally, he said, "Again, I'm afraid I wasn't privy to whatever private exchanges they might have made. I saw the three of them once a month, all together. At our meetings. Everything was civilized. Everything at Bartholomew's is always civilized." It seemed to Stanley that his last was said with an edge to his voice.

"You never saw your brother and sister outside of those business meetings?" Stanley asked.

"Rarely. The funeral business is an all consuming one. It's not like having a nine to five job. Bartholomew's was, to a great extent, their life. It was no longer mine. It hasn't been for many years." He gave them a macabre smile, a smile that failed to reach his eyes. "You could say that death parted us."

"Mister Bartholomew," Stanley said, "your brother is dead, and your sister is missing. For all practical purposes, that leaves the management of Bartholomew's in the hands of Horace Davros, doesn't it?"

Mathew looked as if he had never before considered that possibility. "Yes, I suppose it does," he said finally. "For the present. Until my sister returns."

"And if your sister is dead?"

"I have no reason to suppose that is true." Said sharply, almost angrily.

"Is there anything you know about her disappearance? Anything you can add to what her husband has told us? Told us, and the police?"

"Nothing."

"Does this action, this disappearance of hers, fit with your sense of the kind of person your sister was?"

"Is," Mathew again corrected him. He spread his hands. "Who of us ever completely understands another? My sister and I weren't close. I've told you that already. I can't honestly say I've ever quite understood what sort of person she was. There were things..." He bit off whatever he had been about to say.

"What sort of things?" Stanley prompted him.

"I've always considered my sister's private life her business. As I still do." He looked from Tom to Stanley, and back to Tom. "Isn't there a possibility that you haven't considered, in Alice's disappearance? What about amnesia? Suppose something happened—I'm not a medical doctor, but I know there are instances, where people forget their past

entirely, for a period of time, at least ... a blow to the head, some emotional trauma..."

"What kind of emotional trauma do you think your sister might have experienced?" Tom asked.

"How should I know?" Definitely angry now. "I'm only offering a suggestion that it seems to me no one has thought of up till this point. It's as likely as the other possibilities, isn't it?"

"And the email she sent her husband."

Mathew made dismissive motion with his hand. "Who knows who sent that? Horace might have sent it to himself."

"But why would he?"

Mathew gave him a speculative look. "You said yourself, just a little while ago, he's now in effect running Bartholomew's. Maybe that's something he had in mind all along, from the day he married Alice."

"You don't think he loved his wife?" Tom asked.

Mathew sighed. "No, I don't mean that at all. I think he did. Very much. If anything, too much."

"What about you?" Stanley said. "Did you ... do you love your sister?"

"What a stupid question."

"My apologies." Stanley waited, but it did not seem that Mathew Bartholomew intended to embellish his remark.

Everyone, Stanley found himself thinking, even the suicides, died in God's chosen moment. When one simply vanished into thin air, however, taking love with them, those left behind waited in a slow hell of anguish. Waiting was not

the hardest part of it, though; it was thinking that was torture.

There was no question that the pain that had flashed across Mathew's expression, at the suggestion that his sister might be dead, had been genuine. Was it only to avoid the pain that he insisted so vehemently that she was still alive? Or did he have some reason to cling to that conviction—some knowledge of what really had happened to her, of where she really was at the present?

Mathew got up from the chair in which he had been sitting, a clear signal that the interview was over, and said, "I think, gentlemen, that I've told you everything that I can tell you."

"Or will tell us?" Tom said.

"In the end, they come to the same thing, don't they? Good day, gentlemen."

"Mister Bartholomew," Stanley said quickly, "you and both your wives are divorced. Did Bartholomew's have anything to do with those divorces? Did they perhaps disapprove of your business?"

"Good day, gentlemen."

"Would your father have approved of Bartholomew's, as it operates today?"

Mathew Bartholomew preceded them to the door, and saw them out without another word.

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Chapter Fourteen

"Fruitcakes, if you ask me," Tom said when they were in his pickup. "The whole bunch of them, fruitcakes."

"The Bartholomew men don't do very well with their wives, do they? Old Mister Percy's wife died young, in childbirth. Mathew Bartholomew and both of his wives are divorced. Percy Junior's wife killed herself."

"Or was murdered."

"Yes. Or was murdered. But there's the suicide note."

"Which conveniently showed up at our doorstep."

"Too conveniently, maybe. But there's nothing to support the idea of murder, is there?"

"The way her wrists were cut. Like the Latimer chick pointed out, it's not how most suicides do it."

"Still, she was married to a funeral director. In a family of funeral people. It wouldn't be strange if she knew that."

"True." Tom opened a stick of gum and popped it into his mouth, chewing with gusto. "Doesn't seem to me as if the women do so much better. Tiny Alice married Horace Davros, a cold fish, if you ask me. I think cutting up bodies is more than just business with him, I think he enjoys it."

"Everyone says he adored her."

"So did her brother, apparently. You have to wonder why. Nobody describes Alice as exactly adorable, do they? And she was no great looker, if you ask me. Not a dog, exactly, but not the kind of woman guys go ape over."

"Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point."

"Baby, I've told you before, I only know two languages, bad English..."

"And worse English. I know. It's Pascal. 'The heart has its reasons which reason knows not of.'"

Tom thought about that for a moment. "Yeah. I guess he got that right. Love. It gets really fucked up sometimes, doesn't it?" His tone of voice suggested he wasn't only talking about the Bartholomew's.

"Which certainly seems to be the case here." Stanley chewed on his lip. "It's interesting, isn't it? All those people who supposedly loved Alice. Mathew insists that he did, and their father as well. Everyone agrees Percy did, and Horace."

"Your point being?"

"My point being, for all the people who loved her, it doesn't seem as if anyone actually much cared for her, it you know what I mean."

"Or about her. She seems to have been more of a nuisance to everyone, doesn't she?"

"Exactly. Or, at best, a hinderment. What do you suppose it all means, though? The younger brother, the sister. Almost like a married couple, from the way he described them. And then, she meets someone, falls in love, gets really married. It must have been a wrench. Maybe her husband killed her out of jealousy."

"Seems to me it would have been more likely to be the brother. She marries, and then, for the first time, we hear about her standing up to her brother, opposing something he wants—selling that white elephant of a building. He was used

to her doing whatever he said, whatever he told her, and now she's crossing him."

"And he does her in, and kills himself out of, what, grief, guilt? What did that note say: 'There are some betrayals for which only death can atone.'"

"She betrayed her brother by marrying Horace?"

"Or Percy betrayed her by offing her?"

Stanley considered that. "It's possible, either way, but neither story seems entirely convincing. There must be more to it than that."

"The AIDS thing? Maybe, she felt that he'd betrayed the business, getting himself infected."

"Meaning, she murdered Percy and then disappeared. Or killed herself. But it doesn't sound to me like she was as obsessed with the funeral home as he was. Anyway, I'm not sure that the revelation of his AIDS would have harmed the business. It might have benefited it, even. AIDS is the glamour death today."

"Is it?"

"There's always one. In the nineteenth century, it was consumption. Sex and Death. A sure fire combination. Which is what Bartholomew's is all about, really, isn't it? Sex and death, death and sex. The two are hardly separated, not at Bartholomew's. You get one with the other, the frosting on the cake."

"That's the sort of thing you'd know better than me." Tom was silent for a moment. "Maybe we're taking too narrow a view of things. There's the other brother to consider, the one

we just talked to. Mathew. We seem to be giving him an automatic *Get Out of Jail Free* card. But, how do we know?"

"He's taken himself out of the picture, though, hasn't he? Doesn't seem like he has much to do with anything."

"So he says, but we've only got his word for that, haven't we? He's still going to those meetings, isn't he? He's awfully cagey on the subject, but he must have had some opinion on selling the building. I'd like to know what kind of income he still gets from it."

"Cyril could probably find that out for us. But, where does that lead us? Mathew kills Percy ... are we now taking it for granted that Percy's death was murder, and not suicide?"

"That's my take on it. Isn't that how you see it?"

"The police see it as suicide."

"Bryce has his doubts."

"But not enough to act on." Stanley sighed. "Maybe I'm just acting like a detective. Maybe we both are. You know, seeing spooks where there aren't any. We decide it's murder, we want it to be murder, so the facts become irrelevant. We expect a murder, so we see murder. But, really, we've found nothing to suggest it wasn't suicide."

"Or maybe we're not fooling ourselves. Maybe we're seeing what's really there. It could have been murder."

"Well, it could have been all sorts of things. Space men from Mars doing a probe that got out of hand. But there's simply no evidence that it was anything but suicide, not a shred. Plus, there's just no motive, is there? Think about it, what are the usual motives for murder? Money? As things stand now, the partners will get less money than they would

if Percy Bartholomew had gone ahead and sold. No one questions, apparently, that this would have been the financially prudent way to go. What else? Sexual jealousy? In that dressed up excuse for a cathouse? Everybody's pants go down faster than the Titanic. When everyone's passing it around so generously, it's unlikely someone is having a jealous fit."

"Maybe somebody fell in love."

Stanley snorted. "Those guys? The closest any of them get to real love, in my guess, is when they're looking in the mirror." He paused for a moment, thinking.

"You think it was suicide? Percy's death?"

Stanley sighed deeply. "No, not really. I'm just playing devil's advocate. I'd like to believe in the suicide business, but in my heart I've always thought murder. Suicide just doesn't feel right. Take that note, for instance, it sounds more like a message from the killer, doesn't it, a reflection of why he did this? Some betrayals for which only death can atone?"

"So, what's the betrayal? The sale of Bartholomew's?"

"But, they didn't sell it. Percy was pushing to sell the property, and it seems that Mathew would do better financially if that happened, and unless he's a damned good actor, he doesn't care all that much about the business itself, other than as a means of income. So why would he kill Percy?"

Tom ran a hand over his eyes. "There's the real mystery—nobody benefits, really, by Percy Bartholomew's death. The sale of the property goes on hold for the moment but it sounds as if eventually it will happen anyway. Percy's own

money goes to his sister and his brother. Hers is on hold now, too, and what Mathew gets doesn't sound like enough to justify murdering his brother."

"I guess we could look into Mathew's financial situation. He looks to be pretty comfortably well off, but looks can be deceiving. Maybe he's hurting for money. Cyril said he was expected to get fifty thousand. That can seem like a fortune if you're in some kind of bind."

"I can check that out. But, you know, it doesn't feel to me as if this is about money."

"Me neither. If Cyril's made a partner, which seems likely, the sale is almost certainly going to go through in the end, just a bit later than it might have if Percy had lived. Why kill someone to buy a few weeks time?"

"Which leaves us, what?"

"The betrayal," Stanley said.

"But, who betrayed whom?"

"And we're right back to that. The betrayal."

"Look, it's getting late and we're spinning our wheels," Tom said. "Let's go home and grab a bite to eat before we go back to the house of stiffs. Personally, I'm getting tired of that canned music and all that heavy atmosphere."

* * * *

At home, Stanley took a shower, thinking it strange that even showering in your own bathroom was somehow more refreshing than in a strange one.

When he came back to the kitchen, Tom had food on the table. Stanley sat and surveyed the spaghetti with red sauce

on the plate Tom set before him. He ran the tines of his fork listlessly through the mess.

"This is the spaghetti sauce Chris taught you?"

"Yeah. Great isn't it?" Tom looked at the huge pile of spaghetti on Stanley's plate. "Isn't it?"

"Yes. It's delicious."

"But? You're not eating. You don't like it?"

"I do, honestly. It's just ... well, we've had it now for five nights in a row."

"Well, sure. It's the only thing I know how to cook. Except for grilling a steak. You want me to fix you a steak? I can fire up the grill."

"No, don't, this is okay." Stanley made a show of twisting a large mass of spaghetti around the tines of his fork and shoving it into his mouth. "It's great, really. Only, I'm thinking, maybe tomorrow night, you should have a night off. I'll pick up some Chinese down the street. The Peking Palace. I could even get some egg rolls. You know, for breakfast."

"Yeah. We've had a lot of scrambled eggs lately, too."

Stanley swallowed and looked wounded. "We had toast this morning. And yesterday morning. I haven't scrambled eggs since Wednesday."

"Stanley, I'm a big guy. I need more than toast in the morning."

"And coffee. Besides, didn't I just say, I'd get some egg rolls?"

"I don't like egg rolls."

"We've been together all this time, and you're just now telling me you don't like egg rolls?"

"Not for breakfast. I want ... I don't know. Don't you do pancakes, say? I like pancakes a lot."

"I do eggs. With bacon. And I do toast. You want fancy breakfasts, you should have married Julia Child."

"I don't know her. Who's she?"

Stanley stood up, wadded the paper towel he'd been using for a napkin, and dropped it smack in the middle of his uneaten spaghetti. "She's someone who wouldn't serve spaghetti every night, is who," he said, before he marched out of the room.

Tom sat at the table, staring after him. "What'd I do now?" he asked the empty room.

* * * *

Stanley was in the bedroom, staring out the window. Which told Tom he really did have something on his mind—there was nothing to see outside the bedroom window but an alley and some trash cans.

"So, what's this all about?" Tom asked.

"I'm just sick of spaghetti, is all."

"Well, sure, I can understand that. No more spaghetti for a while, agreed. Only, you know, you're not usually so crabby."

"I'm not crabby," Stanley snapped.

There was a moment of silence. "Baby, did I do something wrong? I know I'm a dick sometimes."

Stanley searched his mind, looking for something that Tom had done wrong. Because, he didn't like thinking about the alternative; that he really was just being a bitch.

He couldn't understand why, either. It really wasn't anything Tom had done, and he knew he was being unfair. He just felt so ... so something, so all churned up inside; had since he'd shot his brother. He couldn't get that fateful moment out of his mind. Or Tom's scars. He couldn't get his thoughts away from all that crap.

Or, if he did, he found himself thinking of all those hot guys at Bartholomew's—he was surrounded by beautiful buns and big baskets, and all of them blatantly available—and, yes, he had been tempted, more tempted than a man with his own special partner at home ought to feel tempted. So then he felt guilty. Guilty over this, guilty over that, guilty over the damned spaghetti, for crap's sake. At the moment he wasn't so very fond of himself.

Temptation notwithstanding, he had done nothing about those guys at Bartholomew's. Of course he hadn't. He loved Tom, who was surely enough man for anybody, the only man in the world he really wanted. And he had comforted himself by thinking, who wouldn't drool over guys like these? But, really, rationalization was an easy god to serve. He shouldn't have had to struggle with the temptation.

Tom stepped closer, put his arms around Stanley, and pulled him close. For a second Stanley resisted petulantly, still sore, and not sure exactly what he was sore about. Then he relented and leaned back against Tom's brawny chest. It felt very good. He loved it when Tom's arms closed around him.

He turned, looking up at Tom—at the face he loved, even messed up as it was. "Would it be okay if I fuck you?" he asked.

Tom blinked in surprise. "Wow. You really are romantic tonight. Lots of hearts and flowers."

"If you don't want to, that's okay. I know it's not your favorite thing, only..."

"Hey, it's okay," Tom said. "That's what you've got a partner for. I'm here to make you happy."

"No, I mean it, if you don't want to..."

"It'll be more comfortable if you get out of your clothes too," Tom said, already slipping his shirt off.

* * * *

It wasn't, they both knew, one of Tom's favorite things, but there was no denying, when he did it—and they both knew he did it for Stanley's pleasure—he did it right. Usually, doggie fashion, Tom on his knees on the bed, head down on a pillow, butt raised in the air, welcoming Stanley's attentions.

Which, to start, were lingual, a slow, determined rim-job that invariably progressed into an around the world, Stanley taking time to follow the trail downward of Tom's perineum, to tongue-bath Tom's ponderous balls as well, even to slide under him and suck the cock that was by this time rock hard and extended to it's full nine plus inches.

Tom mostly remained still, only occasionally murmuring with pleasure, allowing Stanley to have his way, until Stanley had made the round trip and was back where he had started.

This time, his stay was brief, before he got on his knees behind Tom, fitted a condom over his own stiff dick, and guided it to the spit-glistened opening. As he always did, Tom

grunted at the intrusion, still unfamiliar to him despite the times now that they had done it this way.

Once Stanley had pushed his way inside, though, Tom's passivity ceased. "A bucking bronco," Stanley had once described it, and the phrase was apt. Tom pushed back to welcome the full length of Stanley's dick inside him and, as Stanley began to thrust, Tom began to move with him, twisting from side to side, arching his back, meeting each thrust with a welcome shove.

Stanley clasped him by the hips, and fucked more energetically. Usually, knowing that Tom was doing this only to please him, he performed gingerly, but today he let himself go, plowing Tom's ass with increasing ferocity, as if pounding the guilt out of him.

Tom took it without protest, nothing more than an occasional moan that might have signified pain or pleasure. Stanley felt the climax building within him, growing more and more intense, until it was overwhelming, his entire being had dissolved into that rush of energy surging through him, down and out through the tip of his dick. When Stanley went deep, to the hilt, with one final, violent lunge, Tom reached behind him, grabbing Stanley's hips, and pulled him tight, until their sweaty bodies had become almost one.

They lay like that for a moment, regaining their breath, Stanley resting his cheek gratefully on Tom's wide, heavily muscled back. Finally, he felt himself soften and slip out.

Tom rolled over on his back, obviously still aroused. Stanley leaned down, took Tom in his mouth. Savoring the sweet, male taste of him—barely had time to swallow Tom's

cock, feeling the whole length of it slipping down his throat, his nose buried in a thick patch of silky-wiry hair, before it erupted, Tom shooting like a water cannon into his mouth.

Afterward, Stanley lay with his head on Tom's hard belly, Tom stroking his hair affectionately, and wondered how he could ever have thought, even for a moment, that anyone else could compare to the man on the bed with him.

He felt better, too, like he really had drained a lot of negative stuff from his thoughts. Really, what did he need with any of those princesses at the mortuary, with what he had here at home? The funny thing was, he hadn't actually wanted any of them—it was more the forbidden fruit kind of thing.

On the other hand, he couldn't quite shed the memory of that image that had stolen into his mind while he was fucking Tom—a picture of Armando, bending over a casket.

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Chapter Fifteen

Late again. David Solomon all but ran the last block. The fog had descended upon the city, thick enough to choke on. He'd done a fast turn through the Castro, but it was not a night for cruising.

He let himself in the front door of Bartholomew's, feeling a twinge of guilt as he hurried across to the stairs and took them two at a time.

In a sense, he thought it didn't matter. He had made up his mind that he would finish up his internship at Bartholomew's, which would serve him in good stead wherever he went.

He did not intend, though, to apply for a position as funeral director here. He still could not exactly explain it, but something about the establishment cut across the grain with him. He could adapt to the way things were here. Why not? He liked sex, and sex was what it was all about when you came down to it, no matter how they managed to prettify it among themselves with rationalization.

He'd talked with Greg and Cody both. They were both seriously looking forward to careers here at Bartholomew's. And, though neither of them said so, he thought they were looking forward, too, to the sexual ambience of the mortuary. He rather thought it suited both of them perfectly well. Despite the fact that they were going at it hot and heavy every night with one another, both of them had made it clear

to him that they were agreeable to some action with him as well, should he be interested. He was, too—only, he wasn't.

So why wasn't he? He couldn't say exactly why it didn't suit him as well, or more importantly, why Bartholomew's didn't suit him either. He certainly was no prude. How many nameless males had he had sex with since he'd come out to himself, in dark doorways, in parked cars, in the bushes at Buena Vista Park?

That was different, if he wasn't sure altogether why or how. That was him. That was his horniness. None of it was done at anyone else's bidding, none of it done regardless of his own personal inclination, or lack thereof. He got to pick and choose, and if someone didn't interest him—well, so be it.

He wasn't one to think over much about honor and integrity, but he had an idea that they mattered—maybe something that he'd inherited in the blood from his parents. And if they mattered, then surely the first step to losing one's honor was to become someone else's creature. That was pompous, he knew. It wasn't something he thought he could say to anyone else, although he rather supposed his mother would understand. It was how he felt, though, and he knew as surely as he knew his own name that it was something that wasn't going to go away. He would never be happy as a funeral director at Bartholomew's.

Still, for the present he was an intern here, and in all fairness he ought to work a little harder at it. If they didn't exactly prohibit interns from going out, and staying out late, he was well aware that they regarded too many late night outings as an indication of a somewhat frivolous attitude

toward the work. In the future, he would be more careful of his time.

He wished he could resolve his differences with his parents so easily. He had thought, when he promised his mother to attend shul with her, that this would solve their problems, but in an odd way, it had only exacerbated them.

He had said, after prayer, that it only made him feel like a hypocrite. "And aren't you hypocrites, too?" he'd made the mistake of asking. "What if you were asked under oath if you really believed all that old mythology, Samson's haircut and Mount Sinai and the parting of the Red Sea? Could you honestly swear you think that is all literally true?"

"A belief doesn't have to be strictly true to be worth dying for," his father had replied in an icy voice. "Or worth living for, as far as that goes."

So, more quarrels. And once again, he'd come away thinking what a disappointment he was as a son. He had made a vow on the walk back to the mortuary that he would try to be a better son to his parents. Now, he added a promise to try to be a better intern as well.

He paused on the landing to the third floor. Something had moved along the corridor to his left. He stood with one foot on the stairs leading up, looking in that direction. He remembered Stanley's experience, the night he'd gotten conked on the head, and thought briefly that maybe he ought to go back down and summon the director on night duty to come investigate with him.

He'd feel foolish, though, wouldn't he, if there were nothing to be found? He'd had more wine to drink than

probably was wise. He wouldn't have described himself as drunk, but he was a little tipsy. What if the director recognized that? They'd think he was imagining things. And, maybe he was. He couldn't be sure, actually, that he'd noticed anything.

On a whim, he left the stairs and started along the corridor, thinking that if he saw or heard anything more definite, then that would be the appropriate time to summon help, without making himself look foolish.

Someone had lit candles in one of the chapels. He paused in the doorway. Something about the casket with its raised lid ... an odd streamer of pale silk, shining in the candle light, dangling down the side of it. Too puzzled to remember to be frightened, he crossed the small room in three steps, staring into the open coffin—whose pink lining had been ripped to shreds as if a frenzied demon had taken claws to it. Why on earth would anyone want to rip the lining out of a coffin?

There was a sound behind him. He turned, his eyes going wide as a figure loosely draped in a white bed sheet rushed toward him, so swiftly that David was frozen momentarily in place, unable to quite grasp what was happening.

"What on earth are you...?" he said.

He never got to finish the question.

* * * *

"Some fog."

Tom grunted an answer. He was humming as they pulled into the garage at Bartholomew's.

"You sound awfully happy," Stanley said.

"Oh, well, sure. Aren't you?"

Stanley gave him a dry look. "Don't be so damned smug. We fucked. That doesn't mean I'm still not sore at you."

For a reply, Tom grinned and blew him a kiss. He was thinking, but considered it wise not to say, that there was something to be said for having a tiff, if it ended up in hot sex. And, yes, he was smug. He knew perfectly well that once he got Stanley on the mattress, there was no way Stanley was going to stay mad at him.

But he didn't think, however, that it would be wise to say that either.

* * * *

Bartholomew's was quiet. They climbed the stairs, pausing on each floor to stroll up and down the corridors, but they saw no one. There was nothing out of the ordinary at all, in fact, until they came to the fourth floor. Tom paused at the top of the stairs, sniffing suspiciously at the air.

"Oh, man, fuck me," he said suddenly.

Stanley could smell it too: gas.

Getting stronger as they ran down the hall—coming, it was quickly evident, from Percy's apartment. Tom, in the lead, unlocked the door and shoved it wide. The gas fumes swelled over them in a choking wave. "Stay here," Tom ordered. "I'm going to open the windows."

"Far wall." Stanley took a handkerchief from his pocket, slapping it over his nose, and followed Tom inside. The smell of gas was thick here, choking them. Despite the handkerchief, Stanley went into a coughing fit.

Together they got the two recalcitrant windows in the front room open. Fog poured in like swarms of ghosts. Stanley started into the bedroom, and stopped dead in the doorway.

"Oh, Jesus," he said, forgetting the handkerchief altogether.

David Solomon sprawled across the bed, head flung over the edge, eyes closed.

"Call 911," Tom said. He tried to get the single bedroom window open, and when it resisted, broke the glass with his elbow. An alarm started to ring somewhere distant. The gas fumes began to thin as the cold nighttime air and tendrils of mist swept through the apartment.

"I left that window open," Stanley said, dialing on his cell phone.

"Somebody closed it. And locked it. All the windows."

Tom came back to the bed. David was bare to the waist, and his smooth young skin had a marked lividity, a bright pinkish red that Tom, the experienced homicide inspector, recognized at once as typical of carbon monoxide poisoning.

He knelt down. "He's still got a pulse," he said, "but it's faint."

"Don't let him die," Stanley cried. "He can't die."

Tom began resuscitation.

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Chapter Sixteen

"He's alive," Bryce told them, "but still unconscious."

"I want to know who did this to him," Stanley said vehemently.

"It looks like a suicide attempt," Bryce's partner, Carlson, said. "The closed windows, the gas turned on."

"Bull. David Solomon was not a candidate for suicide."

"His family says the same thing," Bryce said.

"Sometimes it's the gay business," Carlson said.

"But the family knew about that," Bryce said. "The father didn't seem particularly happy about it, but I get no sense that it was a source of major conflict. They love their son, they were prepared to keep him in the family circle regardless."

Stanley said, "And as soon as he wakes up..."

"If he wakes up," Bryce cautioned. "At the moment, he's hanging on by a thread. The doctors aren't enthusiastic. Even if he survives, he may not remember things."

Stanley was devastated by the mere thought of someone so young and beautiful, so obviously full of life, dying—at, he was convinced, the hands of someone else. A murderer. And there was no longer any doubt in his mind that they were dealing with a murderer here at Bartholomew's. A particularly clever and diabolical murderer. Who'd almost been successful again.

"But if someone tried to murder him," Tom said when they were alone, "How did his wannabe killer manage him?"

Someone would have had to half undress him, put him in that bed and turn on the gas. Not to mention, overpower him to start with. David wasn't exactly a burly type, but he wasn't a frail little thing either. Certainly if someone had attacked him, he'd have put up a fight. But I didn't see any bruises or scratches, anything to indicate there had been a struggle. Nobody gets overpowered without some kind of struggle."

Stanley thought of Cyril's fingers at his own throat, demonstrating. *It takes very little to shut off the supply of blood to the brain*, Cyril had said.

"It could be done," Stanley said aloud. "If someone caught him by surprise, someone who knew exactly what to do."

* * * *

By morning, Bartholomew's seemed to have descended into a mood of violent idleness. In one of Life's peculiar coincidences, there were no services scheduled, not even an embalming. Horace Davros announced that he might as well go home. Everyone else stayed, but there was time on their hands.

And much on their minds. Everyone looked askance at one another, each of them clearly wondering who among them was responsible for what had happened. They paced about, drank coffee in the break room, read—but, each of them alone, even when several of them were in the same room together. No one spoke more than was necessary. There was not even any pretense, now, of the camaraderie of which Cyril had once boasted.

Watching them with a sharpened eye, Stanley became aware of something he hadn't noticed before: as handsome as they all were, there was a darkness that had infected each of the directors, maybe the very spirit of Bartholomew's that had settled on them, like coal dust under the fingernails of miners. It was this, he thought, that David had intuited earlier, had tried without success to articulate. He looked at them now and, though there was no question that they were still splendid to look at, he found them oddly less attractive than he had before. They were like glow-worms trailing an artificial light.

While they waited to hear from Bryce, Tom and Stanley did a search of the entire funeral home, without much hope of discovering anything. They asked Cyril to show them every corpse in the place, on the outside chance that someone really might have hidden Alice's body in plain sight.

"Stranger things have happened," Tom said, but none of the corpses looked anything like the missing woman.

"Which, surely," Stanley said when they were finished, "Cyril would have noticed."

"Unless it was Cyril who hid it," Tom pointed out—a possibility which Stanley was not prepared to dismiss.

* * * *

When Bryce called early in the afternoon, in the wake of a long and somber morning, their first thought was that David might have recovered, but Bryce quickly dashed that hope.

"He's still out, but he's doing better. It looks as if he's going to make it."

"Any thoughts on the suicide angle?" Tom asked.

"I don't believe it. Not after the other business. We've reopened the investigation into Percy Bartholomew's death, too. This whole business stinks, if you ask me. And, Tom, there's something else I want to share with you. But, you understand, I'm breaking protocol, just by calling you like this. Even by telling you where I am."

"I understand. Don't sweat it, Bryce, you know I'm not going to tell anyone. What's up? Where are you?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Uh, not anyone, right?"

Uh oh, Tom thought, *he means Stanley*. Bryce was on the make. He was jealous of Stanley. By all rights, he should remind Bryce that he and Stanley were partners, discourage any further interest on his part.

On the other hand—Stanley had the detective's instincts. If this was something important, he'd want to know too. Tom crossed his fingers. "I'll come all alone," he said, which wasn't quite a direct answer. "Where are you?"

"Carlson's downtown. Meantime, I'm on my way to SFO. We found Alice Bartholomew's car."

"I'm right behind you."

* * * *

Of course, he told Stanley first thing, the minute the call was completed "The thing is, baby, he wants me to come by myself. He didn't even want me to tell you. I won't go, though, if it upsets you."

Stanley nodded. "No you go. This is important. I'll stay here. He's got a crush on you, and he's doing us a big favor inviting you to check out the car with him. He's entitled to a little time with you, on his own. That's okay."

"I feel like the prize bull."

"Fine. No stud service, though. That's my exclusive privilege. Just a little play time, and then home. Or, back here. I'm not leaving this dump until I find out what's going on. Someone has got me seriously pissed."

"Uh, what exactly is the pissed Stanley going to do while I'm gone?"

"I don't know. Something. There's something we've missed. I intend to find it."

"Listen, you stay put here, okay? I don't want you wandering off on your own, the way you do. You always get into trouble."

"I won't venture out the door," Stanley said, drawing an X across his heart.

Tom rolled his eyes. "I'll bet," he said.

"Actually, I want to talk to Nancy Latimer again. I think she'll talk more openly if it's just me. Oh, and Tom," Stanley said when Tom was halfway out the door, "limited play, okay? All flies stay fully zipped."

"Right. And your cell phone's charged up?"

"Uh—sure." Had he charged it? Stanley couldn't remember. It wasn't dead, though, he was sure of that.

* * * *

Stanley found Nancy Latimer in the little prayer garden below. She sat without moving on one of the stone benches. Today she wore a voluminous dress the color of her brown hair, its folds all but concealing the bench on which she sat, staring into the shallow, ornamental pond as if she were meditating. To his surprise, she had done something with her face. She'd painted pink lips in the general vicinity of her own, and odd gray stains under her eyes. Far from prettifying her, they made her look like something out of a French farce. Really, the woman was in desperate need of a gay boyfriend.

She looked up as Stanley came out of the building, but she did not look at all surprised to see him. She might even have been waiting for him to join her.

"Mister Korski," was all she said. Murmuring again.

"It was you, wasn't it?" he said without preamble, "you left Carmela's suicide note for us, didn't you?"

She appeared to have anticipated his question. There was neither hesitation nor embarrassment in her response. "Yes. I was the one who found Carmela, when she killed herself."

Stanley sat on another of the benches that ringed the pond. "And she did kill herself, then? You're sure of that?"

"Without any doubt. I found the note, too. I took it before the authorities arrived."

"But, why?"

"I wanted them to think it was murder. I wanted them to investigate. Unfortunately, they found nothing. Even without the note, they concluded that it was suicide all the same."

"But, then, why turn the note over to us, after all this time?"

"It was what your friend said, about two perfect murders, being a terrible coincidence. I thought, if you knew that she had killed herself, then it works the other way, doesn't it? It's the two suicides that become coincidence."

"And so, suspicious."

"Exactly. I wanted you to question whether Percy really did kill himself. I don't believe it. I can't believe it. Percy would never have killed himself. He was murdered. I want you to find out who murdered him."

"How can you be so sure? Did you really know him so well?"

"Percy and I were lovers," she said in a matter of fact way. No murmuring now. She saw how greatly she had surprised him with her statement. "Yes, I know," she said in a bitter voice, "strapping, super-stud Percy, and me. Oh, I know what you're thinking. Good Heavens, I'm not a fool, Mister Korski. You're thinking, *that fat cow*. And he could have anyone he wanted. Did have, practically everyone. I knew about that."

"Some would say that gave you a motive to murder him yourself."

She smiled tolerantly, unoffended by the suggestion. "Jealousy? I felt none. Percy was that kind of man. He needed the variety. More than that, though, I think somewhere inside himself, he thought it was his mission in life, to bring pleasure to as many as he could. Not just the beautiful women—they would be attended anyway, in the natural order of things—but to women like myself, the ones no one else wanted."

"I think you do yourself an injustice," Stanley said, but he knew his voice lacked conviction.

"Do I? I don't think so. I know most men find me grotesque. Fat, middle aged, homely, without even that gift for coquetry that allows some women to overcome their physical disadvantages. But Percy thought I was beautiful." She hesitated for a moment, seeming to consider what she'd just said. "Or, if he didn't, he pretended otherwise. He made me believe otherwise, if only for those brief times in his arms, when we were together. For a woman like myself, a woman who had never known love, not even the romantic trappings of love, that was good enough. I was at his beck and call, his love slave, if you will. I'm not ashamed to call myself that. Oh, it wasn't often and, yes, I knew about the others. He made no secret of them, not with me. He talked about them frankly. Many of them, anyway, though I'm sure not all. They mattered not in the least. Women, men, Percy knew no restraint, his appetites were insatiable."

She turned her head and fastened those sapphire blue eyes on his. "That, Mister Korski, is how I know without a doubt Percy did not kill himself. Putting it in the simplest possible terms, Percy lived to fuck. And he hadn't finished fucking, not by a long shot. Not so long as there was still someone standing that he might yet seduce and hadn't gotten around to. He'd never have thrown in his cards while he had even a chance of taking a trick."

Stanley sat in silence, hardly knowing what he could say. In the pond, a thin, silvery stream of water shot from the mouth of a dolphin. The sun touched the edge of the spray with golden fire. Celestial ejaculate, Chris had once described a fountain like this one to him. He smiled at the memory, and

brought his thoughts quickly back to Percy Bartholomew—and his own, it seemed, heavenly ejaculate. The image he'd pieced together in his mind, of Percy and the kind of man he was, had undergone an enormous shift.

But what kind of man was he, then? A lecher, yes, a satyr, apparently, whose sexual appetites knew no limits—but he had made this woman happy. Perhaps the others as well. He remembered Cyril's comments about his uncle: "His drawers came down for any and all who expressed their need for that sort of comfort, and I'm told it was considerable comfort he offered, too."

Percy hadn't been a particularly good looking man, as he recalled from the photographs he'd seen. But, according to history, neither had Casanova been. What he'd had, apparently, had been the very gift that Nancy had described; he was able to make women feel beautiful.

As if reading his thoughts, Nancy said, apropos of nothing, "He always made me laugh. That is a very precious gift, you know. Women are generally susceptible to a man who can do that. Most men take it all so seriously, bedding women. Most of them take *themselves* so seriously, as if what they've got down there is too precious to be seen as a mere instrument of amusement. But a man who can laugh at himself—who can laugh at the whole sexual folderol—well, it gives it all an entirely different dimension. How can you feel remorse after that, or any sort of guilt? It wasn't as if you were simply fornicating, the way it might be with another man, or worse, worshipping at the Great God Penis. You were having fun. And, if only for a few precious minutes, I was young, I was

slender and desirable, it was my thighs that held the treasure. I don't know if you can appreciate the difference."

"You know," Stanley said, "I think I can."

He was thinking of himself and Tom, of their sexual history together. In the beginning, it had been incredibly hot—in part, of course, knowing that when it came to man on man sex, Tom had been a virgin. And, physically, he was so delectable.

What had surprised him more than anything else, however, as their relationship had progressed and deepened, was how much better the sex had gotten. Each time, it seemed, was better than the last. He hadn't tried to analyze that before, but thinking about it now, he realized it was exactly what she had said: it was more fun. The give and take, the constant teasing. Tom's body was still splendid, his dick still a thing of beauty, but by whatever instinct, Tom knew exactly how to make it fun. With most men, sex and laughter were self canceling. It was a rare man indeed who could make you laugh and make you hot at the same time. Which, he thought, bade very well for their future together. The physical part of it would, inevitably, fade with time—but the rest of it, he thought now, might just get better and better. Happy thought.

He would never in a million years, though, have imagined that Tom and Percy Bartholomew had anything in common, but they did, it seemed, share that rather rare trait.

He and Nancy Latimer sat for a long moment surveying one another, the water gurgling softly in the background. She had a dark blue stole around her shoulders that matched the

color of her eyes, and in them, he thought he caught a glimpse of what Percy must have seen when he looked at his cousin, when he first contemplated the idea of bedding her. She was a person of reserve, she wore a mantle of cold disdain, behind which a woman who knew she was not beautiful—worse, knew, too, that she hadn't the instincts for making herself beautiful—hid her pain. But there was a spark there, in those blue eyes, if you knew to look for it. An ember that smoldered, waiting to be fanned into a flame. That, then, was what Tom must have seen when he looked at her. Percy had seen it too, but it was only a special sort of man who would have noticed. Good Heavens, no wonder she had adored Percy so.

Something else occurred to him then. The Goddess, Nana, Innana, Isis, Ishtar, Ishara, Hawthor—by whatever name, she had been the giver of life, she whom men had worshiped for centuries before the sex change that made Goddess into God. Oddly, though she had been worshiped in places far distant from one another, by tribes who could not possibly have communicated with one another, the representations of her that had come down through the centuries, from Australia, from Africa and Asia, from ancient Briton, were all astonishingly similar—a big woman, wide of hip, full of breast, her very generosity of figure promising something more than mere passing pleasure, promising abundance, fertility—promising the very essence of life itself in its womanness. Perhaps, in his attraction to her, Percy had been responding to some ancient call that reverberated in his blood, some

wisdom inexplicable to the thinking brain but recognized by his genitalia.

How shallow his own thinking had been in comparison, how inane, in supposing that this woman, simply because she was fat and homely, was incapable of knowing passion, lust—real love, even, the same as anyone else. He had been guilty of judging a book by its cover, the dumbest kind of misjudgment. Never mind what the authors wrote. People were the real mystery, weren't they?

"This ring," she said, holding her hand out to show him the ring he'd noticed on her hand before, that she wore on her thumb, a simple band of gold with a square cut Topaz unadorned. "He gave me this. He said it would be my wedding band. Only, I was to wear it on my thumb, and never the ring finger. I'm not sure why he insisted on that, but I did as he wanted."

Stanley remembered then what had teased at his consciousness the first time he had seen the ring on her thumb, the lines from old Ben Jonson: "The thumb, in chiromancy, we give to Venus; the fore-finger to Jove; the midst to Saturn; the ring to Sol; the least to Mercury."

In her earliest depictions, Venus, too, the goddess of the thumb, if you wanted to think of her like that, had been a woman of bountiful proportions. What wisdom was to be gleaned from those old writings.

He got up to go. Before he could do so, however, Nancy surprised him once again.

"She was pregnant," she said out of the blue.

He blinked. It took him a moment to understand. "Alice?"

"Yes. I heard her throwing up mornings. The bathroom in her office, it's right next to mine."

He was still trying to process this new piece of information when she said, "Horace always *said* he wanted children. But Horace is a selfish man." She paused. "All men are, aren't they? But Percy wasn't."

"Still, that's not particularly surprising, is it? Her pregnancy, I mean. Everyone says her husband adored her. Even if her affections were less passionate, she must have loved him as well. She married him, after all..."

"Alice never wanted to marry."

Another zinger. "But, then...?"

"It was Percy. He insisted. He said..." she hesitated, grimaced. "He said it was unnatural for her to remain a spinster. It didn't look good for the family. For the business, he said."

Not for the first time, Stanley felt a pang of sympathy for poor Alice Bartholomew. Had anyone loved her for herself, or had she always been simply a tool to be used to further the designs of the men in her life?

"I want to know who killed Percy," Nancy said again, more emphatically.

"So do I."

Her mis-painted pink lips smiled without amusement, and she abandoned all pretense of whispering now. She spoke in what might have been a normal conversational voice for anyone else. Coming from her, it was nearly akin to a shout.

"No, you don't understand. You don't want to know in the same way I do, Mister Korski. I was born ugly. I grew up fat."

Do you know what it means to a woman, to be ugly all your life, and fat, and then, suddenly, all too briefly, to feel beautiful in here?" She thumped a hand hard against her ample bosom. "With Percy, for those brief moments, those precious moments, I *was* beautiful." Her voice broke, and he thought she might burst into tears, but the deep blue of her eyes flashed with a fire like heat lightning on the western prairie.

"You find out for me. You find out who killed my Percy, and I swear to you, Mister Korski, I swear by all that is holy, I will personally tear him limb from limb with my bare hands."

She raised her hands before her and flexed them as if to demonstrate. The topaz glinted. A single, choked sob, almost a moan, broke from her throat. She fairly spat the rest of her curse at him, "With these *fat* hands."

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Chapter Seventeen

"It's her car," Bryce said. "No question about it. Even got the registration in the glove box."

"So it wasn't really meant to be concealed permanently. Whoever left it here would have known you'd find it eventually," Tom said.

"Right. Like thumbing a nose at us, seems to me."

"Any sign of violence?"

"There's a stain there, on the front seat." His face carefully noncommittal, Bryce pointed at what was little more than a smudge of discoloration on the leather. "Could be blood."

Tom leaned inside the car to look, careful to touch nothing. "That? Could be anything. Some ketchup from a McDonald's dinner."

"Maybe."

"Mostly likely."

The two detectives regarded one another stonily for a moment. "I say we pick up the husband," Bryce said. "Call this a probable. Put him through the mill."

"Can I ride along?"

* * * *

Stanley's cell phone rang. Thinking it might be Tom, he snatched it quickly out of his pocket, but it was a woman's voice on the other end of the line.

"Is this Stanley? Mister Korski?"

The voice was vaguely familiar. "Yes, but who...?"

"It's Molly O'Neil. From Bartholomew's."

"Molly? But how on earth did you get my cell phone number?"

"I got it from Cyril. From his desk, to be honest. I ... Mister Korski ... Alice is here, and..."

"Alice Bartholomew? You've found her? Where is she?"

"We're at the crematorium. Only, she won't speak to me."

"Put her on the phone. Ask if she'll talk to me."

"Yes. I was to ask if you'd come here, you specifically. No, she can't talk to you on the phone. Can you come, please? I beg you, before she disappears again. I think she might. I think you had probably better come, right away."

Stanley hesitated. Tom called him a magnet for trouble. And he had promised he wouldn't go off again on his own.

This wasn't one of those occasions, though. In the past, he had put himself in harm's way. The day he'd gone off alone with his terrorist brother, he ought to have known better, and what a chain of tragedies he had set in motion with that error in judgment.

This was different. Here there was no danger for him, surely, in going to talk with Alice Bartholomew Davros. And, imagine, if he could produce the missing wife ... Tom would be so proud of him, wouldn't he? He'd have a leg up on Inspector Bryce, who obviously had his eyes on Tom. He didn't really think Tom was likely to cheat on him with Bryce, but it couldn't hurt anything to play a trump card.

As for Molly O'Neil—what kind of threat would she be, a wispy old woman? She couldn't hurt a fly.

"Are you going to be there as well?" he asked into the phone.

"Yes. But this is all about Alice, really. About getting you together with her. You can be alone with her if you prefer. If you like, I'll go out, go for a drive."

Alice Bartholomew had been a little woman, too. A sparrow, Cyril had called her. And Molly O'Neil was hardly more robust. What danger could there be from either of them?

"No, that won't be necessary. How do I get there?" he asked. She began giving him instructions. Stanley repeated them aloud, memorizing them.

* * * *

Tom and Bryce checked Horace's house first and, finding no one there, headed for Bartholomew's

He wasn't there, either, though.

"He said he was going home, but his car's in the lot," Cyril said. "He couldn't have gone far, unless ... one of the hearses, maybe. Or a limousine. But I can't think why he'd..."

"Check them," Tom said.

Cyril was back in a moment. "One of the hearses is gone," he said.

"Where would he have gone in a hearse?" Bryce asked.

"I've no idea, really. The crematorium, maybe, but I can't imagine why. We don't have anything scheduled there. We haven't used it in ages."

"I want to see his office," Bryce said.

"He keeps it locked when he's not here," Cyril said.

"Unlock it."

* * * *

The white bed sheet on the floor of the closet clinched it for Tom. "The night Stanley was attacked, his assailant was wearing a white sheet," Tom said, holding it up. "Speaking of which," he turned to Cyril, "where is Stanley? He's still around, isn't he?"

It had not escaped Tom's notice that Cyril had been cool of late toward Stanley. It had made him suspicious of Cyril, who looked around the office now as if expecting to see Stanley hiding behind a chair.

"The last I saw him," Cyril said in a not very interested tone of voice, "he was talking to Nancy, Miss Latimer, in the meditation garden."

Tom felt an all too familiar sinking in the pit of his stomach. This was so like Stanley. He always thought he could resolve things on his own, and he always walked right into some kind of disaster.

"An absolute magnet for trouble," he muttered under his breath. Bryce at his heels, he went in search of Nancy Latimer and found her at her desk.

"He got a call from Molly O'Neil," Nancy said. "She asked him to come to Colma, to the crematorium."

"Did she say why?"

Nancy shrugged. "He didn't tell me and I only heard his end of the conversation. Something about Alice, is all I can say. I know that's where he was going simply because she

gave him instructions, and I heard him repeat them. Then he dashed out the door. I'd guess that's where you'll find him."

"That's where Horace is going then," Tom said to Bryce. "Let's go."

"Wait." Nancy closed her eyes, the way people do when they want to be sure they hear clearly, though Tom wasn't sure what she was listening to. Not, he thought, what he'd said. She tilted her head back, rapt. For a second or two the room was so still you could have heard a leaf fall. He could almost see the gears turning inside her head.

"Horace?" she asked in that whispery voice. "What's he got to do with anything?"

"He's missing too," Tom said. "Along with one of the hearses."

Her eyes flew open as suddenly as if a firecracker had just gone off. "That bed sheet—where did you get it?"

Tom had forgotten the sheet he still carried in his hand. He looked at it, almost surprised to see it there. "It was in Horace's closet. Stanley said the person who attacked him in the hall that night was..."

She didn't wait to hear the rest. Her eyes narrowed and her nostrils seemed to flare, like she'd just smelled something rotten. "It's Horace, isn't it? He's the one you've been looking for. The one who killed Percy."

"We don't actually know..."

Nancy had already formed her own conclusions. "It makes sense. Yes, Horace. He would be the one. I think I've always suspected. The slime." She got up and came purposefully around the desk, moving faster than they would have

expected for a woman of her bulk. "Take me with you," she said.

"Tom," Bryce said, "you know I can't. Civilians..."

"I made your friend Stanley a promise," she said, speaking directly to Tom and ignoring Bryce. "I told him if he found the man who killed Percy, I would tear him limb from limb with my own hands. I'm begging you, please. Let me come with you." When they still hesitated, she added, in a determined voice, "If you don't, I'll just go anyway, in my own car. You can't stop me. Besides, I'll probably get there before you. I know the way. You don't."

Tom looked hard at her, at Bryce, and back at Nancy. "Let's go," he said again, and to Bryce, "it'll be faster with someone to show us the way."

* * * *

The crematorium was in a cemetery in Colma. Huge wrought iron gates were open when Stanley drove up to them. Inscribed above the left hand gate in tall, gilt letters was Le Fontane, and over the right gate, for those whose Italian might be inadequate for the translation, The Fountains.

There was no one to be seen. A perfectly raked drive of white gravel, glittering brightly in the sunlight, led straight into the cemetery, past two enormous fountains; dolphins cavorted, reminding him of the pool at Bartholomew's, and sprayed water twenty feet or so into the air, leaving little rainbows in their wake.

A short distance along the drive a sign said crematorium, and pointed to a road to the right. Stanley followed that, past another, somewhat smaller fountain, this one of mermaids, water running into their cupped hands and trickling down their scale covered bodies.

The crematorium sat in a little dale, so that he was almost upon it before he saw it—an elaborate pseudo Greek temple, ringed with Doric columns, and wide, shallow stairs that led to profusely carved bronze doors. Stanley parked in the lot. A nondescript Toyota sat a few spaces away, and beyond that, at the very end of the parking lot, a hearse. Why a hearse, he wondered, if the crematorium was no longer in use? Or maybe it was left here. Presumably a cemetery in Colma would be a safe place to park a vehicle. Anyway, he didn't suppose hearses were high up on the desirable list of car thieves.

The bronze doors were slightly ajar. Stanley mounted the stairs, pushed the doors wider and called, "Hello, Mrs. O'Neil? Molly?"

There was no answer. He stepped into a small foyer. It was empty now of furnishings, but patches on the pink brocade of the wallpaper showed where paintings had hung previously, and impressions in the thick beige carpeting showed him where furnishings had stood before the room was stripped. Settee there, table beside it, chair, chair, settee, table—a gathering place for mourners, before they moved on to the room where the services would be held. It must have been elegant once, but it looked forlorn now, the wallpaper

and the carpet splotched with rain damage, the air sour with mold and mildew.

"Molly? Alice?"

Light flickered beyond an open archway. He went to it and stood in the opening, surveying the room. It looked much like the slumber rooms at Bartholomew's; more pink brocade and soiled carpeting, a small semicircle of chairs facing a lectern where presumably a minister could perform a memorial service. A plain wooden casket sat atop a conveyor belt that ran along one wall, disappearing through metal gates. Leading, he supposed, to the furnace. There was even a spray of pink and red flowers, proud looking gladioli, in a white maché. The casket and the flowers puzzled him, though. Cyril had told him the crematorium was no longer in use. Whose funeral was this, then?

On the opposite wall, massed candles, so many of them they made the air pungent with their smoke, burned atop an antique Italian credenza, the only other furniture in the room. The candle flames danced in the breeze from the open door.

An array of framed photographs was interspersed among the burning tapers, crowding the surface of the credenza. A green and black marble urn sat in the center of the display, dominating it, and next to it stood a large eight by twelve photograph in an elaborate shell and rattan frame. Stanley stared for a moment at the photo claiming pride of place. Surely he knew the woman in the photograph.

He crossed the room, circling the backs of the chairs, and picked up the shell encased photo to look more closely at it. Yes, his initial guess had been right, it was a picture of Alice

Davros; not the same one Cyril had shown him, the grim wedding picture with her husband, but a snapshot of her alone that had been blown up to portrait size, blurring it somewhat. Behind her, sand and ocean waves, a glimpse of some beach shacks. Baja, he thought, Ensenada, maybe.

Alice was prettier here than she had been in the other picture, though, perhaps because the blur had softened her somewhat angular features, and no doubt also because she was smiling. She had been described to him as fey and fragile, and she looked both. Her smile was tentative, but hopeful, as if she had somehow sensed the importance of the moment, that this click of the camera would be her immortality.

He set the photo in its frame back where it had been and looked left and right. All of the pictures, he saw now, were of Alice. There again was the wedding picture, in a plain cardboard frame, and scattered around it a dozen or more smaller photos in cheap dime store metal.

It had the look of a shrine, enhanced by all those flickering candles. And there, in front of the shell-framed photograph, was something he recognized instantly, though in fact he had never actually seen it before: the emerald lavalier Alice wore in her wedding picture. Looking again at the pictures, he could see it in every one.

But, if Alice were here, wouldn't she be wearing it now? Cyril had told him she wore it all the time.

He picked it up, feeling almost guilty. The green depths of the stone winked at him in the wavering candlelight, as if in conspiracy. He couldn't begin to imagine what it must be

worth. Emeralds were perhaps the most expensive of all the precious gems, out costing rubies, even, and diamonds by far. Six figures, certainly, and not the low six figures, either. Its value intimidated him. He felt almost guilty, holding something so precious in his hands as if it were a mere bauble.

He placed it on the credenza again and stared at the urn of marble next to the photograph, its veins of deep green seeming to reflect the light from the emerald's depths. Surely, this couldn't be ... He lifted the lid with a trembling hand and poked one timorous finger inside. Ashes. Human ashes?

"Yes," a voice said behind him, making Stanley start so violently that he dropped the urn's lid with a bang, "that's her."

Stanley whirled about to find Horace Davros standing in the door from the hallway. He hadn't heard him approach. Had he been in the house all along, and just ignored Stanley's shouted greetings?

"Alice?"

Davros nodded and gave him a sad smile. "Yes. Shocking, isn't it, to what a human form is reduced. A woman who once lived and breathed, who was loved. Now only a handful of dust, and a collection of photographs tended by the man who loved her."

He came to where Stanley stood, picked up the lid and replaced it gently on the urn. "And these," he said, indicating the photographs, "all my memories."

"But, how..." Stanley stammered, momentarily at a loss for words. "Molly said she was here."

"As she is." Horace waved his long fingers in the direction of the urn. "Careless Molly, she simply neglected to tell you Alice is dead."

"What, then...? Are you telling me you killed her? Alice?"

"No. Oh, in a way, yes, I suppose you could say I did. It was I who strangled her, I who burned her body, who reduced her to those ashes. Not just now, of course. This was weeks ago." He ran his fingers lovingly along one side of the urn, and turned owlish eyes on Stanley, his expression ineffably sad.

"But really, you know, it was her brother who killed her. That damage was done long before I came on the scene. I can't be blamed for that."

"Percy? But, everyone says he loved her too."

His laugh was sardonic. "Yes, indeed, loved her too. Loved her too much, would be the better description. Loved her in a way a brother isn't meant to love his sister. Loved her to death, you might say."

Stanley felt something rise up in his gorge. He should have guessed ... maybe on an instinctive level, he had known all along that this was where the story of Alice Bartholomew and her brother was leading.

"Incest," he said simply.

"Yes. From the time they were very young, apparently. Percy was quite without morals, Alice totally under his sway. It had gone on for years, their guilty secret. Even after he

married. It drove his wife to suicide, when she finally realized the truth—but not until after she had married the man."

"Carmela? Her death really was suicide, then?"

"In a sense, Percy could have been said to kill her, too. He drove her to it, certainly. Poor Carmela, she had no idea what was going on when she married him; and when she found out, she went nearly crazy. What was she to do? Who would believe her? And even if they did, think of the damage that would have followed its being revealed. Bartholomew's, destroyed. Her husband, her own life, the life of her child, all ruined. Worse, he made it clear to her that he had no intention of ceasing the affair. It was something she would just have to learn to live with.

"She must have seen cutting her wrists in a bathtub as by far the lesser of evils. And he encouraged her to think that. He laughed when he told me how insistently and cleverly he had planted the idea in her mind. There was another solution, he told her. She needn't suffer the indignity, the humiliation. She wasn't a strong woman, Carmela, not mentally, nor emotionally. He'd picked her for a wife in large part because of that. Not a very bright woman, either. I think he thought when he married her that she'd never tumble to it."

"How did she?"

"She found them together. In a situation that left little in question, even to a dim-witted woman."

"He admitted this to you?"

The smile this time was rather self-satisfied. "Yes. Things came to, I suppose you would say, came to a head. I hadn't known either, at first, when I married Alice, and I was far

from dim-witted. Besotted, however. Yes, most surely besotted. I did love her. She insisted she loved me—oh, it was not a passionate love, I knew that even before we married. She wasn't a passionate woman. Or at least, so I thought. Though obviously there was more passion in her than I would have guessed"

"Then, how did you learn the truth?"

"I overheard something. One of those evil queens at the mortuary. A remark about Alice and her two husbands. I ignored it initially, the suggestion. But how do you resist that kind of poison once you've been infected, how do you drive a suspicion like that out of your mind? I began to watch them together—all the little things they did, the glances, the clandestine touches. When you love someone, you find that you can read those signs like reading the tarot. It was obvious, the truth of their relationship, if one only watched them together. His dominance of her. The way she clung to him and yet, she seemed almost embarrassed by him. It was like reading a book."

"But you never confronted them?"

"I chose to ignore it. I loved Alice, hard as that may be to imagine. And I wanted the marriage, the money, a place at Bartholomew's. I knew already that Percy was planning to sell the business, Alice had discussed that with me. I would get a large slice of the pie when that happened. I could afford to turn a blind eye to their disgusting behavior. It didn't stop my loving her, ever. But that didn't stop the poison either, it didn't clean it from my mind, from my blood. Once you are infected..."

"Love's dark side."

"Exactly. No matter how much one may desire to cherish and protect, there is something in a man, in his love, that makes him wound, too. The poets, the great lovers, have always known that."

"But, why murder them? You wanted the money. Percy was ready to sell. You'd have gotten your share of the proceedings. You'd tolerated this ménage à trois this long, why end it now?"

"Alice didn't want to sell. She was adamant about it. She told him he would sell Bartholomew's over her dead body. Her remark planted the seed in my mind. It was then that I saw what must be done. And as it happens, he gave her a very powerful trump card: she had discovered she was pregnant. Not, as it happened, with my child. We hadn't slept together since our wedding night, and that foray was sufficiently unsuccessful enough, not to say humiliating, to convince both of us it needn't be repeated."

"Percy's child?" Stanley could not help a frisson of revulsion that went through him.

"Yes, indeed. A pretty state of affairs, wasn't it? There she was, knocked up, and by her own brother. I don't suppose it would have been the same sort of scandal that it might have been years earlier, but it would have been enough, surely, to close down Bartholomew's. Who would have patronized a funeral home run by a pair of fornicating siblings? They might sing of that in a Wagnerian opera, but in real life, people are less forgiving. We'd have lost everything, all of us. He knew that better than anyone. So they had no choice but to come

to me, to plead for my connivance. They wanted to insure that I would claim the baby as my own. No one needed to know, as Percy put it bluntly to me, that there was anything at all untoward about the pregnancy."

"And you were revolted by the suggestion?"

"Absolutely. Of course, I told them I would have to think about it. And then, as soon as we were alone, I strangled my wife, and made up that business of her running off. I brought her here. No one uses this anymore, not since the last earthquake. It isn't safe, really. So there was no risk of my being caught. And such a convenient way to dispose of a body. Only, I couldn't bring myself to dispose of her lavalier too. I kept it."

"It's worth a fortune."

"I didn't keep it for its monetary value. Purely for sentimental reasons." His voice lacked sincerity. Stanley thought he was very much aware of the emerald's monetary value.

"You must have known it would one day give you away."

"Oh, I don't normally keep it here. Usually, it's locked in the safe in my office. I left it here today for you to see. I thought you would appreciate its beauty. But, of course, once I'd disposed of Alice, I had to kill Percy as well, and right away. He'd certainly have known the story of her running away was a lie."

"So you arranged to have a drink with him."

"Yes. In his office, before he even knew of her disappearance, I told him I wanted to discuss some details. I drugged him, just enough Nembutal in his brandy to put him

to sleep. Everyone knew Percy indulged in drink and drugs. Once he was asleep, I had only to administer the lethal dose, and leave him in his office, with the evidence of his suicide."

"And the note. 'there are some betrayals that only death can atone.' Her betrayal of you?"

"With her brother, yes. His betrayal, too, of her, of her innocence. Percy had much to answer for, don't you agree?"

"I suppose. Still, you made yourself judge and jury. Is that any less evil?"

To Stanley's surprise, he laughed. "And executioner. If you're going to condemn me, don't, please, forget that part of it. That was the only part, after all, in which I took any pleasure."

"All of it simply to avenge your wounded ego. You murdered your wife, the woman you claim to have loved, because she'd made a childish mistake? And David Solomon? What had he done to you?"

"He had the misfortune to catch me in the act. I wanted to convince everyone that the only solution was to sell Bartholomew's. I was destroying one of the slumber rooms when he came in."

"And for that, you thought he had to die?"

He fairly snarled. "It must be very comforting, Mister Korski, to see everything in such moralistically black and white tones. That's the trouble today, in my opinion. People have no will to do. They think doubting is making a decision. A bunch of milquetoasts, can't come up with a good reason for blowing their noses. The spectators never won a fight, you know."

"You think killing people is the same as blowing one's nose?"

"I told you earlier, it's different for those who do my kind of work, the whole life and death business. When she was dead, Alice was no longer my wife, no longer his incestuous mistress. She was just dead. My qualms of conscience, such as they were, died with her. As for Percy, I suffered no pangs when I killed him. The world would have been a better place if someone had done so years sooner. His sister would have been a better person. She might even have known happiness instead of the suffocating guilt with which she lived. His wife might be alive, or perhaps she would have found real happiness with someone else, someone less poisonous. As for that young man..." He shrugged. "It had to be done."

"And you feel no regret for any of this? No guilt? No shame?"

"I felt regret that the young man did not die as I had planned. And I felt shame for Percy and Alice, certainly. What they did was an abomination. It was foul. When once you have looked upon your own face plain, life loses much of its appeal. It had for Alice. I am convinced of that. I believe she was grateful to me. It is degrading to face what is in one's own heart. That is why we have bodies, so our souls can be hidden in them. I believe the Calvinists were right, though. There is no free will. It's all pre-ordained. I couldn't have done things any differently, could I?"

Stanley thought that was nothing more than an easy excuse for one's actions, though he did not say so aloud. Something else occurred to him then. "Where's Molly O'Neil?"

he asked, looking past Horace as if he expected to see her standing there. "She's the one who called me and asked me to come here."

"Yes, I asked her to do so. Money. Poor Molly, that's all she could think of, was money. I simply promised her a very generous payment, and she was happy to do anything I wanted."

"But, where...?"

"You walked right past her," Horace said, looking over his shoulder as well. Stanley followed the direction of his gaze, to the casket and the flowers. "Yes. That's her."

"You killed her?"

"She'd served her purpose."

"And I suppose you thought that was pre-ordained, too?"

For an answer, Horace surprised Stanley with a question of his own. "Have you ever seen a cremation, Stanley?"

"No," Stanley said. "I don't think I..."

"It's quite instructive, really. One of those things you never forget once you've witnessed it."

He reached for the wall behind him, and flipped a switch. The conveyor belt began to move, the casket inching toward the metal gates at its far end.

Stanley looked toward the door to the outside, wondering if he could get past Horace to reach it. Horace was taller than he was, and his wiry body looked strong. His oversized hands displayed no tremor now. He looked like a feral animal—and dangerous. He had already killed—how many?

As if reading his mind, Horace said, "Let me ask you another question. Have you ever killed anyone, Mister Korski?"

Stanley shuddered involuntarily. This was too close to the dark thoughts that had plagued him since that fateful moment in Tom's hospital room.

"Yes," he said simply. He was not going to entertain Horace Davros with confessions of his grief.

Horace seemed surprised by the affirmative answer. "How intriguing, I would never have guessed. There must be an interesting story there."

"Not so interesting."

"Ah." Davros nodded as if he understood everything. "Well, then, did you pray, when you did it?"

"When killing somebody? What prayer could you offer that wouldn't be some kind of obscenity?"

Horace thought for a moment, and shrugged. "I should think for some it would be an act of mercy. But perhaps you're right. Come with me."

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Chapter Eighteen

The casket had reached the end of the conveyor belt. It shoved its way through the metal gates, rocking briefly as if on the tip of a precipice, and vanished from view with a little thump.

Horace indicated a door next to the opening through which it had disappeared. "You'll find this a memorable experience. You may even find you want to pray after all." He paused. "Unless, of course, you're frightened." He raised one eyebrow, his expression mocking.

Stanley was, but he didn't want to admit that. He took a moment to consider everything Horace had told him. He couldn't imagine for a minute that Horace had made this confession expecting Stanley to walk out of the crematorium unharmed. Horace certainly meant to kill him as he had killed the others.

For the moment, though, he was still alive. He had learned in previous cases that no matter how bleak things appeared to be, the old cliché was still true: where there was life, there was hope. He remembered the cell phone in his pocket. It needed only a moment of distraction ... and, he thought Horace actually wanted him to be afraid, that he was the sort who enjoyed making others fear him.

He was suddenly conscious of the smell, that smell, that had so insulted his nostrils that day in the embalming room. Was it really here, too, in the crematorium? Or did it cling to

Horace, permeating his clothes, his skin, even. Or was it only in his imagination? The mind played tricks.

"No, I'm not afraid," he lied, and was surprised to realize how convincing he sounded. "This way?"

"Yes," Horace said. "The show's about to begin."

He ushered Stanley through the door to another room. No wallpaper or carpeting here, only bare concrete floors and a ceiling with steel beams. In the middle of the room and taking up most of the space was the crematory itself, an enormous incinerator sheathed in sheet metal. It might have been a giant kiln, or the furnace of a large apartment building.

The casket, still on its conveyor belt, had paused outside a steel door in the crematory. Horace raised the door with a chain and sprocket pulley. Blistering waves of heat poured into the room from within the furnace. He touched another switch, and the casket again moved forward and fell with a thump onto the firebrick floor within the furnace.

Horace lowered the door with a clang and a clatter. The controls sat on a small console just to the side of the door. He stood before them and worked a valve. They heard a little explosion within the furnace as the fire ignited, followed by a prolonged hiss of a gas jet.

"Come," he said. He put a hand on Stanley's shoulder and guided him to one of two porthole-like windows in the side of the crematory. Stanley stared through it with morbid fascination, wanting to see and not wanting to see at the same time, while Horace adjusted the controls.

As Stanley stared through the glass, fire filled the interior of the furnace, dancing and leaping and looking like

something from the end of time, hellish tongues of flame that had already in those few seconds charred the wood of the coffin, peeling it away from itself like the rind being stripped from a burning orange.

"At first, we use gas," Horace explained, speaking in a monotone as if he were lecturing a roomful of students. And perhaps, Stanley thought, he had done that in the past. "We need to build the heat up to a thousand degrees or so. Then we introduce the oil. In the old days, they used the oil alone, but it makes smoke. When folks see the smoke coming out of the chimney, they complain, they think they can smell the bodies burning, although of course they can't. So, we use gas to begin, and the science, the art if you will, is in getting just the right blend when we introduce the oil. Enough heat, and no smoke."

Stanley wanted to look away from the inferno beyond the thick glass of the window, but his eyes remained riveted. He started when the lid of the coffin suddenly seemed to vanish. One minute it was still there, charred but intact, and the next, the lid and the sides as well just disappeared, consumed by the fire, and there was the body of Molly O'Neil. Or so he supposed. Already, it would have been impossible to say for certain.

Stanley's gut turned over. He wanted to look away, and found that he couldn't. Some horrible fascination held him in thrall. It was like watching one of the old horror movies as a child; you knew what was coming, you wanted to look away or close your eyes, but you continued to gape at the screen regardless.

"I'm going to turn on the oil now and shut off the gas," Horace said, in his same matter-of-fact voice. "In no time flat, the heat will reached twenty-five hundred degrees or more. It will burn up everything. There will be nothing left. Oh, maybe a few bone chips. Insignificant, really."

He adjusted his valves and the flames became more yellow than red. Stanley glanced sideways at Horace. He was rapt, his attention fully engaged in the display within. He appeared to be enjoying himself immensely.

"Ah," he said, with a note of satisfaction.

Stanley looked through the porthole again. The flesh had all but burned away from the body within, revealing the bones beneath. They looked eerily white and clean. The ribs seemed to dance as he watched, violet colored fingers of flame jetting from their tips.

Suddenly the skull fell free, dropped to the floor and rolled underneath Stanley's window. A trail of something he did not even want to put a name to escaped from its sockets and sizzled briefly on the floor. Molly O'Neil—what was left of her—seemed to leer up at Stanley accusingly. He put a hand out to one metal-sheathed wall to steady himself. The bones beyond the window had begun to crumble now. Even the skull had disappeared.

"Molly's gone, Stanley," Horace said, his voice sounding to Stanley as if it came from a great distance. "There's nothing left of her, nothing at all, nothing that you could really call Molly. It's as if she never even existed."

"Ashes," Stanley said around the bile rising in his mouth.

"Those? Just soot. Really. It's the perfect way to dispose of a body. Remember that the next time you kill someone. Afterward, there's no way, even, to say who it had been."

"No DNA?"

"Not in that." He made a dismissive gesture toward the furnace. "Just a few oxides. Oxides of sodium, potassium, calcium, iron, a trace of magnesium. All of it inorganic. All the organic matter has burned away. The DNA with it."

Stanley might have fallen, his legs had grown so weak. "Ah, now, no fainting," Horace said. He stepped quickly behind Stanley. "It had to be, you see. No one will know what happened to her. This too was pre-ordained. Molly had to disappear, once she'd served her purpose. She just vanished, the same way Alice vanished. Here one moment and, the next, poof."

Stanley didn't need to point out that he knew what had happened to Molly. Almost certainly Horace did not intend to leave him behind as a witness.

"I don't..." Stanley said, starting to turn around, and saw that Horace had a small bottle in one hand and a cloth in the other. Stanley tried to step back, but he was against the metal wall of the furnace, nowhere to go, and he felt weak from what he had just witnessed.

Horace moved quickly. He clamped the damp cloth, smelling sickly sweet, over Stanley's mouth and nose.

Ether. Stanley gasped, surprised, and in doing so breathed deeply. He felt as if his lungs were suddenly on fire. He brought his own hands up, trying to claw at the hands holding the cloth to his face, but he had reacted too slowly and the

ether was acting too swiftly. Already the room was beginning to darken. In another moment, his legs gave out, and he sank into the arms waiting for him.

* * * *

"How much further?" Tom asked. They had just exited the two-ten, drove now through a world of car lots, of strip malls and curio stores. The street traffic was thick and aggressive, the sidewalks naked of pedestrians.

"Ten miles, more or less," Nancy said from the back seat. "Left here, then right at the next light."

Bryce, driving, glanced sideways at Tom. "Siren?"

"No. Not yet. Might be better if we arrive unannounced. We don't want to panic him into action." Or was he making the right decision? Tom's gut ate at him. What if they were wrong altogether? What if Nancy Latimer had misunderstood the conversation she'd heard? Or, maybe Stanley had come here, and then gone somewhere else, been taken somewhere else by Horace, in the missing hearse? No way to know till they got there. Nine miles, now, nine and a half maybe...

"Take a right here," Nancy said.

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Chapter Nineteen

Stanley woke slowly. Even when his eyes fluttered reluctantly open, he was still in darkness, total darkness. He lay for a moment, trying to comprehend, blinking. No glimmer of light penetrated the enveloping blackness. He'd never seen a darkness so complete.

He tried to sit up, but he could raise his head only slightly before it banged against something solid above him. He could barely move at all, in fact.

His hands were folded across his chest. He put them out to his sides. Again, he could move them no more than an inch or two before his fingertips touched cushioned silk. He reached up, and felt silk there too.

At first, he could not understand. Or, would not. The reality of his situation was so horrible, his mind did not want to accept it. He lay unmoving, trying not to think, trying not to accept the truth of where he so obviously was.

Recognition would not stay away, however. He knew. Knew and did not want to accept the truth. He was in a coffin. His breath seemed to crowd into his throat. This couldn't be real. Surely it was only a nightmare, from which he would awaken any minute now.

"Wake up, Stanley," he told himself, actually mouthing the words aloud. "Wake up, damn you. Now."

Even as he said the words, however, he knew this was no figment of his dreams.

Deadly Slumber
by V.J. Banis

He lifted his shaking hands again, tried to shove the lid away, but it did not budge. Not just in a coffin, then—*sealed* in a coffin.

* * * *

Calm, Stanley, calm, just stay calm.

He told himself this over and over again, until his breath returned to something approximating normal and his heart had stopped threatening to pound its way out of his chest.

The coffin began to move, swaying slightly from side to side. He puzzled over that for a second or two before he realized it was being lifted. A moment later, it was dropped roughly and came to rest. He tried to imagine where. Still at the crematorium, surely. Horace didn't lure him here just to transport him somewhere else. But, where at the crematorium? Inside the furnace? He shuddered at the prospect.

As if he knew Stanley had regained consciousness, Horace spoke from outside, his voice muffled by the wood and silk, but the words distinguishable nevertheless.

"Sorry to leave you alone for a bit," he said, "but I have things to clean up here. Mustn't leave Alice for someone else to discover."

"Horace, you monster," Stanley shouted, hoping he would be heard as well, "let me out of here."

There was no reply.

* * * *

Horace used the hose from outside to wash down the parlor, lest he left any clues behind. He didn't have to worry about ruining the carpet. The place leaked now when it rained. Who would know the difference? Anyway, the furnace was burning and he meant to leave it that way. It was not unlikely it would eventually explode, burn the crematorium down.

* * * *

As if he meant to ration the air, Stanley found his breathing grow shallower. For a few seconds, he actually caught himself holding his breath—which was silly, how long could he do that?

Horace was going to roast him like a chestnut, just as he'd done with Alice and Molly O'Neil. The perfect way to dispose of a corpse. What was left afterward but a few grams of ashes, like Alice's in that urn? Horace had kept those, but ashes could easily be tossed anywhere, impossible then to recover. *He certainly isn't likely to keep mine.*

Stanley's mind was racing. He wished he had his gun with him. It would be easy enough to shoot at Horace through the lid if he tried to move the coffin again. Killing Horace at this point wasn't going to prey on his conscience the way killing his brother had. He no longer carried the little Beretta with him, though, had felt sure he'd never want to use it again.

But ... he blinked into the darkness. His cell phone. Had Horace taken that? If he could reach it ... there was so little room in which to maneuver his hands—easier to lift them up than to move them at his sides. He pushed against the silk

lining with his elbows, struggling to bring his hands up to his pockets. His shoulders felt as if they were being dislocated by the effort. His elbows strained against the walls of the coffin.

At last, an eternity later, his fingers brushed the outline of the cell phone in his right pocket. Yes. There it was. Now if he could just get it out of the pocket. He pushed against it, working it upward, slowly upward with the tips of his fingers.

Finally, the phone slid out of the pocket. He tried to clasp it in his trembling fingertips but it slipped away and dropped to his side. He felt for it, straining his shoulders still further. Again his fingers brushed the sleek plastic surface of the phone. He fumbled, managing at last to get hold of it. He lifted it gingerly above him.

When he flipped the lid open, the light from its face blinded him after the complete darkness. He blinked, squinting, trying to adjust his eyes.

The battery was low. He cursed himself for not keeping it charged up, and hit the "contacts" button, praying that the power lasted. He'd call Tom. Tom would...

Wait. Tom would what? Rescue him? Of course he would—but look what happened the last time Tom had to come save his butt. He couldn't do that again, couldn't put Tom through another ordeal.

Of course, this time there was no fire, so ... or, wait, yes, there was, the fire from Hell.

Only, how would Tom get burned in that? *I'm the one who's going to get turned into charcoal.*

But, what if somehow ... No, he couldn't. He wouldn't. He'd rather lie here sealed in this wooden box until it traveled along the conveyor belt and dropped into the furnace...

On the other hand, he absolutely did have to tell Tom about Horace...

* * * *

"Stanley, where the hell are you?"

"I'm in a b-box, Tom, in a c-coffin."

"What?! Where?"

"Oh, never mind about that, it's not important, he's just going to burn me alive, is all, but it's my own fault and I don't want you to do anything about it, honest. I'll just have to take what's coming to me, however awful, I mean, truly awful it may be. I called because you need to know about Horace, he killed his wife, plus he killed Percy, and..."

"Stanley, for Christ's sake, you can tell me all this later, where are you?"

"At the crematorium. In Colma, I think, but don't worry yourself about..." The phone slipped out of Stanley's fingers.

"Crap," he swore aloud. It bounced off his chest, slid down his side.

He fumbled again, wriggling about as best he could, all but wrenching his shoulders out of their sockets. He got his hand on the phone again, lifted it ... and found that the battery had gone dead.

* * * *

Horace finished hosing the interior down, dragged the hose back outside. He'd closed the cemetery gates and locked them, so no one would intrude before he was done. He would leave by a little used back exit mostly known only to the cemetery's workmen.

Molly's car was parked a half mile away, alongside a patch of older graves. In time, they'd find it, but it would tell them nothing. Molly was gone, simply vanished. There was nothing to connect her to him. He'd even scattered her ashes among those gravestones. The wind would disburse them. No one would find them.

He'd kept Alice's ashes, though. He couldn't bear the thought of parting with them, not just yet. They, and everything he'd brought here with him, were stowed in the hearse. He'd leave for Mexico directly from here. He'd made all his plans already, had a house waiting just outside Ensenada. Maybe he would scatter her ashes there. They'd gone to Ensenada on their honeymoon. She'd been happy there; or at least, he thought she had been, although in time he'd come to realize he really didn't know Alice at all.

Of course, by leaving, he'd forfeit the money he had hoped to get from the sale of Bartholomew's, but the failure of young David Solomon's murder meant he could not stay here. David had seen his face. If the boy recovered consciousness...

Anyway, he had the emerald. Even sold on the cheap, that would keep him for years in Mexico. And the money he'd long been siphoning from Alice's bank account. He'd be fine. More importantly, he'd be alive.

Just before he left he would move Stanley's car behind the crematorium. They'd find it in time, but what did that matter? By then, they'd have deduced what had happened to him. They might suspect him, most certainly would if that Jew boy survived to tell his tale. But it would all be too late.

He went back inside. The casket with Stanley in it was on the conveyor belt that would carry it into the next room, to the furnace. The furnace was already burning, its door standing open, the heat pouring from it in great, stifling waves. The casket would fall directly inside, into the waiting fire.

"Might as well do the whole number," he said. He put the flowers he'd brought for Molly on the belt with Stanley's coffin. Smirking to himself, he switched on the music. A mournful organ piece wafted from the speakers in the wall. It might have been Bach, but water had leaked into the tape deck and the speed was off, the music too distorted to quite identify. The organ sounded more like the moans of the ghostly dead. Still, he doubted Stanley would notice.

A few more minutes, and his work here would be finished, and he'd be on his way, long before anyone turned their attention to him. He had only to throw a switch, start the conveyor belt moving. All his problems would be gone, up in smoke.

He began to hum along with the off pitch organ.

* * * *

"We were right," Tom said, "Horace is our murderer. His wife. Percy, too." Even with the noise in the car, he could

hear the loud intake of Nancy's breath. She leaned forward in her seat. "And he intends Stanley to be next, if we don't get there in time. I think we need the siren now."

Bryce flipped it on. It was a modern unit, going from a whoop, whoop, whoop to a digital cackling, to a whock, whock, whock in random sequence.

"Light," Bryce said.

Tom took the red bubble light off the dash, lowered the window, and slapped it on the roof. With the siren and the flashing light, traffic began to part for them. Bryce jammed the accelerator down hard.

"How much further?" Tom twisted in his seat to look at Nancy. Her face was set in a grim expression, her eyes wide, her breathing fast and excited. She looked, he thought, like some avenging demon from hell. If she got her hands on Horace Davros, she very well might rip him limb from limb the way she'd threatened. And if Davros had harmed Stanley, he would let her. Would even help.

"Half a mile," she said. "Those big gates up there on the left."

* * * *

What is this world? What asketh man to have? Now with his love, now in his colde grave, Alone, with-outen any companye

The darkness, the lingering effects of the ether, the horror of his situation ... Stanley's mind began to close down. Not sleep, exactly, but not quite a conscious state, either.

Deadly Slumber
by V.J. Banis

He heard, incongruously, the soft murmur of a fountain, or was he only imagining it, a distant, faint song of water splashing upon itself. It called to his mind the meditation garden at Bartholomew's. He saw the Triton from the pond there, as clearly as if it were in the coffin with him. The demi-god was no longer marble, though, and not quite flesh, either, but something in between the two that glowed in the darkness. And the water came not from dolphins, but from the Triton's erect, massive phallus, jetting out of the glans like a monstrous orgasm. Kneeling below him, a satyr opened his mouth to receive the spewing tribute that overran his lips, his beard, ran down across his shoulders, his shaggy chest. Spilling into a basin in which two pretty young boys cavorted, delighting in the silvery cascade falling about them; and down still further the water ran, overflowing a great chalice, running down the legs of the slaves who held it, down, down, down...

Overwhelmed by darkness and by terror, Stanley sank into something very near to a coma.

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Chapter Twenty

"The gates are closed," Bryce said unnecessarily, the big Crown Vic rocking wildly as he slid into a turn. "Would they be locked?" He glanced over his shoulder at Nancy. "Have you got a key?"

"Fuck it. Hit them," Nancy shouted, pounding a fist on the seatback.

"Hit 'em," Tom echoed.

Bryce did. The police car hit the gates like a torpedo, ripping them off their hinges and sending them flying. He kept the pedal crushed to the floor and turned off the siren.

"Take a right, first road," Nancy said, hanging onto her seatbelt and sliding across the seat as the car rocked.

They skidded wide, showering gravel. The car slid on grass to the right, grass to the left, before Bryce got it straightened again and rocketing down the narrow lane. They went briefly airborne over a slight knoll.

"There it is," Nancy said as they landed with a groan of metal and a crunch of gravel.

"There's Stanley's car," Tom said.

"And there's the hearse." Nancy was practically shouting her exultation. "He's here. He's still here."

Bryce didn't even pause for the four, wide shallow steps that led up to the crematorium. The Vic took the steps with a great shuddering leap, and smashed into the closed bronze doors.

Bryce's airbag went off, stunning him, but Tom was out of the car while it was still rocking. The front end of the car filled up most of the entry foyer. He danced around it and burst into the room beyond, gun drawn.

Horace Davros stood at one wall, startled into immobility by the crash, staring wide-eyed at the doorway as Tom rushed through it. Then, a second later, Davros shrugged as if he'd reached a decision. He put out his hand to a switch on the wall and threw it. A conveyor belt behind him started with a jerk and a thump and began to move.

"You're too late," Davros said, stepping into Tom's path with a smirk.

It took Tom a few seconds to process what he was seeing. A wooden casket sat atop the conveyor belt, a paper container of flowers next to it. The belt led to a pair of metal gates at its far end, through which intense heat poured in scorching waves. In the few seconds Tom hesitated, the casket had nearly reached the metal gates.

Stanley had said he was in a coffin. "Get out of my way," Tom roared. He knocked Davros aside as if he were a feather and crossing the distance to the casket in three giant steps, grabbed hold of a wooden handle. The heat coming from beyond the metal gates was monstrous. Just before the casket reached them, Tom yanked it off the belt. It fell to the floor with a bang and a clatter of splintering wood. Stanley gave a muffled yell from inside. The container of flowers rocked and fell through the gates.

"No," Davros shouted. "You're ruining everything."

"I'll ruin you, you fuck." Tom would like to have beaten the man to a pulp right then and there, but for the minute, Stanley was the greater priority. Stanley was in that box, no doubt terrified. Stanley—his first concern was for Stanley.

Anyway, Davros wasn't going anywhere, at least not in a hurry. He'd have to climb over the car in the doorway just to get outside, and Bryce wasn't likely to let him get away. And what if he did? There wasn't anywhere he could go that Tom wouldn't find him. If he'd harmed Stanley...

The flimsy wood of the casket had split when it hit the floor. Tom bent and grabbed pieces of wood in both hands and began to tear it apart, mindless of the cuts he was getting on his hands.

"Tom," Stanley called from within the pile of broken wood.

"Hang in there, baby, I'll have you out in a minute."

Davros took advantage of Tom's distraction to try to escape, but when he moved toward the door, he suddenly found it blocked by an enormous presence. For a moment, with the light behind it, he thought it might be another vehicle, it filled the opening so completely. She shifted her weight then, and he realized it was Nancy Latimer.

"Get out of my way," he roared. "Let me by."

She took a step toward him and grinned. "You're going to pay, Horace," she said, her voice the hiss of a cobra. "You're going to pay for killing my Percy."

"He was fucking his sister," Horace bleated, backing away from her steady advance. "My wife. He deserved to die."

"He was fucking me," she said. "You had no right..."

Horace had never taken more than passing notice of Nancy Latimer. He'd always thought of her as a mouse, an obese mouse, to be sure, but shy and ineffectual. He'd never seen her like this, now, her eyes blazing. His own eyes went wide with surprise and, quickly, fear. He took another step backward.

"Leave me alone, you fat cow."

She actually laughed, a maniacal cackle of glee. "Yes, Horace. That's right, exactly. I am a cow. A mad cow." She gave an eerie, drawn out "Mooooo."

With her enormous bulk and in her brown dress, she looked more like an angry bull, advancing toward him inexorably, hands reaching for him. You could almost see her wide-splayed feet paw the ground.

He tried to dart around her but Nancy moved with a speed he would never have imagined from her, grabbing him by the front of his shirt. He wrenched away, the shirt tearing, but when he leaped backward to escape from her, he lost his balance. He fell across the still moving conveyor belt.

Nancy charged forward. Before he even knew what she was doing, she had lifted his feet off the floor and onto the belt. In seconds the belt carried Horace, flat on his back, away from her—and toward the metal gates—toward the furnace.

"Ah, no, no, help me." Horace's cry was a scream. He tried to remove himself from the belt, but Nancy followed him relentlessly, keeping pace with the moving belt. When he struggled to sit up, to swing his feet to the floor, she swatted

him hard with one massive paw, and he fell flat again, still being carried along.

Before he could make another attempt to sit up, his head banged hard against the gates, dazing him. In seconds, the belt had carried him through the opening. He scrabbled to take hold of the gates, to stop his progress, but Nancy gave his flailing feet a violent shove.

"Go to hell," she cried.

He fell, shrieking in horror, into the waiting furnace beyond. His final scream ended abruptly. The heat that leapt from the opening might indeed have come from hell itself.

Stanley was struggling to get out of what was left of the broken casket. "Get me out of here," he shouted. One foot and a hand appeared. Tom knelt and ripped what was left of the casket's lid right off, revealing a wild-eyed Stanley within.

"Baby, you do get into more shit," Tom said, actually laughing with relief.

"No lectures," Stanley said, struggling free. With Tom's help, he got to his feet and stepped out of what was left of his coffin. "There's a score to be settled. Where is that bitch, Horace? I have a few things to say to him..."

"He's not going to hear them," Tom said. "Not where he went."

"He got away? You mean..." Stanley followed Tom's gaze to the moving conveyor belt. The gates still swung faintly to and fro. The heat poured past them. "There?" Tom nodded.

Stanley looked at the moving gates. "Eew. Toasted," he said. "How awful."

"It's just what he was going to do to you," Tom said.

Stanley looked at the remnants of the coffin scattered on the floor, and for a moment he remembered what it was like, to wake up inside that box. The smothering darkness ... knowing that he was headed for the fire ... His knees went weak, and he fell against Tom.

"Oh, God, I was so scared."

"It's okay, baby," Tom said, holding him tight. "I've got you. And his ass is cooked."

"Really cooked," Bryce said. Still shaky, he had appeared in the doorway in time to watch the final scene between Davros and Nancy Latimer. He looked unhappily at the sight of Stanley, held in Tom's embrace.

"You could have pulled him off there," Bryce said in an accusing voice.

Tom flexed an arm. "Wrenched my shoulder," he said, "saving Stanley."

"You let her kill the son-of-a-bitch. That leads to the furnace, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Nancy said in a monotone. "To the furnace."

They all looked at Nancy. She was staring at the opening through which Horace had disappeared. Her face was blank of all emotion.

"Maybe we can get him out of there," Bryce said, but without much hope.

"Don't bother," Nancy said. "By now, he's nothing but ashes."

For a long moment, they were silent. Then, slowly, all the spirit gone from her, Nancy turned to face them. She seemed

to deflate, the energy draining out of her like the air from a balloon.

"I won't put up any resistance. I did what I came for," she said, shoulders slumping, her voice dropping once again to her characteristic murmur. "It's worth whatever is done to me. You can arrest me." She held her hands toward them as if welcoming the handcuffs.

"For what?" Tom said. "We saw you try to save him. If he hadn't struggled ... It was practically suicide. Well, people in a panic do dumb things." He gave Bryce a meaningful look.

After a moment, Bryce said, with a sigh, "Yeah, really dumb." No way he was going to report seeing this crazy woman fling their murderer into an incinerator. Sometimes justice was what mattered the most.

It was better this way, too. No messy trials, no witnesses to deal with, no smarmy lawyers. An uncomplicated report, a simple administrative hearing, enough evidence to back it up. Murders solved, murderer punished.

Wasn't that what it was all about? Only it didn't often work out so neatly. He looked at Tom, and found Tom watching him.

"We're garbage men, Bryce," Tom said. "We clean up the mess, is all."

Nancy looked from one to the other. Then, she lowered her head and began to cry, silently, her huge shoulders trembling and tears spilling onto her massive breasts.

The three of them stood in awkward silence, staring. Stanley found himself thinking—and hated himself for thinking it—that the very young, the very pretty, could look

charming when they cried, even attractive; but a woman like Nancy, not young, not pretty, only looked grotesque.

Still, it was Stanley who stepped forward, who put his arms about her and was in turn swallowed up in her embrace, crushed against her heaving bosom.

"Percy's gone," she sniffled. "No man will ever again make me feel like a woman."

Thinking of Tom, of his assessment of Nancy, Stanley wasn't so sure—but he kept that thought to himself. Better not to give her ideas. Sympathy stopped short of that kind of generosity. When the time came, when another man saw what Percy had seen in her, and Tom had seen, too, she could be pleasantly surprised.

And it wouldn't cost him any sleepless nights.

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Epilogue

David Solomon was conscious, on his way to recovery, and he confirmed what, by that time, Tom and Stanley already knew, that it was Horace who had tried to kill him.

"He put this cloth over my face, and when I breathed in, everything went dark."

"Ether," Stanley said. "He did the same thing to me."

David talked about the experience as if it had been no more than a lark, a boyish adventure—which, Stanley thought, was the great advantage of youth. Everything mattered in its moment, was paramount, and then it was gone, and the next moment took precedence, and you were more interested in being alive than in the "might-have-been-dead" past.

"And, they've rescheduled Bernie's Bar Mitzvah, so I can attend," he told them, smiling happily. Knowing nothing about Bernie or a Bar Mitzvah, Stanley could only nod and smile back. Tom, even more in the dark, just looked mystified, but chose not to ask any questions. Whatever this was about, the kid seemed happy with it, which was good enough for him. His smile, looking from Tom to Stanley and back to Tom again, was dazzling.

It was after nine when they left the hospital. They were both of them silent, lost in their own thoughts. Stanley's, of how glad he was that the young man they had just left would live after all to enjoy—and almost certainly suffer, too—the experiences of growing up gay, of meeting Mister Right and

falling in love, and out again, probably more than once. The young had a tendency, as Browning had put it, to love what they saw, and their looks went everywhere.

They were in Tom's pickup, driving along Folsom. They passed a dance club. Despite the relatively early hour, the patrons were already lined up outside waiting to get in. When had the club-goers gotten so young, Stanley wondered? They looked like mere children.

One of them, waiting at the curb to cross the street, grinned at Stanley as he went by—*or, perhaps not at me at all*, Stanley realized, perhaps for no better reason than that he was young and happy, with himself, with the night, with life. What better reasons could there be?

Tom, without a word, reached across the seat and took Stanley's hand in his, and brought it over to rest upon one muscular thigh—not in a sexually suggestive way, but in a proprietary manner. Stanley looked at him and smiled, and Tom smiled back.

Just like that, happiness surprised Stanley, so suddenly that he literally caught his breath. He had felt for so long now as if the Hounds of Hell were chasing him, and here in the moment, was everything that he wanted, everything that mattered.

He knew too, as surely as if some celestial voice had declared it, that things would be all right with him and Tom. They had been through some rough waters; would probably again. But their love was an ark that would see them safely to shore. He was sure of it.

He wanted to ask Tom to circle the block, to try to have the moment again, but of course, it couldn't be. The young man would have gone, or he would be with a friend and not notice them at all. They would all have aged, too, in those few minutes. They would all of them be different people from what they had been just seconds before.

What a fragile thing happiness was, and how inexorably the moments passed, and were gone, often before we recognized how priceless they were. If they could be stopped, the moments ... but time was like a roulette wheel, wasn't it? Moments might remain forever, the ball might come to rest, but who could predict at which number the ball would land? He might as likely find himself for an eternity trapped within an airless, lightless box as riding through a San Francisco evening with Tom.

No, better to take them as they came, the moments. Let the wheel continue to spin, on and on, around and around. The number would come soon enough, and when it did, the bets were over. This moment, at least, was safe. The future could not touch it, nor the past. Tom sitting next to him, humming faintly—*Me and Bobby McGee*—his jeans-clad thigh warm under Stanley's hand, his own hand atop Stanley's, fingers gently squeezing. Of such little things are the happy moments made. These are the treasures, to be stored up, to be spent carefully over the time to come.

Did it matter at all to Tom, this brief interlude? Probably not. Tom wasn't afraid the way he was. Of so many things. Of his own weaknesses, mostly. And of losing Tom. That, certainly, more than anything.

"Let's stop for a drink," he said on an impulse.

"Sounds like a plan. Where? You choose."

Stanley picked a cowboy bar off Folsom Street, where the clientele was mostly of the butch sort, and where he thought Tom would be more comfortable than in most of the Castro bars.

They got beers and went to stand along a side wall. Tom seemed oblivious to the glances that the other patrons cast his way—confirming what Stanley had long since concluded: Tom's scars were already beginning to fade. Here, in the dim light by the wall, the scars weren't all that noticeable. Even so, even when they could be seen in the brighter light, they didn't seem to diminish his appeal for gay men, any number of whom had cast interested glances in his direction. Which Stanley had deflected with a smug smile that said, "Yes he is, isn't he? And he's already taken." Luckily Tom seemed not to notice the glances at all.

They sipped in silence for a minute or two, standing close enough that their arms just barely touched. Finally, determined to seize the moment, Stanley said, "I've got this confession to make."

"Uh oh."

"No, not that bad. But ... well, I've had stuff on my mind."

"I know that. The nightmares?"

"You know about them?" Almost every night since Horace had tried to kill him, Stanley had awakened from a dream of impenetrable blackness, his heart pounding. Often, unable to go back to sleep in the darkness of their bedroom, he would

lie awake in Tom's arms until morning began to light the window.

"Baby, I track you even in my sleep."

"Yes, it's them and, well, not just that, either. It's, oh, I don't know—everything used to seem so simple, so clear. In the old days. I'd prowl the Castro with Chris, maybe we'd eat at the Cove, one or the other of us would pick up a trick ... and now, it's like I'm on another planet."

"Are you unhappy with me?"

"No. Oh, Lord, no. It's more like I'm unhappy with me." Stanley raised his hands to his temples as if to squeeze the thoughts out of his brain. "There's so much, swirling around inside me. Sometimes I feel as if my head is going to explode."

"The coffin business. I imagine that's part of it."

"Yes. I don't think I've ever been so scared."

"It's okay to be scared, baby."

"Is it?" Stanley slanted a look up at him. "You're not. Even when you were a cop ... were you? Ever scared?"

Tom shrugged. "Sometimes. I guess so. I never think about it much. Why?"

"Because I am. A lot. Of situations, and things, and people—the bad guys." He thought for a moment. "What about, when ... you know, in that fire, were you scared then?"

"Not the way you mean. I was scared about what might happen to you. Not like I was trying to be a big hero, either, or anything like that. It's just..." He paused, searching for the words. "Things happen, and then they're done, and you can't go back and change them. Somebody you love is in some

serious shit, or say it's a little kid, that happened to me one time, and he was in real danger, and it was like in that fire, you have one chance, and only one, to do something about it, and that's it. For the rest of your life, you will always be the guy who did something when he could, or who didn't. You've got to live with it. That's the part that scares me, I guess."

"I think I'm just a wuss. When I woke up in that coffin..."

"I can understand that. That's different. You can't do anything, you're just laying there in the dark, thinking about where you are and what's coming down the road. Not the nicest thing to happen to anybody. Who wouldn't be scared? Who wouldn't have nightmares? And then there's the stuff with your brother."

"I don't know which is worse. I guess that thing with my brother, maybe. I mean, thinking you're going to die is awful, but killing someone else ... do you understand?"

"Of course I do, Stanley. You wouldn't be human if that didn't eat at you. Jesus, what happened, what you did then, when it happens for you, the first time like that, it's like it never happened to anyone before, but that's not so."

Stanley was surprised. "You mean, the first time you ... you know..."

"Killed somebody?" Stanley nodded. "Fuck, I just about went off the deep end. Baby, nobody can do that and not agonize over it. Some of the guys on the force, the old timers, well, you can see it in their eyes, in the way they walk, even. It's like a cancer that eats at them. Chews some of them up completely. They take to booze, or drugs. They turn mean, do bad things. Sometimes they just off

themselves. It does different things to different people, but nobody goes through it Scot-free."

"So, what are you saying, exactly?"

"I'm saying, you did what you had to do. You have to see it that way, and let it go, okay? And, when it gets too heavy for you, well ... you're safe in my arms, you know. Nobody will ever get to you there." He paused for a moment's thought. "I used to go fishing, up in Nova Scotia."

"You told me. When we were up at Bear Mountain."

"Right. And, sometimes instead of salmon, you get an eel. Have you ever seen one?"

"Not in the flesh."

"They're slippery. Just like a man's conscience."

Which was, Stanley thought, another way of saying something he'd been contemplating for a long time: man was the world's only truly corrupt animal.

"When things get too hairy," Tom was saying, "that's what you've got me for. You come to me and talk about it."

But if man were corrupt, Stanley pursued his own train of thought, there was still a divine spark in him, that surpasses everything else, encompasses all things, forgives without exemption, that is beyond cherishing: love. Tom's love. What could be more divine than that?

"So, that's it?" Tom asked of Stanley's thoughtful silence. "That's your big confession?"

"No. That's not it." Stanley sighed. Might as well get it all out in the open. "There's more."

"Now what?"

"It's those guys," he said in a small voice, feeling terribly cheap and juvenile. It was one thing to agonize over killing someone, or being sealed in a coffin—but, the rest of it was silly, wasn't it. Queen stuff, the kind of thing he had always scorned gays for, and here he was, just as bad. Making a mountain out of a molehill of pretty bodies. Still, it needed to be told. Tom deserved to hear it from him.

"Guys? What guys?"

"At the funeral home."

"So? What about them?"

"I ... I lusted after them. Some of them. Well, okay, most of them. Cyril excepted."

"Lusted after them? That's kind of fancy talk, isn't it? You mean you had hot nuts for them?"

"Well, I wouldn't have put it in quite those words, but yes, I did. Some of them, anyway."

"And?"

"And, nothing. I mean, they were all so hot, and so horny. When I was there, you know, thinking about all the action they got into, about how easy they'd be to land ... I got ... well, I got pretty horny myself."

"But you didn't do anything about it?"

"No. But I thought about it. A lot. Way more than I should have, considering. Like, David Solomon. To tell you the truth, I'd have probably committed murder myself to get into his pants. I wanted him bad. Really bad."

Tom shrugged. "I can see that. He's a real cutie, isn't he?" Tom chuckled. "Did you see that male nurse at the hospital?

I'll bet he's checking David's temperature right about now. And, hey, you're gay, aren't you?"

Stanley was surprised. "You're not sore, hearing about it?"

"Sore? No, why should I be? Hell, I'd have thought something was wrong with you if that one didn't give you a boner. Couple of the others, far as that goes. There was another guy there, big tall Italian, too pretty for words."

"Armando."

"Yeah, that's the one. I'll bet you had fantasies about him, too, didn't you?"

Stanley laughed and shook his head. "Boy, I wonder if I'll ever really understand you."

"Plus, that David kid, you know, I'd have fucked him myself, in a minute, if it wasn't for you, for our being partners, I mean. He's the only guy apart from you that ever got to me that way. For sure I imagined it a couple of times. Just looking at the pretty little butt of his. Who wouldn't want to plug that, for crap's sake?"

"Humph. You don't sound sorry to admit it."

"Cause I'm not. Why should I be? Why should you be, either? Stanley, look, this relationship we've got, well, it's different from a guy being involved with a chick. It's not just what you've got swinging down there. It's how we're made. We were born guys. Guys get hot nuts. Like you did. Like I do sometimes. It's just the way we are."

Stanley pursed his lips, considering that. "So, what are you suggesting, then? That we have an open relationship, you and me?"

"What's that?"

"We both, you know, go our own way?"

"What? You mean, fuck around on one another?" Tom looked shocked by the suggestion. "No way, Jose. Sure, we're going to be tempted from time to time, that's just human. That's just guy stuff. We're partners, though. You get the urge to fuck, you come to your old man. Same with me. It's not always going to be easy. Hell, what is, that's worth having? If we want this to be worth anything, we've got to work at it."

"But, with you ... well, there's a whole different thing."

"You mean the women. Ah, hell, Stanley, for sure women still get me hot, you'd know I was lying if I told you otherwise. Look at what happened to me that night at that art gallery, that Daniella chick. I wanted to fuck her so bad I could taste it. Before I met you, before we became partners, I'd have had her in a minute. I must have had a thousand women, maybe two thousand. Hell, I never kept score, I just did it, like I was on automatic pilot. You know, I don't even pretend to understand what happened to me, with you. Well, I know what happened, falling in love with you, I mean, but I don't understand why. Guys, they never did anything for me. It was always women. But, see, what I had then, when I was the happy stud, nailing everything I saw, and what I have now, with you, they're a million miles apart. Sometimes, it's like I can't even remember that life, like I had, what do they call it, when you lose your memory...?"

"Amnesia."

"Right. Or, I don't know, more like it was somebody else that lived that life instead of me. I sleep with you in my arms

at night, and it feels like, fuck, I'm no good at explaining things."

"You're doing a pretty good job of it, seems to me."

"It just feels right, being with you. Sometimes I feel like my life didn't really begin until you. Does that make any sense?"

"It's funny, I feel the same way."

"Not so funny." Tom gave him a shrewd look. "Okay, we've got all that squared away, right? The coffin and your brother and the hot guys. Plus, I'm guessing, along with that stuff, you've gone through a period of, what? Resentment. Because I saved your life. And guilt. Over this." He lifted a hand toward the scars.

Stanley stared at him open-mouthed. "You understand? About all that?"

"Stanley, I was a homicide detective for a pretty long time. I've seen death from a lot of different angles. Near death, too. People, civilians, they don't always understand it. They want to see it romantically, and not the way it really is. They think, if a guy saves someone's life, that other guy is going to love the rescuer for it. But it isn't like that. No one likes to be in someone else's debt. To feel that you are obligated. And there isn't any bigger debt you can owe than your life."

"Are you saying, you felt the same thing about, when I shot my brother? My saving you?"

"For sure. You're the philosopher, I'm more an action kind of guy, but it seems to me this is how human nature is. I loved you more after saving you. It was like it made you more completely mine. I'd bet you loved me more too after

you saved my butt. But the resentment was there, about being saved. And the guilt for feeling resentful. You feel guilty about my face, but you shouldn't. Somebody else put us there, in that situation. Put you in a position where you had to fire a gun. I did what I had to do. We both did. Sometimes that's all you can do. People get things all mixed up inside."

"Did you ... you know, blame me? For your face?"

"Yes."

Stanley blinked in surprise at his bluntness.

"But only for a little while. Only because I was so sore. But it wasn't you I was sore at. Like I said, we both just did what we had to do. And we've paid for it. Paid plenty, it seems to me."

"And yet, here we are, together."

Tom smiled, one of those smiles that made Stanley's heart swell. "I think with you and me, the two different events kind of cancelled one another out. Rough times, but we'll get through them. Maybe already have, the worst of it. Korski and Danzel."

"Danzel and Korski. Partners."

"Partners."

Stanley found himself remembering, when he'd first met Tom, he'd thought him a dumb ox. Not so very dumb, though. He had his priorities right. Stanley grinned at him and Tom grinned back.

"*Cum vivo vivebo*," Stanley said. "While I'm alive, I will live."

"Sounds like a plan." Tom looked around, a little self consciously, at the bar scene. "So, uh, Stanley, what are we doing here?"

Stanley looked around too. A long narrow bar led the way back to a well lighted and fairly large dance floor to the rear. At the moment, a number of guys in cowboy outfits were doing a line dance, maneuvering intricate steps with the ease and grace of a line of Rockettes.

"This particular bar, you mean? I picked it because it gets a butcher crowd than some of the others. I figured you'd be more comfortable." He didn't add that he especially liked the place—all those guys in tight levis and cowboy drag, the perfume of male bodies. He knew Tom would never understand that.

Tom glowered at the line dancers. "Not too butch. Anyway, you know perfectly well I'd rather be at home."

"Hiding in our den? You're just thinking about your face. Tom, we've been all through this. Forget about it. Nobody thinks it's ugly." That, he knew, was Tom's nightmare. Maybe Tom had it right, maybe in the end that was what it all came down to: someone to hold you when the goblins threatened.

"Nobody thinks my dick is ugly, maybe."

Stanley gave him a frosty look. "It is to be hoped that nobody here but me has actually seen that face to face, so to speak."

The hillbilly rock number had ended, and Patsy Cline had taken its place: "I Fall to Pieces, Each time they mention your name..." The line of dancers had broken into couples, moving in a large, counterclockwise circle about the floor.

"It's time," Stanley said.

"For what?"

Good question. He looked around, found an answer.

"Let's dance," he said, putting up his hands.

"I don't do that line dancing stuff. I only do slow dancing."

"The line dance is over. This is a slow dance."

"Forget it."

"You slow danced with me when you were first courting me. We were at your apartment."

"At my apartment, right. I remember. Not out in public, where everybody could watch. And I wasn't courting you, you were courting me."

"You got drunk so you could get up the nerve to get into my pants. So I'd have to drive you home."

"Besides, we're in a..."

"Tom," Stanley took Tom's right hand, put it firmly at his waist, took Tom's left hand in his own, "You're just thinking about the bright lights back there, and your face. Well, you can't run around with a paper bag over your head. There are some things you're just going to have to get used to. It's the roulette wheel."

Tom frowned. "I didn't see a roulette wheel."

"It's a figure of speech. Look, just shut up and dance."

Tom grunted, but he led Stanley onto the dance floor. At first, his movements were reluctant, but Stanley already knew he was an excellent dancer, however unlikely it seemed.

After a moment, Tom began to surrender to the beat. He forgot about being self conscious then, forgot about his face,

forgot he was in a gay bar, just relaxed into the pleasure of holding Stanley in his arms, gliding gracefully around the floor to Patsy's melancholy serenade.

On a huge hill, cragged and steep, Truth stands, as Donne so nicely put it, and he that will reach her about must, and about must go.

Why on earth, Stanley wondered, had he been so afraid of telling Tom the truth, of just talking to him? Didn't he know that Tom loved him, that Tom lived to protect him and look after him? What could be more precious than that—and, surely, more deserving of the truth. But then, he'd had to go about, hadn't he, and about? *What a goose I am sometimes.*

"What if I had?" he asked aloud.

"Had what?"

"Done something. With one of those guys."

"But you didn't."

"No, I didn't..." Stanley's voice trailed off.

"So, what's the point?"

Which maybe, Stanley thought, was the point. Tom spun him around lightly, smoothly.

"How did you learn to do this?" Stanley asked.

"A chick in high school. When I was fourteen, she was sixteen. We swapped. She taught me to dance and I fucked her."

"You paid her for the dance lessons by fucking her?"

"What? Don't sound so surprised. There were chicks all over the place, and some of their old ladies, wanting me to fuck 'em. I had to keep a list. I moved her up to the top of it. Two weeks, after school every afternoon, dance lessons and

then we fucked. She got two whole weeks worth. That was our deal."

"And she was happy?"

"Deliriously."

"How many dances did you learn?"

"This is it. We only had an hour each day, till her mom came home from work, so we kept the dance lessons short. Ten minutes to dance, the rest for fucking. We set a timer."

"Sometimes," Stanley said, "I think you make all this up."

Tom only chuckled and, holding him closer, did another, faster spin.

* * * *

Two guys standing by the bar at the edge of the dance floor watched them turn, Stanley all but swept off his feet. "Pretty good," the tall one said.

"The beauty and the beast."

The other scoffed. "You're full of hot air. I'd take either one of them in a heartbeat. And so would you."

After a moment, the tall one said, "You think he's ugly? The big one?"

"Well, that face. Wonder what happened to him."

"Who gives a fuck? He's totally hot. I'd jump him in a minute. That body, it's like a fortress just waiting to be stormed."

"By the bravest only, I'd say."

"And look at that ass. I'd eat a yard of his shit with fish-hooks in it just to get to that."

"Ugh. You certainly have a way with words. Maybe you should be a writer. You know, for that outfit that does all the man-candy stuff, MLX, or something like that."

"MLR." Absentmindedly, eyes glued to Tom. "I wonder what would happen if I cut in?"

"Are you out of your frigging mind? You want to die young? That's Stanley Korski, the little one."

"So?"

"So, he killed a guy a while back, shot him dead. For messing around with his man."

* * * *

Tom and Stanley happened to dance past at that moment, close enough to hear the remark. Tom chuckled. "Pistol Packin' Mama," he whispered into Stanley's ear, giving it a nibble. "That's my baby."

"Damn right," Stanley said, tilting his head up for a kiss. "No one messes with my man." After a moment, he said, "Uh, Tom?"

"What?"

"The music's ended."

Tom paused for a few seconds, looked around. The other couples had stopped dancing, some of them heading for the bar, others waiting in place for the next song. A few people stared at Tom and Stanley.

"Not for me it hasn't," Tom said, and began to dance Stanley around the floor again, humming as he went.

"Besides, I can't stop now. I've got a hard on."

"I know. I almost tripped over it a couple of times."
Stanley giggled and rubbed against it. "I've got one too."

"You think I didn't know that? Baby, I can see hard on in your eyes."

The music started up again. Hank Williams hurried to catch up with them.

Pistol packing Mama. Stanley giggled.

"Were you ever sorry?" Tom asked. "About those guys? About not getting into their pants?"

"No. Of course not. Absolutely. Why do you ask?"

"Just wondered."

"Well, don't."

After a moment, Tom said, "I love you."

"I love you more."

"Don't."

"Do."

"Keep it up, Korski, I'm going to drop you on the floor right here and fuck you till your nose bleeds."

"Well, we can't dance all night, can we?"

But he could, he thought, dance like this forever, wandering in two-step down the years. In Tom's arms. People would say, "Oh, that's Stanley. He's Tom's." Till the years ended. *And now we maun totter down, John, but hand in hand we'll go...*

Their next time past the two at the bar, Stanley blew a kiss. What an ass I've been, he thought.

Still—that tall one—Stanley couldn't help thinking, how awfully hot he was. There was something about redheads. Going down on one, sinking into that halo of spun gold at the

Deadly Slumber
by V.J. Banis

bottom. Secret treasure. You could all but hear the Rhine maidens singing.

Unbidden, the thought came into his mind: *Would it be an accident, if, say, I tripped, and...?*

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About the Author

Lecturer, writing instructor and early rabble rouser for the rights and freedoms of individuals, including gay rights, civil rights, women's rights and freedom of the press, Victor J. Banis is the critically acclaimed author ("the master's touch in storytelling..." Publishers Weekly) of more than 160 published books, plus numerous shorter pieces and verse, in a career spanning nearly half a century. His most recent works include *Lola Dances* (MLR Press); *Angel Land* (Regal Crest Enterprises) and the Deadly Mystery Series from MLR Press: *Deadly Nightshade*; *Deadly Wrong*; *Deadly Dreams*, and *Deadly Slumber*. A native of Ohio and longtime California, he lives and writes now in West Virginia's beautiful Blue Ridge.

Visit Victor at his website www.vjbanis.com

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by V.J. Banis

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the trevor project

The Trevor Project operates the only nationwide, around-the-clock crisis and suicide prevention helpline for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. Every day, The Trevor Project saves lives through its free and confidential helpline, its website and its educational services. If you or a friend are feeling lost or alone call The Trevor Helpline. If you or a friend are feeling lost, alone, confused or in crisis, please call The Trevor Helpline. You'll be able to speak confidentially with a trained counselor 24/7.

The Trevor Helpline: 866-488-7386

On the Web: www.thetrevorproject.org/

the gay men's domestic violence project

Founded in 1994, The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project is a grassroots, non-profit organization founded by a gay male survivor of domestic violence and developed through the strength, contributions and participation of the community. The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project supports victims and survivors through education, advocacy and direct services. Understanding that the serious public health issue of domestic violence is not gender specific, we serve men in relationships with men, regardless of how they identify, and stand ready to assist them in navigating through abusive relationships.

GMDVP Helpline: 800.832.1901

On the Web: gmdvp.org/

the gay & lesbian alliance against defamation/glaad en español

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (glaad) is dedicated to promoting and ensuring fair, accurate and inclusive representation of people and events in the media as a means of eliminating homophobia and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

On the Web: www.glaad.org/

glaad en español: www.glaad.org/espanol/bienvenido.php
servicemembers legal defense network

Servicemembers Legal Defense Network is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, legal services, watchdog and policy organization dedicated to ending discrimination against and harassment of military personnel affected by "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (dadt). The sldn provides free, confidential legal services to all those impacted by dadt and related discrimination. Since 1993, its inhouse legal team has responded to more than 9,000 requests for assistance. In Congress, it leads the fight to repeal dadt and replace it with a law that ensures equal treatment for every servicemember, regardless of sexual orientation. In the courts, it works to challenge the constitutionality of dadt.

sldn Call: (202) 328-3244

PO Box 65301 or (202) 328-FAIR

Washington DC 20035-5301 e-mail: sldn@sldn.org

On the Web: sldn.org/

the glbt national help center

The glbt National Help Center is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization that is dedicated to meeting the needs of the

gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community and those questioning their sexual orientation and gender identity. It is an outgrowth of the Gay & Lesbian National Hotline, which began in 1996 and now is a primary program of The glbt National Help Center. It offers several different programs including two national hotlines that help members of the glbt community talk about the important issues that they are facing in their lives. It helps end the isolation that many people feel, by providing a safe environment on the phone or via the internet to discuss issues that people can't talk about anywhere else. The glbt National Help Center also helps other organizations build the infrastructure they need to provide strong support to our community at the local level.

National Hotline: 1-888-THE-GLNH (1-888-843-4564)

National Youth Talkline 1-800-246-PRIDE (1-800-246-7743)

On the Web: www.glnh.org/

e-mail: info@glbtnationalhelpcenter.org

If you're a GLBT and questioning student heading off to university, should know that there are resources on campus for you. Here's just a sample:

US Local GLBT college campus organizations

dv-8.com/resources/us/local/campus.html

GLBT Scholarship Resources tinyurl.com/6fx9v6

Syracuse University lgbt.syr.edu/

Texas A&M glbt.tamu.edu/

Tulane University www.oma.tulane.edu/LGBT/Default.htm

University of Alaska www.uaf.edu/agla/

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University of California, Davis lgbtrc.ucdavis.edu/

University of California, San Francisco lgbt.ucsf.edu/

University of Colorado www.colorado.edu/glbtrc/

University of Florida www.dso.ufl.edu/multicultural/lgbt/

University of Hawai'i, Manoa

manoa.hawaii.edu/lgbt/

University of Utah www.sa.utah.edu/lgbt/

University of Virginia

www.virginia.edu/deanofstudents/lgbt/

Vanderbilt University www.vanderbilt.edu/lgbtqi/