

DARK RIDERS

By Jim Cleveland

Chapter 1: A BACKPACKER

I thought about hiking the Rockies, the whole great chain, from the South up north into Canada, an eternal backpacker, until I found a quiet place of peace far beyond my restless anger. I didn't want contemporary society to find Xavier Thorn again.

But I needed a parting blow to relieve my frustrations with all the hypocrisy and greed, to purge myself of wanting to strike out. I needed a target to channel my anger. I finally decided upon the Mafia.

There could be no more despicable adversary. For generations, they had operated with pompous impudence, squirming like vermin through a leaky judicial system that served to meet the monetary needs of the legal profession and keep society's low lifes moving through the court-prison system at a profitable pace. I knew I was too cynical about everything. And the Mafia had never done me harm. But after considerable thought I decided that the mob had no redeeming features, had made no contributions to American life. At least all the other professions except for organized crime was in there pitching, the government, business, doctors and repairmen. But the Mafia just deserved something like a hand grenade thrown into an executive board meeting, which was certainly an idea worth filing in my dark recesses.

I began to dismantle my life and make pre-natal preparations for another, watching my material comforts shrink away and re-shape into basic survival needs, a well-stocked mobile sanctuary in my van, a comforting stash of cash in the bank to fall back on. I spent thoughtful time with my backpack, stuffing it and arranging its every content in a proper place. A backpacker could walk eternally away from the system, never letting it make him phony and deceitful. In the mountains, he could sense the changing seasons; smell meadow flowers wafting in the summer breeze; glide gently past crisp, white snow, heaped in loving abundance on the pines; feel the majesty of sheer, hard rock splitting the blue sky; hear the rustling crunch of his boots plying through autumn leaves on the trail. I wanted to embrace these things and make them part of my life.

For the winter, I bought a sturdy set of snowshoes, the best I could find, with some of the money from the stereo. I dissipated my goods piecemeal, and as they disappeared, like the crumbling petals of a dry flower, I thought also of my life, piecemeal, and how I had become the way I was over thirty-nine years. If I am bound to tell this story of how I stung the Mafia – and myself – it seems to provide some shape to the bottom of it.

I was the only child of an auto mechanic and part time farmer. My mother held the family together in the glow of kerosene lamps and the softness of feather beds, and frequent dinners of cold milk and hot, greasy cornbread. She enjoyed simple pleasures like a dip of snuff and a rocking chair on the front porch summer evenings. My father seemed to always be washing up in a basin by the water bucket on the back porch, scrubbing with Lava soap at the hard black grease of the garage or the gritty brown dirt from two acres of corn.

I thought a lot about the bigotry of those days. There were people in those nineteen-fifties backwoods who loathed blacks as inferior and apelike. They were always known as "niggers," of course, a black usually being a kind of a horse. And a white person would have to be courageous or impervious to ridicule to speak the word "Negro" in the presence of his bigoted peers. All the while striving to belong with those peers, to find a place somewhere above the hard place of poverty.

There were other groups for which our provincials had low regard. Jews, of course, and yankees. And city slickers. And rich folks. And any foreigners they might chance to see. As well as the area's Choctaw Indians and even

selected white people of the county. If the truth were known, most didn't like themselves, knowing secretly inside of their own inferiorities.

And I was among them, growing up with the peculiar name of my great-grandfather along with my father's. Xavier was a Frenchman who traded furs in the new world and lived for a time in Jamaica.

I grew up to know both sides of the 1950s and 60s racial conflict in Mississippi. When the desegregation edicts were laid down, I was still much under the brainwashing influence of my family and friends. Most of them saw blacks as unwashed and immoral, stupid and lazy. If one accepted that dogma, which was instilled in the home from well before puberty, you would logically agree that they were unworthy to sit at a lunch counter or next to a white person on a bus. Much was made of the fact that they bathed irregularly, if at all, but I was able to reason, even at that uncomprehending teen age, that it would be hard for anyone to bathe regularly without benefit of running water. Not so many years earlier my own family had been in that unknowing disadvantage until we added the bathroom---a great day. I still remembered the indignity of bathing in a cramped little zinc washtub, knees under my chin, and mama pouring a bucket full of cold well water over my cringing head to wash out the P&G soap.

Disliking the looks of the blacks, their language, the seeming contemptuous squalor of some, I found it difficult to shuck the devious teachings of the fireside, that the blacks were tolerable okay, only "in their place." But I rebelled anyway because I was an avid reader and a student of contemporary affairs – beyond Mississippi's tangled honeysuckle society. It wasn't right to pour fountain Cokes over the heads of those poor blacks at the Woolworth lunch counter in Jackson. It wasn't right to dump sugar bowls over their heads while a crowd of gawking whites leered and laughed or stood bemused. It wasn't right to turn the fire hoses and dogs on those people in Birmingham. My rebellion grew slowly and quietly and without exceptional courage. I bemoaned that memory. For I was still cursed with a striving to "belong."

I was twenty-one by then, lean and long-haired, full of that smoldering fire of dissent that I had neither the intellect or courage to express, wrapped tightly in self-doubt. I wanted to be a great news photographer and I focused my every talent on that goal. But after growing up in the racial turmoil that split the state, having served in the National Guard during the milestone integration of the University of Mississippi, and, as a young news photographer for the Jackson Courier, photographing freedom riders, sit-in demonstrators and the marchers to Selma, Alabama with Martin Luther King, I wanted two things: I wanted to be a great photographer, and I wanted it to be somewhere else.

"I just don't fit in here. I just don't want to live in Mississippi," I told my father that dark night on the porch. "I'm a photographer, Dad. I've got to go someplace else to get a good job." And all the time I knew I shouldn't go and might not go, for dad was widowed and lonely by then, and prone to cry more readily now, at the pain of a sharp memory that might appear without warning during his long days and nights. I stayed on in Jackson for a while.

I saw the seamy side of town on the police beat; disasters wrought by nature and man, including a plane crash that scattered the mangled bodies of men, women and children among shattered pine trees just a few hundred yards from the runway. I saw state capitol and city hall inefficiencies and underhandedness covered up by the newspaper's family owners and their special interests. My cynicism deepened, and as my colleagues seemed willing to accept such a world, I became a critic of my own institution, and even of myself for having such a idealistic, naïve point of view about it in the first place.

There were other encounters with the institutions of life, and they often ended in an impasse.

Sgt. Waldo, beady-eyed, a chaw stretching his hard Army jaw, offered to promote me two stripes – to Sergeant First Class – if I would re-enlist in the National Guard.

"No way," I told him. "I've got better things to do than come down here and sit around the armory and watch some instructor scratch his head and try to speak English. This is a joke. If this were anything like a real army, we'd be

training ourselves to do what armies do – kill people. We're so busy picking up cigarette butts that our guys throw down and stomp in the first place that we don't have time for decent training."

"Hell, boy. Why don't you lighten up a little?" countered a bruised Waldo. "You could be a damned good soldier if you'd get that chip off your shoulder. You got brains if you'd use 'em. You coulda' gone to O.C.S. like I tried to get you to do."

"Why would anybody want to be a damned good soldier?" I fired back. "You just send them out to get shot down anyway without trying to win anything. The army didn't do a damned thing in Korea except run up a record number of casualties. That's what happened to the Dixie Division, and that's why you need more warm bodies like mine to take their place. If we're not going to win a war, there's no damned excuse for being in it."

In the future, of course, there would be another miserable no-win war, in Viet Nam. And it would be even more frustrating. We don't learn and make things better. We refuse to learn and make things worse.

I rarely succeeded in such arguments, very frustrating, and it was because I was always putting my adversary in a no-win situation too, which meant that, of course, he wouldn't let me win either. Just like Korea, Viet Nam, or two children fighting over a bauble.

I married Delores March; a bookish young social worker that wore big glasses and smiled readily. Her even disposition calmed my stormy insides, and we settled into a social scene with a liberal set of do-gooders from the welfare agency and the nearby college and a friend or two from the Courier. My life seemed to be losing its momentum in these early 70s years. I had taken over as photo editor of the Courier, where I could get away from the grind of the streets. I was weary of crowded hallways and fast-moving photo subjects, people with handcuffs and covered heads, others with plaques and smiles, women in evening gowns and plaster-cast teeth, ballplayers flashing one finger and politicians waving two, victims of tragedy tear-streaked and broken, gloating lawyers, bitter lawyers, smug lawyers, politician lawyers oozing distorted generalities. They all filled our pages. It was easier to handle it from behind a desk.

For all my angry arrogance, though, I knew there was a kind man inside me, clamoring to get out, given to bringing home wounded birds that died anyway, petting and feeding stray dogs, remembering most of the special days of those I cared about, and expounding at length on mellow dark evenings about how love and related blessings could somehow change the world.

Delores was killed just outside her office. They thought she was standing there in curiosity at the madman waving the gun. In the course of his brief struggle with a security guard and a stray bullet, she fell dead and left me bent and broken. I regressed, and became alienated then even from the hapless parade of troubled humans whom I had pitied, who flowed through a welfare system that also seemed out of control.

"A lot of these bums need jobs, not handouts," I told a scowling welfare administrator in the aftermath. "There seems to be a philosophy in this country that money solves everything. It's screwed up our welfare system, our foreign policy and our heads."

"Where the hell was I supposed to come up with jobs for them?" Price retorted. "Most of them aren't able to work, some of them don't want to work and if they did they wouldn't have sense enough to hold a job."

"You don't ask them what they want. You tell them what to do if they want the money. We ought to demonstrate to everybody that all work is honorable. You can give them jobs as easily as you can give them money. Give the real idiots clean-up jobs. We've got the filthiest cities and junkiest roadsides of any country in the civilized world and act like we're too good to clean up after ourselves. And if we could weed out the bums, you could pay the old and disable people enough to do them some good."

My acerbic opinions were okay with some people. I usually made reasonable, if not practical, sense. It was just that they didn't want so much of it. A double-barrel blitz of Xavier Thorn was too much. Sometimes people wished I could be turned off like a spigot. I was a nice guy, okay, but too intense. I knew that too.

In the year after Delores' death, I cared less about conventions and camaraderie. I was less fastidious in my personal habits. I grew a beard and sometimes it was unkempt. I drank more and smoked marijuana. I sometimes took downers and a few lines of coke. I began to enjoy hiking and made frequent sojourns to national parks and forests where I grew to revere the purity and admire the beauty of the natural wilderness, especially the mountains, which I considered to be a citadel for all of nature. I read about the mythical god, Pan, an idea really, and equated this Godliness with nature, God's creation, the only way to see the deity.

As I expanded my mind and body, my views of the contemporary scene mellowed into a resigned sense of peace without honor. I made a truce with demons that I once would have railed against. I created my own world within the grounds of the asylum, satisfied myself with the possible and pondered many thoughts that I hoped would lead me to a more hopeful and balanced view of reality. I edited photographs by day and my life by night – locked inside my apartment where I devoured a wide variety of books with a restless passion, or in a theatre where I studied the films that dared to comment on society. Within myself, there was an all-knowing but misunderstood feeling. My head became like a sponge for counterculture thought. I tempered my mind into quicksilver, my body into muscle, moving deliberately and steadfastly to balance mind and body, emotion and spirit, the essential four, which must advance together in balance. Finally it came together.

I stashed much of the money from dad's house in the bonds, spent some of it on sophisticated weaponry for the Mafia, found with the help of a Cuban photographer whose brother knew a man who trafficked in guns for the South American trade. For two pay-offs and four thousand dollars, part of which was left to me by my dad, now dead too, I had enough firepower to create serious problems for the Cosa Nostra. I focused my thoughts on the pompous and evil cretins who had created their cancerous Sicilian society as a tumor within our own. Finally, I had a worthwhile goal in my life, one that would make a significant contribution to society, to make things better, far more than my telling but passive photographs ever did. And as I drove, I would have plenty of time to plot and scheme.

On a selected Monday morning, the van was serviced and ready. I awoke in my sleeping bag on the bare floor of my empty apartment. Everything was gone, down to the drapes and the empty pop bottles under the sink. I wanted it to be exactly like this, so I had planned it. At last I had begun planning my life, and not drifting aimlessly, like a clot of seaweed dipping in the waves, or a city full of daily laborers thinking endlessly about all the things they had to do. I would concern myself only with feeding my mind and body and spirit.

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, my gear packed neatly in the van, I looked at my confident countenance. My blonde beard was trimmed neatly, my close-cropped head appropriately tanned from the hours of devoted running up and down the neighborhood streets. My chin was appropriately lifted too, and I vowed to keep it that way while I first explored my dark side, then the other.

With my forefinger, I rubbed the wet remains of a bar of Ivory soap and scrawled three letters across the mirror.

XIT. My exit. My opening farewell.

Chapter 2: BORDERLINE

The bridge was broad at Vicksburg. I looked through the steel girders and down into the muddy water that flows from the farm belt. The Mississippi River used to flood the delta regularly, depositing rich midwestern soil to grow bountiful crops. The flood control projects prevent most of the flooding now, and the soil just washed down the river and out into the Gulf, or in piles up down in Louisiana and has to be dredged to keep the shipping channels open. All the while the delta soil loses fertility and requires heavier doses of chemical fertilizers, the run-off of which mixes with the myriad of pesticides used to fight grass, weeds and insects to flow together into the streams. Nature repeated befouled. I crossed the bridge, but it only went to Louisiana – a bleak landscape of idle farmland and gray March day. This year I wouldn't see familiar fields of soybeans and cotton. There would be fresher, brighter images – flower-strewn mountain meadows, awash in yellow and sunshine, and snowy crowns of mountaintops growing larger before my on the road northwest out of Denver.

A pothole awakened me from my thoughts. I was a few miles out of Tallulah. Battered and besmirched clapboard houses sat in junk-littered yards, poverty sores on the side of my two-lane blacktop. As usual, I had avoided the Interstate, to feel the pulse of the people going about their tacky lives.

I could feel my own presence on the highway, while my green van droned easily onward, over creased and cracked asphalt. I held my eyes on the road ahead. I glared at a muddy pickup truck with a gun rack on back, coming on strong, not inch, and the khaki-clad denizen with a tobacco chaw large enough that I could recognize it on the fly. He whizzed by, and out of mind.

The van was clean and well oiled, filled with gas, and holding all the creature comforts that I considered necessary. And I knew it was necessary to draw the line on such contrivances, the other hand being soft decadence, the failure of self-reliance. I had a full ice chest, a fruit crate full of groceries, another with a modest selection of clothes and a gallon of water. My backpack hanging on the hook was fully stocked, with a hatchet and space, a sleeping bag and green sponge rubber ground pad positioned outside. Snowshoes hung nearby, and assorted tools. My weapons were in the two long crates, packed securely and nailed together, and meticulously stenciled by my own hand with a sign-making kit: Peatross Sound Company, Meridian, Mississippi. Clever disguise.

Single bunk beds were hooked up against either side, heavily braced by fold-up iron supports that fit snugly against the bottom. The other two sleeping bags were folded up with the cots, ready for each evening's sleep. Space is tight in a van and you have to make it count.

The wind swirled all around me in my moving house, my fortress, and I sucked in the feeling of it like a man hungering for a revelation, feeling and tasting everything fiercely to make a good feeling, even more so that I really was. I stretched. And felt. And it was just the beginning of the solitary control I was taking over my life. In Tallulah, it quickly changed. As if by cosmic decree I was to be thrown into intimate conflict with these ordained people.

It was just a greasy truck stop, the kind that offers a half-acre of free parking for the truckers' rigs, and waitresses who know the value of a truly fresh cup of coffee. I walked in with my long, confident stride, eyeing my reflection in the glass. In control. I ordered coffee and wished the waitress a "Good morning" with my usual wry smile. Then I watched the people and felt the scene. I always do. As if checking it all out from on high somewhere.

It was a little later. The cursing was from a woman, from the outside. I gazed intently out into the sun-washed gravel parking lot and saw it all.

She had tight blue jeans and a feisty temper. But a truck driver with a western shirt and an overhanging gut kept throwing things out of the cab anyway, pulling them out of the sleeper and tossing them with disdain out onto the dusty lot.

"You redneck mother fucker!" she shouted up. "Come down here and I'll kick your balls up your ass."

The man was through. He climbed down to confront. "Don't overload your ass now," he warned. "Look, I picked up you and your friend. I try to do you a favor. An' you smoke that shit in my rig and risk getting' me in trouble with the law."

"That ain't the problem, hot shot."

"Now this is where you're getting' off—"

"Where the hell you been for the last twenty years, man. This stuff ain't nothin' any more. You been locked up in a church somewhere?" She was lean and hard, with small erect breast outlined clearly through her tight black sweater, and tighter jeans wrapping her long legs. She had tousled black curls, falling around a narrow, suntanned face that was gritted just now in brazen anger. Her denim jacket lay at her feet."

"It's against the law. That's all the hell I know or wanna know," said the driver. "Now I ain't messin' with you no longer. You take your friend and get yourselves another ride an' stay away from my truck." He pointed a large mangled mechanic's finger at her. "And if you make me mad, now, I'm gonna call the law."

"Be real, man." She drawled. "You're just mad 'cause I wouldn't let you feel me up. Fuck you, okay!" She slapped dust out of the jacket and grabbed up a scarred and discolored suitcase and sleeping bag. "When you get out in the boondocks, you meet all kinds of weirdo," she said to no one in particular. She trudged toward the coffee shop. "Come on Rags. Let's get the hell out of here."

I saw the other one for the first time, slipping quietly from around the huge fender. Another girl, also in her 20s. Her hair was as sun-leached blonde as the dark girl's was sun burnt back, but long and straight. Falling freely over her shoulders. She was brown-skinned too, and strikingly beautiful. With finely-chiseled cheeks and pale blue eyes and a body amply camouflaged by baggy white pants and floppy sweatshirt. She clutched a brown-papered parcel to her bosom with one hand and struggled with both a sleeping bag and a canvas knapsack in the other, stumbling behind the dark-haired girl into the restaurant. I watched them intently as they pushed their way through the heavy door, clumsily trying to control their loads.

They dumped everything back by the pay telephone, two booths from mine. The dark one took the receiver, biting her lip, brow furrowed, listening inn vain. Her dark hair was long and kinky, either a black sheep, she was, or an electric lady. Her black corkscrew curls fell about her forehead like a helmet. Her intently worried eyes said she would do battle.

And the blonde one. Her blue eyes were compelling. They were angelic, open and pure, oblivious to the hubbub around her, just calmly resolved to it. But they moved quickly like a cat's, staring intently, briefly, then darting away, to catch every nuance of the passing scene. I could only look at her and feel all of this.

And she saw me. But the blue wave of her wide, ocean eyes swept over me for only an instant, and she turned, like a gentle gazelle, turning in the face of the lion. She wouldn't look again.

The dark one got an answer. "Hey. This is Chelsea... Yeah... Look, Aunt Marlina we're stuck here in some Louisiana truck stop... Right, just over the line from Mississippi... Just calm down and let me tell you. Look, the motorcycle is busted, finished. I sold it... That's right. Look, it was really worn out, a piece of shit, okay? Listen, I got a bus ticket that got us up to Jackson, Mississippi, and we were out of money again. So I decided we'd hitchhike to Dallas, all right? Now, can you pick us up there?"

She seemed disgustingly arrogant, young and foolish and stuck on her self like the whole self-loving, self-gratifying generation. But the other one was different. She was listening. And she was very calm.

"Aunt Marlina," the dark one started again, "that's the best we can... No, we've got to hitch. I just don't have any money. We're busted... we got enough for a cheeseburger, okay?... What difference does it make what we sold the motorcycle for? Listen, Aunt Marlina. I bought that bike with my own money. I worked on that sucker and I'm tellin' you it was all over. I didn't think it was gonna make the rip in the first place, but, listen, I had to get out of that place, so I split, okay?"

An angry young woman. Probably openly sexual. My fascination grew. A long pause in the conversation. She was really getting mad. I would see how she handled it.

"Now, look! I've got no more money for the phone. I'll call you from Dallas and come get us – please! I'll worry about getting to Dallas. You worry about all the other shit in the world. That's all you've done for years. No, operator... I'll call you tomorrow probably. An' I'm still the toughest bitch on the road, believe me. No, operator. I said—" She stared at the receiver for one long spiteful second, parsed her lips in angry self-control, then replaced it gently. The blue eyes were looking intently at her, hungry for an answer, a thought. I wondered what it would be.

The dark one dropped her forehead and her long, frizzled black hair into her hands for a few seconds. Then she looked up coldly. "Come on, Rags, let's get a cheese burger and think about the future."

The blonde girl had further acknowledged my presence with occasional darting glances. I knew that the frizzled one had seen me too, but she had not reacted. They shuffled their gear around in the booth by the phone.

"No," she told the blonde one. "Leave it here and let's sit over there." It was the table next to my booth. They moved toward me, the blonde girl hesitantly. The dark one dropped into a chair, facing me. Her companion sat down uneasily, clutching the brown parcel against her breast protectively, looking at me now with those wide, searching eyes. I stared at her, and then at the dark one, who looked me over with something like wry derision. I was taciturn. It sometimes unnerved people, but not her.

"Hell, well you know I did notice you when I we walked in," she said to me evenly. "That's what you wanted, huh?" She paused for only a second. "You know I can tell you're not from around here. So where are you headed?"

"Right through Dallas."

"Hey, well how about that? Are you dangerous to ride with? Or do you just look that way?"

"I don't think you know me well enough to ask a bunch of questions."

“I got it. You’re a mystic, right? That’s why you got rid of all your hair, Kung Fu, huh?”

“Right. I see things. I see that you’re a punk roadrunner who’s broke and stranded.”

She gave a forced laugh. “Well, don’t think it’s gonna get you laid ‘cause it ain’t. I’m no bum either, big man. I’ve seen places you just think about.”

“Maybe you’d like to show me some of them,” I said calmly. “Or maybe you’d like to see some of mine. What’s your name, anyway? I like you.”

She looked at me in amazement. “What? – Oh yeah, let’s be big buddies, okay?”

“What’s the matter? You don’t need a friend? Looks like to me you do.”

“After all that shit, you wanna be friends? Look, I just need a ride.”

“I’d give a ride to a friend,” I said. “And even friends have disagreements. I like people who can take care of themselves. Looks like you can do that. You’d be a good friend because you can take care of you own shit, okay. I’d count on it.”

“Well, hell, yes,” she replied positively. “But I’m not too damned sure we want to climb in a car with you.” A waitress was finally making her way over. “Let’s eat and get the hell outa Dodge, Rags. This guy’s comin’ on a little too intense.”

She ordered cheeseburgers and Cokes for both of them, the blonde girl still having nothing to say.

“So, “ the dark girl began again when the waitress had gone. “And who are you anyway?”

“Xavier Thorn.”

“Bullshit. Xavier? I guess you’re from Cajun land, right?”

“No. What’s yours?”

“Chelsea. I’m Chelsea. This is my friend, Colombine. I call her Rags. She usually looks like one, okay? That’s ‘cause we can’t afford to dress up like whores or debutantes. She just ain’t talkin’ and you ought to just let her alone. What do you do, anyway?”

“I’m a photographer. I’m traveling around the country shooting photographs. I want to see what the place is really like.”

“Yeah? What place?”

“The country. The whole country.”

“Big ambition, huh? She shrugged and leaned back. She was fidgety. “You know, you’re a real hard-lookin’ person, I mean, you’re handsome and all, but you act kinda stiff, like you’re kinda mad at everybody.”

“You don’t know me,” I interrupted. “Where do you get off making that kind of stupid judgment about me?”

"I've seen your type and every other type," she said. "The world's full of male macho animals, you know. And all of their brains are in their peckers."

"I wouldn't want to disagree with the voice of experience. And since you have so much, why don't you go to work for me?"

"You better not be implying I'm a hooker?"

"No. I need a personal secretary, a girl Friday. Mostly, you'd be driving. I've got a van. And I'll be doing other things. I'll be shooting photos, and making notes and writing. Rags can help if she wants... whatever. I'm loose about that."

"What the hell? We just gonna travel? For how long?"

"Don't know right now. It can be just as comfortable as sittin' still. I'll buy the food and you cook it. We'll eat together. We'll do some hiking up in the mountains. You'll have to cook some over a campfire. Surely you can handle it."

"This is kinda crazy. How much you paying?"

"Minimum wage for one, room and board for both of you, such as it is. We'll sleep in the van sometimes and outside sometimes, in a tent. Sometimes we'll get a room or a campsite. It's all subject to end for you two without notice, but I'll pay your bus fares to Dallas from wherever we are. Is if a deal?"

"I'm not fuckin' you, you know. And you're damn sure not touchin' her." Chelsea gestured to a wide-eyed Colombine.

"Let's keep that out of the deal, okay?" I told her. "If we want to score we'll have to do that on our own."

"I don't think you heard what I said," she told me coldly.

"Look, Chelsea. I won't touch this... young girl. And they couldn't pay me to jump you. I don't know wither one of you. If you want the job, all right, but I'll want you to do it and not complain about it. I'm not gonna take any shit from you."

"If you don't want any, then don't dish any out," she said defiantly. I looked at her coldly, feeling like a snake trying in vain to hypnotize its prey. I wanted them in the van, on the road. This was exciting.

"All I want is somebody to help drive and do chores," I lied.

"Look, dude. I don't know you, okay? You could be an ax murderer for all I know. We'd be crazy just to throw in with you."

I smiled in a calculating way. "You're a lot safer with me than you'd be out hitch hiking. I've got wheels, money, credit cards, and a purpose in life. I don't know you two. You act like you could be dangerous with all that cussin' and carryin' on, but I'm willing to take a chance."

She was a little more subdued now. The blonde girl, meanwhile, was studying me with serious eyes. "What kind of pictures do you make?" Chelsea asked.

“Landscapes, people, small towns. I’m working on a book project.”

“And where would we go?”

“Into the mountains, the Rockies. Over in New Mexico first and then north.”

“Can’t drive too fast in the mountains.”

“That’s right.” I grinned as if happy that a revelation had come to her. “Did you ever like to travel without being in any kind of hurry, with no place particular to go?”

“Yeah,” she said. “All the time. I’m just used to deciding where myself.”

“You ever been in the mountains?”

“Sure thing. I’ve been lots of places.”

“So have I,” I said, “and tell me about Rags now, for real.” I turned to face her. “Won’t she talk to us—at all?”

“Nope. No way. But she hears what you’re sayin’. And she understands what’s happenin’. Don’t thing she don’t Can you handle that?”

“What’s the problem with her?”

“Not something we need to talk about. If I work for you awhile, she stays too, and she don’t have to talk. And no more questions, okay? Is it a deal?”

I pause before answering. “I reckon.” The cheeseburgers arrived. Chelsea set upon hers.

“I need money for the phone,” she said between bites. “I got to call aunt Marlina back.”

I fished out a quarter and slapped it a little loudly on the table. “You got it,” I said. “And you need o tell me something else. What were you smoking in that fellow’s truck? Pot, I reckon.”

“I do an occasional joint,” she said, pulling apart her partly eaten cheeseburger to sprinkle it vigorously with salt. “Surely you got no objectives to that, have you?” The guy wanted to get laid and couldn’t do it if you wanna know the truth.”

“When you’re with me, you smoke when it’s okay with me. I’m not getting’ busted on this trip.”

“You tryin’ to adopt me or what?” she asked, clamping down on another large bite.

“I’m planning to stay out of trouble. I won’t hesitate to dump you like that trucker did.”

“You are a little tight-assed, aren’t you?”

I glared at her. She was unfazed by it. “You will find me calm...confident...candid...cool...and in control.” I ticked off my arrogant spiel. “If that’s tight-assed, that’s okay. How about you? Have you got a tight ass or a loose one?”

Her smile was sardonic, her silence calculated before she spoke. The mangled remains of the cheeseburger lay before her. “You’re tight-assed, all right,” she said with the same quick-change calm that I had seen her use before. “You’re also overbearing and self-righteous, and I haven’t figured out a single reason why you should be.” She grabbed up the burger and set upon it again, ignoring me.

I chuckled so that she would hear me. “Well, you’ll get to find out for yourself,” I said calmly. “It ought to be interesting for both of us.” I glanced at Colombine. “Maybe all of us.” She peered up at me with those incredible blue eyes.

Chelsea wiped her mouth and threw down her wadded napkin. She looked at me like hard candy. “There’s something weird about you,” she said confidently. “I’m at least gonna stay around long enough to figure out what it is.”

“Look who’s talkin’,” I said with my wry smile.

So began an adventure.

Chapter 3: ROADWORK

The drone of the van became our life force in the weeks ahead as we flowed westward to the mountains, then northward, over passes, back into the grassy planes again. We courted the cactus and the agaves; we sampled county stores and peed on ditch banks of bare earth. The films I exposed piled up like pupae in their canisters. I had no market for pictures, but I shot them anyway.

I told her to shut up when I had heard enough. Again and again. But she was irrepressible, and an able vagabond. She drove and I wrote observations on my pad, and lists of subjects photographed. I studied the maps and guided us north into Colorado.

One might wonder how any of this suited my purpose. My mission had to end with a blow against the Mafia, which was symbolic to me of all sins, a devil incarnate.

But I hesitated to strike while we traveled and waited on the full blossom of spring. Strangely, the reason I had pause was that I refused to be afraid. I realized that I could die in my Quixotic quest, and I would ache with regrets as I died that I had not felt and tasted the treasures of Pan more, had not opened my eyes to natural life more in my continuing effort to understand the lessons it held. I decided to taste it fully in the mountains as I planned my strike, to prepare myself for death if it came to that, and leave myself no regrets. I had to be fearless in the end. I would practice for it.

I saw her naked, bathing in the cold creek. She didn't mind. She was too strong. I sometime equated strength with daring, with a lack of inhibitions. There was no shame in her body or mind, only a fire burning out of control. Too hot to approach. I would cool her not breath. If she were cruel to me, I might choose to quench her flames.

"Why don't you lighten up a little?" She was guiding the van steadily, tending a can of beer and a cigarette, propped at a jaunty angle.

"What's it to you?" I replied.

"I hate to see somebody go around so tensed-up. Why don't you relax a little?"

"I don't need your advice, Chelsea. I have a plan for everything and it's all worked out. I have more answers than you have questions."

"That's a pile of shit. You think you're smart because you put on a tough face and use common sense. Hell, three-quarters of the world's population is doing that and look where it's got us."

"I know the solution to all problems," I told her. "But there's no demand for rational solutions – only political ones."

We argued mostly with the morning newspapers, while drinking coffee and sampling breakfasts at dinky cafes. She plied me with questions and my arrogant judgments flowed like venom, eliciting from her laughter or acid in reply. I asked her opinion and looked for the opportunity to dispute it. She pulled the best from me because she was truly smart. And clever. Devious. I knew that she had been hurt very badly.

Current issues fell like fodder before our swords. And we came to agree more often. We dismissed the President with the language of the poolroom. We complained of greedy corporations, bungling bureaucracies, and bleeding heart judges. We looked for ways to disagree in the first week, and then seemed to finally accept our agreements. After tearing down our stack of blocks repeatedly, one day, someday, we must have decided to let them stand, and add others. Within a week we had something tangible rising from the ruins.

I paid her in cash. She stashed it in a pouch that hung from her belt. In her right pocket she kept a large work knife, which she used to clean her nails. One night she sat by the campfire and whittled a whistle from a piece of mesquite, but it didn't work very well. She tossed it disdainfully into the bushes without emotion, without a word and went to bed.

And I sat there, alone by the flickering fire, watching it lift its dark spirits up into the trees. I planned the vengeance at time like these, feeling the presence of Pan around me in the dark woods.

She looked at me with the cocksure glint. Soon after we met. "Well fuck me in the ass. What have we here?"

I had lit the joint and now held it out to her, without a smile or a word. She took it.

"You're getting' more like a human being all the time, Thorn Bird. Is this good stuff?"

"Don't call me anything but my name, all right?" I spoke calmly. She was taking a hard toke, looked up from it to judge the mood behind the words. I showed her my sincerity, knowing it was a virtue she respected. I was learning other things about her too. As she must be. We were ever moving.

"Why didn't you tell me you get high?"

"It's not important," I told her. "I didn't tell you that I drink scotch either."

Colombine. She was a fair wisp of a girl. And she was serene.

In a logical sense, it could mean only one thing that she was retarded, would never comprehend enough to be sufficiently unhappy and make her place in society. She could never know anxiety or anger, guilt or apprehension.

But I soon discovered that this whole premise was wrong. She had carefully unwrapped the brown parcel, folded the string and tucked it away, and revealed her cache: a Walker Percy novel, a selection of science fiction short stories, a fantasy novel, a volume of Proust, Faulkner's "Light in August," and "Finnegan's Wake" in hardcover.

"She must be better-read than you are. What's with the silence then?"

"In the first place," said Chelsea, bristling. "I'm not livin' so I can read more books than somebody else. Rags gets her peace of mind from a lot deeper than that anyway. She's cosmic."

I ignored Chelsea's anger and spoke directly to her. "Colombine..." she looked up at me with knowing eyes, a mind that clearly comprehended. But she seemed to have no will to speak.

"You're wasting your time," said Chelsea. As if on that cue, Colombine looked back into the book, quietly reposed on her sleeping bag behind Chelsea's seat. I was driving; Chelsea was trimming her toenails with the brown knife.

"Look, Colombine," I said loudly. She looked up again, still angelic. "I would like to carry on a conversation with you, okay? Chelsea says you're able to talk and I'd be very pleased if you'd talk to me...and be my friend." I was looking back intermittently, holding the van in the road.

She smiled sweetly, reached out and put her gentle hand on my beard. I turned to her. She drew it back quickly, then kissed her tiny finger and placed it upon my lips. I veered back on the blacktop.

"Looks like you've made a friend, Thorn," said Chelsea, laughing. "Not much for a trick, though. Colombine loves everybody."

"How can that be?"

"Beats me," said Chelsea. "Guess you'll have to ask her that one."

Colombine smiled and began to read again. She had insulated herself. She carried a secret too.

There were so many scenes in the adventure. Soon we were friends to a kind, Chelsea and I, both fully armored still but accustomed to the clank of all that ancient mail that lay between us. As modern moralists, we were sometimes as simple-minded as a joust.

We fashioned ourselves as satirists, with a broad stroke that gathered in Moliere and Mel Brooks. We considered ourselves both clever and smart, both sensible and mystical, both right and fair. Often we didn't agree, and often we railed together.

Lebanon? I cursed our stupidity at being drawn into another Viet Nam. She assailed the government's constant support of tinhorn military dictators to protect capitalist investments. I agreed.

The blighted economy. I preached calmly about corporate greed, union greed, and public greed. She said the big banking interests ran the Republicans and so the country. I agreed again. And added the big media in my blitz, an afterthought.

Crime? She advocated capital punishment to thin out the prison populace and make room for others, so fewer would get paroled. I drew a plan to reform the judicial system and she accepted it. She was becoming smarter in my eyes every day. I like her more.

And sex was soon imbedded in my masculine mind. The sides of her stylish little breasts through the deep but of her tank top, and the textured outline of her tiny puckered nipples swelled my blue jeans when I sat beside her and allowed my mind to gain control. But I stayed in the back much of the time, poring over my thoughts and notes. For some reason, there were many things I wanted to put on paper, my yellow legal pad. There were messages to a number of people, and messages to myself.

Dear Delores,

If I had made enough money, you could have been home that day, loving and tending that “Bambino” we never got to have. I could have worked harder, learned more, and acted smarter.

She used to love a rocking chair, stitching, her bare feet bending and springing her back with ever-creaky stroke. Those funny long toes.

New Mexico by night. Endless purple skies in a wash of pink. I stood outside the van and peed on tumbleweed, watching from there as she brought the fire up to a crackling blaze. It was a cool night in the desert. The smoke from my pouring urine rose up and dissipated in the chill.

Dear Jesse (Rev. Jackson),

I peed with the blacks and all my scraggly white friends on the side of the road to Selma. I ate with them, laughed and slapped their shoulder, clenched my once-clean white lands into their dark and calloused ones. They were right in what they did. And I did little more than record it. They used my friendship, but I was glad to give it. Today, you want to bloc vote. Racists. You want the United Negro College fund. That too. It’s time to integrate with us. Just another pressure group to solicit money for black favors, black concessions, black largess. Segregated solutions. Can’t you see the government is broke?

It was still too cold for her tank tops, except in the van. I was grateful because I didn’t know how to court her. And I was beginning to ache for her nakedness next to mine.

The fire was hot. I warmed my backside. She made a hash from meat and potatoes. We ate it and dozed of watching the fire. Dreaming of the weapons I had to use. I knew I had to test them, but I didn’t want to drive her away. I wanted her with me.

She was gone.

Her bag on the other side of the fire shined amber in the fire glow. Empty. Colombine was reading in the open van, by the lantern’s light. I walked straight to her.

“Where did she go?”

Her look was soft, vulnerable. Would she wonder at my anxiety? Surely she wondered that I was staring at her, wanting a reply, when she had never given one.

She smiled and pulled a yellow flower from her hair, the one she had picked soon after we pitched camp here on the cool desert. I took it and she pointed into the desert with her tiny finger, and then turned back to the book. It was called “Love in the Ruins.” I put the bloom gently in my jacket pocket and walked forthrightly in the darkness.

Dear Sandra,

I don't know what happened by the pond any more than you do, but it has caused us all nothing but pain. Why carry it on? I've hurt Delores too much already. She didn't deserve it. I want to make it up. It wasn't the act that did it but the lie. The worst assault upon a woman. I will always tell the truth from now on, painful or not. A woman has intuitive powers anyway – no way to hide a lie, we cock-dominated males.

The moonlight bathed the darkness and made it hospitable. I walked lightly, quietly, polishing my stealth. I glimpsed her ahead, or thought I did, in a grove of mesquite trees. I slinked closer to the ground, picking my way carefully, straining my night vision to select the next muffled step that would move me ever closer. She was there, under the tree. I wondered what she was doing – and myself as well.

She leaned back against the trunk, as if resting, stretching her body and clasping her lower limbs behind her. Sensuous. She wrapped her arms through the branches as if tied there, and slowly twisted her body, her thighs, there in the darkness.

The scene unfolded before me. She unbuckled her belt and pulled out her shirttail, then popped the shirt's snaps one by one to free her body, and open her bare breast to the faint moon glow. Her hand moved effortlessly to spread her warm heat in the cool night. I watched, and was overpowered by the lust of Pan.

Her body writhed slowly and I moved toward her, quietly, unhurried. Naked thighs rotating slowly, responding to her prodding massage. Silent steps. Closer. Soft neck exposed, breast erect in the cool night. I was upon her.

She jerked alert, eyes wide, as my hand covered her mouth quickly and my naked body pressed to hers. My mouth covered her lips and my taut hardness slipped easily into her soft warm honey. Our bodies quivered and she moaned aloud. I cushioned her tight little butt from the rough bark of the mesquite and we reveled in our slow-moving passion in the quiet night. It soon exploded into rigors and groans of ecstasy and I was spent there in her arms under the mesquite. A coyote howled somewhere out in the night. The only other sound was our soft breathing. I felt her naked breast against my chest and softly traced my fingers down her slender side.

Her attack caught me by surprise. As she pushed me away, her knee came up swiftly between my legs, a bolt of pain, and I crumpled weakly before her with a groan, pain throbbing out through helpless hand that cradled my groin. I was on my knees – God, the pain! – and doubled over on my side while she pulled away, to somewhere. I didn't care for now, until I could clench my teeth hard enough to stop the throbbing. Then, I thought, I would beat her senseless. I heard the rustle of her clothes.

“Hey, listen Thorn, I'm sorry, okay?”

I looked up, forcing an expression of calm anger, hoping that she understood that I was going to wreak havoc upon her momentarily.

“Thorn... Hey, you'll be okay in a minute. You were just way out of line, all right? You took away my privacy and I just got pissed off about it, okay?”

I got to my feet uncertainly and hobbled over to where I had thrown my pants. Gently, I pulled them on while she complained.

“Look, I just don't like to be bucked with. I told you that. Don't take liberties with me or I'll be pissed. I can't help it. That's just the way I am.”

I slipped on my shirt without speaking.

“You gonna clam up on me right? You’re gonna be mad and stew about it. You know damned well you were out of line, Thorn, and I’ve already apologized.”

“Your apology ain’t worth shit because you got your rocks off too. It’s just something you’re using to keep from taking responsibility for what you did.”

“Bullshit,” she retorted. “I can handle your ass or anybody else’s. I’m not anybody’s piece of ass, and you better believe it.”

I walked up to her, adjusting my shirttail, wary of her knee, tightly wound inside.

“I guess I’ve misjudged you,” I said quietly. “You’re not interested in having a lover, but you do want to take responsibility for your actions.”

“Right on both counts,” she said stubbornly, chin high.

The anger subsided in me sometime during the night, while I sat on a high rock overlooking the desert plain. The flicker of the campfire was the only light in view, though the distant glow that covered the north horizon was surely the lights of Durango. We would go through there tomorrow. Eventually, I was calm.

I shouldn’t have struck her so hard. I shouldn’t have disappeared in the rush of the moment.

When I got back, the campfire had subsided to a bed of glowing coals. I added more wood and watched the blaze renew. She was there in her bag, asleep. I finally walked over to see her more closely, wondering what I would say if she awoke.

She rustled uneasily in her bag. The fire glow showed her cheek, bruised and swollen. I clenched my teeth. My fingers rustled through my jacket pocket, finding Colombine’s tiny yellow flower. I placed it gently beside her face and slipped away.

I was again taciturn the next morning, an escape, and unrepentant. I said nothing to her as we handled our business, though I noticed that she work the withered flower in her hair.

She appeared not mad, but resigned, willing to plod ahead further and see what the adventure would bring. There was hardly anything else to do, for either of us.

If only her bruise did not lie between us, a puffed blue ugly thing that seemed symbolic not of my strength but of my weakness. But then she must have struck out at me from a weakness too, out of that tortured woman-thought that my sexual initiative was a lustful affront. Women think of sex as many things; too seldom as a mutual sharing of affection. But I knew that men had to shoulder much of the blame for alienating and confusing these perfectly wrought sexual partners. I held my façade and wondered if I wanted to challenge her to further episodes. I accepted that scrap of yellow flower as an invitation.

For now, I wrote.

Dear President Reagan,

You were right, of course, about Grenada. The bleeding hearts want us to fight the Cuban rat nest with caution and consideration. Even after Beirut, where we've tried to keep religious power fanatics from slaughtering one another and paid in blood for it. Even after Iran's hostage embarrassment – heartache. Even after Viet Nam, a vainglorious crusade that crippled our minds, our hearts and spirits. We have to learn to play by their rules for therein as their advantage over us. Those who want to fight will always have an edge over those who don't. But those who have the big guns (us) should always whip those who don't...

And Colombine read. As my coolness to Chelsea increased, for some reason, I wanted to show a kindness to our gentle companion.

"How about some ice cream?" I asked her. Chelsea was up front driving and me in the back, propped on a cot, hand cramped from writing. Colombine didn't acknowledge me, languidly combing through her long hair, looking wistfully at nothing at all.

"Colombine..."

She looked at me now, her face attentive and questioning.

"You don't have to speak. Just a nod for yes, and shake your head for no. You'll do that for me, won't you?"

She gazed at me as if amused. Then she made her way to me and kissed me gently on the lips, her tiny fingers touching my beard. The sweet second was quickly gone, and she retreated to her seat.

I heard Chelsea laugh from the front. "You're wasting your time, lover boy," she called back.

I made my way to the ice chest and pulled out two beers, rustled in a sack for a lime and maneuvered to the front, to the seat beside her.

"I told you once not to call me anything but my name. You've still got one good eye; I wouldn't press my luck." I handed her a beer.

She took it and popped the top. "I'll be ready for you next time, mother fucker."

I sliced the lime in half with my knife and handed one to her. "You take life too damned serious. We were having a good time and you go apeshit all of a sudden."

She crushed the lime juice atop the can, holding wheel with her forearms. "I enjoy a good fuck as much as anybody, but you've got no damn right just comin' up and stickin' it in. Who the hell asked you?"

I crushed my lime, making a precarious pool on the can, which I lightly salted. Then I flooded by throat with the shocking cold of the beer and the tangy, salty citrus. I laughed. "Damn, woman. I got pretty horny watchin' you make it with yourself. I figured I should give you a hand... or what have you."

She guzzled her beer too. "You didn't figure anything. I know here your brains are."

"In that case, it looks like I would have stuffed some sense into you. But you still have that nine pound chip on your shoulder."

"Fuck you." She guzzled again.

"Anytime."

"You self-righteous bastard. You followed me, spied on me, and sneaked up on me like a damn juvenile. All I want is a little respect, God dammit!" Chelsea's rancor had loaded her foot. The van was approaching eighty."

"Slow down," I said calmly, and pause. "You enjoyed it. I don't know what you're so pissed about. Don't you want a little adventure in your life?"

"Respect. That's all mother-fucker," she said, "just a little respect, which is impossible for a macho man like you."

"If you want my respect, you'll have to earn it," I told her. "I don't respect you just because you're a female. And I sure as hell don't respect you for kneeling me in the balls. I didn't do a damn thing but try to make some love with you."

"Next time," she suggested hardly. "I think you'd better ask."

I chuckled, drained the beer with a succession of gulps, and crushed the can with one hand. "Don't hold your breath," I said, then stuffed the can into the litter bag and made my grand exit to the back of the van.

"You'd be wasting yours."

I knew she would get the last word. It was amusing. And it was all kind of bittersweet, this feeling inside me. I didn't understand it then. My satisfaction with it all.

Dear Dr. Lowen,

I took your humanities course in 1958. Thought you were a supercilious fop. You probably still are. I remember that you laughed at me and said it was too late to drop the course. It would have to be a WF, withdrawn failing. That it would be on my permanent record. I told you I didn't give a shit. I still don't.

I know you're not too interested in all this, but before you die you should know that things like that aren't important in the real world. The WF has never haunted me, never been more than an amusing footnote. It grieves me to know that his and a million other trivialities are important on college campuses, where most people can't even write readable prose.

By the way, Dante's Inferno is a little dated too. Have you noticed yet? We get stuff like that on the news all the time.

Truly,

An Educated Alum (WF)

If a loathsome professor was not important, I wondered to myself, then why did I bother to address him? There was no one to answer the question, no any of the others that seemed to compound and complex themselves in my brain.

Dear Delores,

You told me a funny story. How the sudden fright of your snowball at my face got rid of my hiccups. And you laughed, red-nosed in a your will cap. And I laughed with you. No more hiccups; maybe it was even true. It must have bee, for they were gone. And you are gone now. No more snowballs, no more scenic views. No laughter or tears. I cried on your stone and saw your beautiful body rot away in my sweaty, restless nights, your empty pillow shining in the moon glow. I should have killed him of course, the disturbed man, and the crazy one. I tried not to look at him, cowardly, and they took him for "treatment." I was so foolish in my grief, but I understand now. The system insulates the disturbed, the irrational, through their transgressions be horrible. Speck. Manson. All of them. This frees them from responsibility that everyone else must shoulder. Even mass murderers rarely have to bear up to the misery they so viciously dispense. Unfair. I should have killed him myself, for if he couldn't accept responsibility for his actions, he was unnecessary. Everybody has to go sometime; better to send these people on early. Like melting a snowball – into a splash of water dashed back into a troubled sea.

"What the hell you find to write about?" It was Chelsea from the driver's seat. "You writin' the great American novel?"

"Putting some thoughts on paper. It helps to understand things sometimes if you put them down."

"I thought you knew all the answers. You mean there's really something you don't understand?"

"No. Not really. That's why I want to put some of this wisdom down."

Chelsea's response was a loud laugh. It suited her. Deep-timbered, dominating, as if the laughter had condescended to release her energy, but only in a show of strength, all hail me in good humor but the derision is not mine. It could be a pleasure to encircle her spirit, to encompass it and make ours a part of each other's.

But not now. She eyed the road in amused derision. He guessed she would not reply.

Dear Chelsea,

I could rip off your panties with my bare teeth. And more...

They wrapped the books in pieces of brown paper bags. We got them from the supermarket. They took the ball of twine and wrapped them, bought books of stamps and mailed them. And there we were in Trinidad, Colorado on a wind-chilled day, waiting for Chelsea to tie her knot around Colombine's helpful finger.

"There it is," said Chelsea. "Even the post office can't fuck up this package. Give me the pen, Rags."

"Where are you sending all these books?"

She had snapped out at me the last time I asked with a curt, "Home." I had no reason to expect more of an answer, for she had evaded any question that might have illuminated her background or experiences.

"I've already answered that question," she said, printing on the brown package with a firm, broad stroke. I tried in vain to read it in the dim light.

"You've got an interesting scenario going here. You and Colombine search out every bookrack you can find. You by books, and sometimes you rip off books—"

"What the fuck you mean?" boomed Chelsea.

"I see you reach through your coat and rip off books, Chelsea. I even covered for you back in Canon City to keep the guy from seeing what you were doing."

"I don't need your help, you God damned sanctimonious, pious bastard. And I want you to keep your nose out of my affairs – and hers!"

I ignored the outburst and replied, hopefully with infuriating calm.

"And then after you...requisition these books, and Colombine reads them, you mail them somewhere, maybe to some great big library in the sky." Chelsea forced herself to be calm too. I thought that we were worthy of each other, she and I, because we could both assert control.

"Xavier," she said to me. "These books are for Colombine's future. All the books she's read over all of our travels over the last several years. They're being kept in a safe place until the time that Colombine quits traveling with me and builds a nest. She'll have them all there waiting for her. Now, does that satisfy you?"

"Why does it piss you off that I take an interest in you?"

She grabbed the van door and pulled it open noisily. "I know what you want, to get in my pants—"

"Don't flatter yourself."

"—You're just like every other macho cunt hound. Hell, it's not me. It's anything with a pussy."

"If that's the kind of men you've associated with it's no wonder you're bitter."

She stood outside the van in the cold win, hand on the door, and looked at me. Her eyes dared me to hurt her. And she waited to close it an instant too long.

She realized it quickly and slammed it with a vengeance.

Colombine and I sat here quietly in the noon cay, insulated from the lazy traffic, locked inside ourselves. I watched Chelsea's confident stride, daring her way through the traffic, across the street and into the stone building, tight jeans accenting her firm little butt, her rugged work shoes slipping nimbly through the glass door.

I looked at Colombine; she showed me her gentle hint of a smile.

"It's too bad we can't talk. Colombine. Maybe you would tell me about yourself, and Chelsea. We might reach some kind of understanding about things and be good friends." I paused, getting no reply. "I like Chelsea okay. She's an okay person. But I'm curious about what makes you so quiet. I might be some help, you know, if I knew how." I spoke earnestly, quietly.

My pause was long and fruitless. She stared at me, still disconcertingly calm, at peace, it seemed, with anything I wanted to say, as if it had no effect on her, provoked no emotion. Say it. I'll listen, but I won't be involved in the bullshit of the world. Chelsea emerged from the post office across the street.

"Well, I guess if you don't want to talk about anything, I guess we'll just go on in our... limited way. Is that okay with you?"

Her tiny hand touched my knee. She looked straight at me, and gently, almost imperceptibly, shook her head. My hear pickup a pounding beat. Chelsea took long, fearless strides across the street.

"So you want me to talk to you?"

She nodded. The wisp of a smile remained.

I was briefly confused. Then I chuckled. What makes me tick? Me. She wants to know. "I thing you've dug up the tap root of a man's problem, sweet lady. We all want to know, but we don't want to reveal. And if you tell me nothing, I have to tell you nothing. That's fair."

Chelsea pulled back the van door with a noisy surge, climbed in, and pulled it shut. I cranked the engine and pulled away, paused for a while before making my move.

"You act like nobody's ever given a shit about you, Chelsea. I don't want you to put me in that category."

"That category's already full. I don't need another road Romeo in there," she spat back.

"Do me a favor," I said deliberately. "Don't compare me to anybody else. I'll do my own living."

"Me too," she said derisively. "I'm not like anybody else, and that's okay."

I drove for a while in silence, and thought it through. In the rear-view mirror, I saw Colombine gazing forlornly, sadly, out the window, but really seeing nothing but her thoughts. My curiosity about her was becoming overwhelming. I spoke without warning.

“We’re going on a three-day hike tomorrow---a change of pace. We’ll shop and get our gear together today and be on the trail by mid-morning tomorrow.” I was calm and direct.

She didn’t reply, only threw me a look of contempt, shook her head and turned to the road. “Macho man,” she mumbled. I seethed but said nothing, only smiled calmly to show her that her cantankerous attitude didn’t matter. I was in control.

Chapter 5; THE REAL

Chelsea must have wondered at first why we would choose to walk over mountains while a perfectly able van sat parked at the trailhead. The view there should have been impressive enough for anyone, she must have thought, though she never revealed her thoughts to me. Her doubts came out in pointed questions, more like statements, that she hoped would give me pause to think.

“I guess you know we’re going to freeze our ass off. This is just April, you know. When the sun does down, the bottom drops out up in the mountains.”

“The forecast is clear, “ I told her succinctly, “and we’ll have a fire. The wood up there is dry.”

“The rangers are going to bust us for building a fire.”

“They’ll have to climb seven miles to do it – after dark.”

“You got everything figured out, huh, Daniel Boone?”

“Listen, Chelsea. You call me names once more –“

“Don’t threaten me, Mister Thorn. Look, I’m not counting on two miserable nights up in the damn snow. I’ll tell you that real fast. I didn’t sign on to be turned into a damned icicle.”

“You’re already an icicle, you douche bag. I’ll make sure you’ve got a big fire to warm your butt. You just make sure you know how to cook on it.”

“I can do any damn thing you can do –“

“That’s what I like to hear.”

“That’s why you’re cookin’ u this little trip, isn’t it? You want to try to show me up. You think you’re so God damned tough.”

“I don’t think. I know. What about you, road woman? Can you make it on your feet or do you have to have motor drive?”

“I can work your ass in the ground. I can outfight you. I can out fuck you,” she told me forthrightly. “People like you have been shittin’ on women for hundreds of years, and “I’m prepared to get some revenge for every damn one of them.”

I sneered at her. “Slow down,” I said calmly, “or you’re gonna have to tell some of that bullshit to a state trooper. He’ll probably think it’s just as silly as I do.”

“It may be silly to you, mother fucker,” she said, calmer herself now, “but anytime you want to challenge me, I’ll be ready.

“Good,” I said. “I can outfight or outfuck you. So I’ll let you know. Meantime, I’ve got a challenge on the board for you. Get a pencil and pad and start a list of provisions.”

“I guess you haven’t given a damn thought to Colombine – whether she can make your macho trip or not.”

“I’ll take good care of Colombine,” I said. “All she’ll need to do is walk along. We’ll rest when she gets tired. It’ll be a healthy workout for all of us. This isn’t Mount Everest, Chelsea.”

She thought for a moment, lips pursed, brow frustrated. “Well, there’s one thing you can count on,” she said calmly. “It certainly won’t give me any problem.”

“Good,” I said. “If you can handle it, anybody can, right Colombine?” I turned to look into her pleasant face, wondering if I would even get a twitch of recognition. I did. She smiled at me, and I was overjoyed. But I hid it.

We supplemented our utensils at the Medicine Creek Trading Post near Leadville, selected freeze-dried stews and mixtures of dried fruit and nuts. From the supermarket we collect cheese and raisins, fresh fruits and chocolates, and boxes of fried chicken and potatoes. We devoured the box lunches on the road to the trailhead and at the edge of the national forest.

From my plentiful stash of maps and brochures of the Rockies, I had chosen a near twenty-one mile loop of trail. At my fingertips, I had descriptions of roads and trails, lodges and shelters for each of the mountain states and the provinces of Canada. One day I planned to work my way north to those Canadian vistas, climb one, a crowning achievement.

I carefully examined Colombine’s shoes and socks. Her feet were tiny and she looked shyly at me, in some kind of muted wonder, as I ran my hand through her shoes, felt the snugness of her puffy white socks and spoke.

I explained to her something of the technique of hiking, the contents of the packs – Chelsea’s and mine – and the safety precautions.

It make me feel fatherly, I suppose, this steady advising that drew little save attentive smiles ad may not have even been necessary.

“Chelsea, listen. Am I wasting my breath? What does she need to know?”

“You’re doin’ fine, pop,” she said. “She’s never doe anything this stupid before so you better get her ready.”

“What did you call me?”

“You called me a douche bag, you arrogant asshole.”

“I believe you’ve used that one, haven’t you?”

“Pompous turd!”

“That’s a new one.”

I pulled on the heavy pack at the trailhead. The brown signpost offered: Crestview Falls 9 mi. I watched her struggle to get her arms through the straps of her pack. I reached to help.

“Back off, pops.” She stumbled, but erected herself and glared at me.

“Chelsea,” I said calmly. “You can lighten up a little. Things are different on the trail. We need to help each other.”

“What happened to your challenge, mother fucker? You want to back down already?”

“No,” I said. “You’ll have plenty of time to prove yourself.”

I smiled, turned and started up the trail, through a scattered stand of aspen trees, with white trunks shining in the afternoon sun.

We crossed a parking stream, where water rustled over rounded stones and inquisitive marmot paused on hand legs to inspect us, and then slip away. Colombine was wide-eyed.

We stopped and puffed silently to catch our breath on rock-strewn overlooks, where vistas of snow-shrouded mountains, massive monuments of nature’s way, loomed large before us. I could sense in Chelsea a changing attitude, from grudging acceptance to open-eyed interest at this new world opening before her. In the past, she had been shackled to the roadside, lazy in society’s smothering asphalt trap.

For some reason, I wanted her to understand more, and appreciate more of the natural world. If I was going to retreat here, I guess I was thinking about companionship. It may have been sometime on the kike that I began wondering to myself where this companionship might end and under what circumstances. And why? And who would instigate it? I didn’t think that I would.

She stumbled on a protruding rock. ”God dammit!”

I seethed, and walked back to her quickly.

“Don’t talk like that. Not out hear.” I told her. “Don’t you feel it out here? Don’t you?”

She glared at me, and a clear-eyed Colombine. The fir trees quivered in the swirling breeze, gently rustling the silence of the sunny day. We could see endless quiet miles across the green valley. A sun-washed snowcap gleamed for us from far ahead. I knew that she sensed something, and that was a beginning.

“I reckon,” she said, turning to move ahead of me. “I guess we don’t need a gutter mouth up here.” She moved quietly to take the lead. I smiled inside. She was still a moving target.

“It’s like a church out here, huh?” she called back.

“A cathedral,” I responded.

We hiked until near sundown and I thought of Pan. But I didn't want to speak of it, for it was my thoughts, my convictions and I would risk neither doubt nor derision by telling them to her, of all people.

But I felt the strong presence, as I always did, of the lost god, the same as all gods but disdained in this frivolous modern-age, when man puts his faith in his own creations and contrivances. But Pan lived on anyway, majestically here, and impervious to human kind's insults and irreverence.

If the old god had truly been replaced by the new Christian one, then these earthly joys would no longer be filling my heart and head. I was gloriously heady, and heart-touched, here in the high country as nowhere else. My heart sang silently, my body surged with strength, my senses vibrated with the sweep of the passing scene, my spirit soared up and tried to meet a passing hawk which glided effortlessly up in the sky.

Pan was not dead, or even disguised. The Christians could not fit him with cloven hooves and devilish black face. Pan. All. Everything. Escaped to here.

But they had usurped his good qualities and turned them into a visionless vacuum. And all the while they proclaimed that the earth, Pan's only solid evidence, had been permanently cursed. Perhaps. But by radical Christian edict. The natural creation was God's, I knew that, so I knew that it was of and unto God, as we were. It was all one – God and God's creations – and each of them had a lesson for us. We should learn from the solid, unwavering strength of the rock, the pervasive posture of the pine tree, the nimble alertness of the prairie dog and the puma, the eternally changing days and nights and seasons, fruited plains to nurture, barren hillsides to sow in grass. I thought these grandiose thoughts and drew pleasure as if innocence were regained, a benevolent dominion re-established.

We cooked and ate and cleaned and a deep silence permeated our campsite. The need to speak seemed to have been pulled from our minds and into the rumbling fire where we stared. The flames flapped the sky and I passed her a joint. She accepted it without comment, and I was glad, having chosen silence myself, and not wanting the glow of the evening spoiled by complaints or mindless patter. The frettings and fumings of our mindless everyday seemed trivial tonight.

For a moment, I ached for her warm body nestled in my sleeping bag. I subdued the urge and stared on at the fire, feeling light-headed and peaceful, and daring not re-a-waken the demon in us both. We slept alone.

The sunset had been entrancing, then the darkness had enveloped us in its cold bosom. Now the sunrise burst steamers of light across the valley and kindled new energy. The fire crackled. There was coffee, fruit and oatmeal.

Chelsea seems thoughtful in her silence, constrained but content. Colombine soaked up the radiance of bright morning into her white-pearled smile.

I help a pensive Chelsea pad a strap that had begun to rub painfully on her soft shoulder, finally capturing her eyes as I worked on it. Don't hurt me, they seemed to say, or I will hurt you. But I believed I was in control.

“What's your last name, Chelsea?” I asked her, checking the straps for balance.

“I haven't decided yet.”

“I got stuck with mine,” I said.

“Not me,” she replied.

“You’re gonna get married, huh?”

“Hell no!”

“Where are you going, Chelsea? What are you going to do with yourself?”

“Live awhile,” she said “and then die.” She turned with a firm finality, not thinking me, and walked over to Colombine, who was resting on a boulder, listening. Always listening.

We grew more tired as we made our rocky way upward. The snowcaps loomed larger. Patches of snow appeared under the fir trees and the shaded undersides of granite cliffs.

In places where it obliterated the trail, I relied on the compass to help us stay on course, that and the natural sense of place and direction that came from many days and nights on the trail.

They were red-faced and struggling to breathe in the thin air, both of them, straining to suck the life-giving chill into their blood furnace, and to find that extra burst of energy – somewhere – to make another short stretch. I hiked that way even now – from one reference point to the next, one at a time. It was easier that way, but not necessarily easy.

Colombine, of course, wouldn’t speak. Or maybe my adventure might actually pull something from her. And Chelsea just looked strained, pinched at the mouth, lungs gasping in the rarified atmosphere, and maybe growing quite mad with me.

I stopped our tiny caravan high on a ridge top, overlooking the vast, snow swept mountain range that I knew reached up through the Yukon to the edge of the frozen seas north of Alaska. It was also massive here and all such a small part of the more massive whole. Like all of our so-called serious problems, I thought. Another lesson in perspective from nature.

“We won’t be going much higher,” I said loudly to her through the swirling wind. “There’s an overlook up ahead. We’ll look for a windbreaker there and take a rest. Then we’ll be going down.”

“Where’s the fuckin’ waterfall?”

“Chelsea!”

“Sorry. It’s not a fuckin’ waterfall. But where is it?”

“You look cute with a red nose.”

“If you don’t get me out of the wind, you’re gonna be stuck with an ice sculpture.”

I laughed out loud. It seemed to startle her.

We made our way carefully over the packed snow, stepping gingerly past boulders and wind-stunted firs. Finally, we stood and recovered our breath, together and looked out over a magnificent particle of the creation, a spectacular panorama of rock and snow, sparkling like diamonds in the winter sun.

I found a shelter for us in the rocks. We drank water and ate a chocolate bar and some nuts. Chelsea and I smoked part of a joint.

“Are you tired, Chelsea?”

Her face, surrounded by her parka, seemed to harden at me. “What do you want?” she sighed. “Some information to use against me?”

“I don’t want anything. I just wanted you to have the experience of doing this. It’s okay to be tired. I’m tired.”

She sized me up with those dark, worried eyes. “Well it’s nice of you to admit it,” she said with resignation. “You might be human after all.” She seemed intent on inspecting a palm full of grit, flaked with the color of gold. She poured the grit through her fingers; a puff of dust swirled upward into the wind. She was Dreamy. It seemed to me that a barer had fallen down.

Dear Chelsea,

Did you build a fence between you and the male gender? Or is it that you don’t like a man who stand up to be one? You would like me less if I didn’t, believe me. I don’t care either way. I can’t afford to.

The winding trail led us down to a grove of sleek bare aspen trees and finally to a rippling brook, which we followed for nearly a mile. I watched the sky, which had sprouted large thunderclouds. I worried they might drench us in cold rain before we could find or make shelter. Pan might have only disdain for man’s clever forecasting.

They joked with me, the clouds, appearing ominous and certain to flood the skies, then dancing and swirling again in the wind, allowing the sun to pay a social call and even warm my chilled bones.

My muscles ached under the pack, but I ignored it by concentrating my thoughts on other things. The essentials of making camp by the falls, the angles from which I would photograph the scene, the changes in myself worried me. She was beginning to intrude in my mind, my plans. There was no way I could allow that to happen.

The water cascaded down in sparking showers, crushing to the rocks below. Wind-swirled droplets rose in profusion from the thundering rush and skipped lightly like Aquarian spirits captured and carried away by the sky.

Colombine climbed down to drink from the pure pool, which reflected colorful montages of the rock and tree and sky. I watched Chelsea climb to a rocky vantage point. She sat and watched the spectacular crash and my mind wandered to her firm young breasts. That, too, was Pan.

There was a feeling of triumph in the mountains and a feeling of uselessness in me. I sat among gray boulders and watched them disappear into darkening sky, blending finally into a gun metal blue that vaporized them, quietly, slowly, into nothingness. A chill came spreading out of the vapor and clutched at the night air. Darkness appeared quietly, but everywhere.

I saw Chelsea down below by the fire, steam rising from the pot, Columbine carrying a final armful of ticks for the fiery altar. I zipped my jacket and turned again to the powerful rush of the water, which poured on, ceremoniously, oblivious to the constant passing of the days and nights. A waterfall was special that way, in its constancy, an unyielding force with the pantheistic purpose of showing and giving us power. Even when the hard freeze of winter chilled its heart and petrified its cascades into sparking polar marble, the power remained intact, encased and waiting only the warm winds of spring to flow again. No icicle trembled under winter’s grip. And each finds freedom again in the spring, dripping slowly, then faster, flowing away, mixing with other waters of a new season.

I pulled the wool cap more snugly over my bare head and made my way down to the fire.

We warmed our backsides by the crackling blaze and watched our warm breath fog the frigid air. We slurped hot stew from steaming spoons as we surrounded the blaze. The amber fire glow on Chelsea's finely chiseled cheekbones gave her the hard, earthy beauty of an oriental peasant. I was almost thankful for the nipping cold to quell my rising desire. Almost.

I passed a bottle of tequila to her. She took it with a firm grip and reached for one of the lemon slices laid out on a bare rock next to my knife. She took a healthy hit, bit and tore the lemon and dashed the peel aside.

I chuckled. "How did you get so tough, Chelsea?"

"I don't do life stories, okay?"

"I didn't say anything. It seemed unnecessary.

Chelsea looked troubled, maybe angry too. "Look, I know I'm awfully fuckin' rude sometimes. I just want you to know there's not anything personal in it. I just have to be hard or I get hurt. I got tired of getting' hurt, so I got a different attitude. I got hard, and damn sure intend to stay that way."

There still seemed nothing to say in the pause.

"I guess you're sayin' who the fuck cares. But really, I just wanted you to know that there's reasons I'm the way I am. I've had to be strong, even if I didn't want to be. You can pretty much make it a good habit, being strong, if you want to or have to. But...I realize more and more that you're not the kind of person I thought you were."

It was getting too interesting to interrupt.

"I understand now that you do have some values and you do care about people. But I'm sure as hell not gonna give you a chance to take advantage of me, or Colombine. No chance. 'Course I don't necessarily think you're the kind of guy that fucks people over. I don't think you're as mean as you think you are."

"We'll see." I breathed a heavy fog in the frigid night.

"All right. Hey, look man. You don't have to prove anything to me. Okay?"

"Of course not. And I appreciate your thinking that I may, just possibly, not be a bastard."

"Well," she countered. "Nothing is a proven fact." Her look hardened on me like an icecap. I stared coldly too.

"We're gonna have to sleep mighty damn close tonight, Chelsea. Let's don't get any shit started." She found my eyes and they twinkled at her.

She burst out laughing. It startled me.

We felt the tired muscles of morning, but worked methodically and quietly to pitch the camp and clean up the area, share a ration of apples, nuts and raisins with hot chocolate. Chelsea and I shared a joint and a final sit-down to watch the waterfall's magic.

"Colombine never smokes?" I asked.

She had just a trace of a smile.

“Colombine doesn’t need to.”

“How can she be the way she is? How is it possible?”

“It’s the perfect way to be. She should be an example for us.”

“Is she?” I asked.

“Sure. Don’t you envy her sometimes?”

“If she’s really at peace with herself, I would. I don’t know that.”

“Maybe she is sometimes,” said Chelsea. “We all have our own ways to cope.”

“So she’s trying to cope with something?”

“What is this? A quiz show? Just because she’s a cosmic person doesn’t mean there’s no hard history there. And it don’t mean she could make it at all without me. I handle the nuts and bolts down in the real world so she can be cosmic, and show me what it’s like up there.”

“Why are you taking care of her?” I asked calmly.

“Look, can’t you be satisfied, Xavier, knowing that she’s different from anybody else you know, and doesn’t really need to get involved in all of this eternal talking and more talking that just complicates things and adds to people’s frustrations and insecurities? I plan to protect her from all that bullshit.”

“So she could talk it she wanted. But she thinks it’s better not to get involved?”

“You try to make it sound silly. Listen. There’s no way you can understand what you’re dealing with here. I think you ought to back off for awhile, all right?”

And I did, for then. But if I knew there was a secret, I had always been the kind to pursue it. There would be a gnawing until the secret was known.

“Colombine.” I called to her and she turned from her seat on the boulder close by. “I want to know more about you so that I can be a better friend to you. Do you mind if Chelsea tells me more?”

I didn’t fool her. She shook her head, no, without a smile.

“Well,” Chelsea fumed. “Looks like you’ve been blessed with a touch of two-way communications. I hope you’ll use it wisely.”

Chelsea had no inclination to explain her remark, and had little or nothing to say as we hiked the morning hours. She seemed to resent the fact that Colombine would reply to me, but she wouldn’t have admitted it.

It's easy to think on the trail, but only in snatches, to let the thoughts that color and change my ever-changing perspectives dart into the mind like determined prairie dogs. Digging a quick dark hole in which to plant them with all the dark rest. I wondered if there would ever be a day to excavate them, bring these spores to the surface and sun-wash them to freshness.

Dear Chelsea,

I am almost afraid. Too close for comfort. You don't care enough. From fear of being used...you would use me. Like Sandra. Tempting me, knowing my weakness, until I tore through my moral fabric, ripping my brain, my heart, to serve my cock. But they are only Eve. And I am compelled to echo the song of Eden.

The large birds glided softly, silently through the blue sky. The swirling white roll of the stream sparkled like crystal as it raced down ahead of us, as if furiously leading the way. The confident sound of the billowing water flow blended effortlessly with the song of the trees, leaves gently rustling in the airflow, together in harmony, and in celebration of the creation. Clean and pure. In immaculate taste.

Dear Clint,

I still say we shouldn't have run the pictures. Somebody's mother, bloody, being hauled out of that wreckage, with blood spattered all over the white through the fingers of those old hands where she buried her face. What's the matter with you people? Are we selling papers to ghouls? How about the Sunday School market? How about people with weak stomachs? How about common decency? It's news? Are you sure? Just in the green sheet, huh? The one that goes on the stands. Too rough for home delivery, but okay for the streets. Front page. Above the mast. Guess that made it okay. If you're a cretin.

I know I said some critical things about you, Clint. To your face, of course. A long time ago.

I meant them.

We drank from one of the canteens. Dry air; dry throat. I gave them more gum. A large, gray camp raider wanted to share our lunch. Its shrill call and cocked head made me smile. How could we resist a contribution? It swooped down quickly, and up again with the cheese. Cheese? Incongruous. Humankind seemed hardly to belong here at all. Conquered it and now bored with it. Except to park its noisy machines just off these snakes of hot, black pavement. And go into the woods with other deadly tools, to kill.

Dear Mike,

You're just the neighbor's kid. And it's just a pellet rifle. But why do you kill our birds and squirrels? So you know, son? Just birds? Just Squirrels? Just pest? Is that what you think, child? I never learned that, and neither should you. Can you just look at them a moment before you shoot. Can't you see?

The trail that had wound downward until mid-afternoon had grown flat. Easy to walk, and the spring returned to my legs. I looked at Chelsea and she looked tired, her even step deteriorated into a trudge, back bowed slightly under her pack. But she wouldn't complain. A nice quality in a woman...or man.

Colombine was tired too, but her large, mellow eyes radiated her good vibrations. I winked at her and she smiled impishly. No need to speak. A thought flashed through my mind. There are other ways to communicate. Sure.

Dear Delores,

I ached to tell you things that I couldn't. So they were things that you never knew. And you did know the one thing that could hurt you. My fallen moment. Or two. It was till between us when you died. So I feel sorry for myself for not setting it straight, or being straight, or for letting it all hang in indecision, like the stench of a dead snake, hung up in warning. Poor me. Fuck me! I believe fervently in self-reliance, so it's firmly my fault. Damn me! Too late. I'm already damned.

The loop closed, and we were less than a mile from the van. It was another special time for me, anticipation the weary end, pulling from my body the ponderous pack for the last time, freeing the body to feel light and lean once again. Even in Pan's massive kingdom, I thought of a cold beer, chilling my throat in its frivolous, dancing dissension into warm bowels. Cold pleasure. And a warm, sudsy shower. Hot pleasure.

"We're in the home stretch, women," I called back to them. "And I'm giving you both and 'A' for ...admirable."

"How about Achin' Ass?" called Chelsea.

"You complaining'?"

"Hell, no." she said. "Just a nice little three-day walk, huh?"

"Good. I see you didn't drop your chip up there anywhere, or forget any of your four-letter words."

"Why should I?" she retorted. "You always have to come back to the real world."

I stopped walking. "This is the real world, Chelsea. You're standing in it. The part that people haven't fucked over"

"Chelsea sneered. "People are the real world, Thorn. Those that fuck over and those that get fucked over. A hiking trip sure as hell ain't gonna change that."

"I don't plan to change it," I said firmly. "I just plan to get away from it. Does that sound appealing to you?"

She stared at me with a look that seemed to ask a stream of questions, and say at the same time that my answers wouldn't matter. "Good luck," she said. "You'll need it." She turned from me and took the lead.

Soon thereafter, the narrow trail again became a wide, bare path by the stream, and traversing it twice over bridges fashioned from split logs, with small round cuts from saplings for hand rails and suitable for the Sunday walks of city families on vacation. They would never venture up into the high country, but could take a small slice of nature, like a modicum of mind candy, once in a while, and not far from the family sedan. I saw them, and knew we looked dirty and weary to them, junior in his short pants tripping over a root and crying, a young couple looking for a place to kiss; and elderly couple fighting the encroaching atrophy that would one day fell us all. I tried not to resent them for not reaching deeper into nature, not understanding, not caring very much. They just weren't able.

And Chelsea didn't care much. Despite what I tried to will for myself, I was disappointed, even a little angry, not at her, maybe at circumstances, maybe at reality. Whatever it was.

And then she gave me hope, at the van, as we tucked away our gear and popped cold beers.

"That was really a nice trip, Thorn." She said. "I hope I haven't been too big a pain in the ass."

I stared at her in disbelief. "I wanted you to see some of the things I love."

"Yeah," she said. "I can see that. It's good therapy for the real world."

"I guess so. I guess it's whatever one can get out of it, or learn from it," I said.

"Well... whatever," she shrugged. "A hot bath and soft bed would sure be nice anyway."

I swigged the beer. "It's hard to give up our creature comforts, isn't it?"

"I don't need that many," she said wistfully. "It's less complicated that way, if you ain't always striving to get more."

"Spoken like a true road woman."

"Yeah," she almost growled. "Let's roll awhile."

Chapter 6; JUDGMENT DAY

We were back in the van, droning on to Denver, after leaving thousands, maybe millions, of our tiny impressions on the trial. I had gone up and come down in more ways than one.

It was a foolish thought that I had, and I knew it couldn't be true. But I persisted to think that I knew the answers to all great problems, could set the world aright again with only the chance, the opportunity. Action might be the only solution for some things. For with action then something definitely gets done. With wisdom, we only have great minds ruminating, boring the masses, resulting in little progress and myriad of excuses, like 'not practical; 'fine if you could do it' and 'human nature being what it is.' Sounds great, but –

“You quit talkin', Thorn? Where we goin', anyway?”

“I'm takin' you to another world. One of infinite contrast. I want to see how real you thing it is.”

“If it's got a hot shower and some hot food, I can go for it,” said Chelsea with certainty.

“We're on the way.”

“So where we goin'?”

“Do you like surprises?”

“No. Most of mine have been bummers,” said Chelsea.

“Then you're due for a good one. And I'm the man to provide it.”

She laughed contemptuously. “You still think you're the center of the universe, don't you?”

“Right.”

“It better be damn good if you're gonna surprise me.”

“Right.”

Soon we were maneuvering through Denver traffic, near downtown. Chelsea finished a beer, crushed the can and flipped it over her shoulder with a hook shot that missed the trash sack and clattered across the van floor. Colombine picked it up quietly and placed it in the bag.

I pulled into the wide circular drive of the Hyatt Regency hotel.

“Holy shit,” said Chelsea, and burped loudly.

We assembled our scruffy disarray and invaded the hotel lobby, Colombine typically wide-eyed, Chelsea re-asserting her shoulder chip in order to appear tough and blasé.

I ordered a suite. Chelsea, lips pursed, worked her eyebrows. "God damn, Thorn! Hope you brought a sack of money," she whispered, while the desk clerk fetched the keys.

"Nothing too good for a charming companion like you" I replied. "Just try not to shock all these genteel society people. They've led kind of a sheltered life."

"A helluva shelter though," said Chelsea, looking up at the huge rectangle of interior balconies that stretched twenty floors skyward. "I'll try not to moon anybody till I get to know 'em a little better."

"And so you think you know everything, Mr. Thorn?" asked the chief inquisitor. He had a white wig, appropriately powdered, and black robe.

"I believe so, sir." Must not appear arrogant.

"And you're prepared to defend your dissertation?"

"I'm cool, calm and confident, your honor."

"I see." Eyebrows wriggled. "Dr. Solar here will assess your spiritual enlightenment. Dr. Bod will see if you're physically fit and Dr. Feeler will examine your emotional spheres. I am, of course Dr. Ell, Doctor of Ideological Wisdom. I will see how well you think. THINK!" He tapped his temple, looming forward with bugged eyes. "Of course, I am chairman." He leaned back in comfort.

"I'm just glad to be here," I said.

"And why is that?"

"I'm just glad to know someone's in charge."

The garage door rolled up. "I believe your dissertation has arrived," Dr. Ell hissed. A forklift truck rolled in slowly, proffering a wooden pallet upon which rested a massive load of mound manuscripts, bundled like old newspapers. The behemoth trembled and teetered, but stayed together at last while the lift, deposited it and pulled away.

"You may take it home with you when you go," said Dr. Ell. "I believe we've quite finished with it." He sounded stuffy.

"And of course you don't need it," I said, smiling. "You've got me."

The inquisitors looked among themselves coldly. Dr. Ell turned again. "Quite," he said.

"Holy Cow! What a spread! You could raise a herd of cattle in here without ever smellin' shit!"

I tossed the bags on the floor of the parlor.

“Good God a’ mighty! This bathtub’s big enough for the Seventh fleet.”

I unwrapped the bottle of tequila and threw the wadded bag across the room.

“There’s a fuckin’ sauna bath in here! Man! I’m gonna steam clean my sore ass! Look at this, Rags.”

I splashed cold water on my face and pulled down a towel.

“How many bedrooms?...one...two...what’s in here? Lord, god. I’ve died and gone to Heaven! It’s a pool table!”

“Well, how do you like the place, Chelsea? It’s a special suite they have for some kind of national pool tournament. Should we just blow this one off and try to find a nicer one?”

She ran her finger sensually over the smooth green felt. “No, man, this is the one, if we just order up a six-pack and roll a little reefer.” She sighted down a cue stick and hung herself over the table. “Man, if I only had a buck for every time I’ve hung my crotch over a pool table...what’s your game?”

“Watching you shoot.”

“Pool, horny crotch!”

“Eight ball,” I said. “I’m the best.”

“Uh-h-h-h!” She grabbed her crotch; eyes closed, and leaned dizzily against the long green table. “Oh, boy! That was a good rush. C’mon, Thorn, I’m gonna shoot your eyes out.”

“So how can we achieve world peace, Mr. Thorn?”

“Call all the heads of state together. Everybody. Albania. Greenland. Uganda, Costa Nostra. Mandatory attendance. Have it in Geneva, Switzerland. A big place. Make them all agree to observe present boundaries, let bygones be bygones, and abolish their militaries. We could put all the military resources into agriculture and finally everyone could get enough to eat.

“I see.”

I sighted down the long, sleek barrel. “Side pocket.” My eyes riveted an imaginary line to the very edge of the black eight, there where there was almost nothing, nearly nothing at all, but a firm silver nonetheless. A sharp silver. I drew a second diagonal line from the blackball to the black hole. My arm came forward in a smooth, easy motion, stroking the white cue ball into a fluid roll. It grazed the eight gently and it rolled straight into the side pocket, clicking softly with others in the nest. The cue ball bounced triumphantly off the far rail and glided back.

“Rack ‘em up, Rags,” she called. Colombine looked up from “War and Peace, “ inserted a bookmark and made her cheerful way to the table.

“Well, you said you could outfight me or outfuck me,” I told her. “I’m glad you didn’t include eight ball.”

“You’re just too God damned lucky.” She turned up a glass of tequila and ice and took a solid hit. She was weaving a little. Me too.

“It’s eight o’clock. You hungry?” I asked.

“Hell no! You?”

I lighted a joint and inhaled deeply, and passed it to her.

“Guess not, huh?” She took it and sucked in a noisy air-cooled hit. “Hey, Rags. Get lost for a couple of hours. Get some food.” She punched me in the side with the butt of her cue. “Hey, give her some money, big boy. ‘An let’s see what you’re made of.”

“Can she handle it?” I asked.

“Has a sow pig got a pussy?” she questioned. “Rags has got more brains than you and me both.

“Why is it men and women don’t see eye-to-eye, Mr. Thorn?”

“They don’t want to, your honor. It’s too much fun this way.”

“Are you quite serious?”

“Not quite.”

“For those who would wish to always agree, I would say that it’s not necessary. We are, each of us, built differently. There is endless fascination in this master plan of thorough uniqueness. Who are we to question the creation? As for the sexes, we should relish the promise of ultimate universal man-woman togetherness that was ordained and can be ours when we learn to blend our strengths together in true sharing. Of course, we’re still primitive, but in sexual ecstasy we can preview the potential that vibrates between us, even now. I’m not talking about marriage. That’s an unworkable contrivance that limits our giving and receiving love on a much broader basis.”

“I see.”

“Good.”

“Free love then, Mr. Thorn. “Is that what you’re saying.” He sounded skeptical.

“Nothing if free your honor.”

I reached for the bottle and it was almost there. But quickly I griped the neck. Got to get up – another joint! – and get cold water on my face – a hit? Hell, yes! M-m-m-m, throat raw. Here it is... smoke in my weirded-out eye. Take it, yeah. Burns. Drunker than her? I sure as hell hope not.

Cruel. She looked cruel.

Joint in her mouth, squinch-eye. Pulling off her shirt, tearing at the buttons. She threw it in my face. Bare-breasted. Nipples erect. Two more eyes. Re-enforcements.

I laughed. Focus these eyes. Focus. Both us? I laughed again. “You gonna make my tongue hard, woman.”

She pulled off a hiking boot and sent it crashing against the wall. “So what you gonna do about it, mother fucker?” She pulled off the other boot and hurled it at a lamp across the room. It whizzed past and clouted the wall.

Grip my teeth. Eye shut. Open. Shut. Open. Head swimming on choppy sea. I pulled off my hiking boot and hurled it at the lamp. It crushed the shade and it all crashed to the floor. “Let’s get naked and see what happens.” I said.

She was upon me, suddenly, and I fell back. My t-shirt, pulled away, stretched over my head. Hard mouth on mine. Hot mouth. Searing me in hot breath. Smell of hard passion. Hot mouth down my chest. My fingers through her frizzy hair. Frizzy black. Black. Bury my face. She tore away and I lay along on the floor. Laughing at me. “Hey! You tryin’ to get a hard dick, ain’t you, mother fucker?”

“Absolutely,” I said.

“The thing that really bothers me, Mr. Thorn, is that you have no humility whatsoever. You profess to know everything and then proceed to explain it with gibberish.”

“Actually, gibberish is what you’ve been hearing for years. That’s why you think it’s real, the right way to think. So when you hear something that isn’t gibberish, that’s of course what you think it is.”

“Your farcical solutions have no meaning, for they cannot be accomplished.”

“So we should change. We shouldn’t change our ideals. We never should have.”

“Too late, Mr. Thorn! It’s too late. There are centuries of history in control of our psyches.”

“Not mine.”

“Come now!”

“I try to protect myself from shit like that.”

Naked. Laughing too hard to stop. Her tight little ass running from me. Bear hug. Crashing to the floor. Huk! Can’t breathe. U-h-h-h! Threw the spread over my head. Blackness. Laughing. Coughing. Laughing again. Tough little woman. Woman! I tried to get up and she smacked me with a pillow.

“Mr. Thorn, we have read your...ponderous pontifications.” He turned a snitty eye to my...fork lifted fulminations. “And we do agree that it promulgates something of...as you call it...a separate reality.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You have taken up every segment of our society and, it seems, shook it by its heels, criticized it quite fully, and made... idealistic recommendations for its improvement.”

“As intended.”

“The only problem is, Mr. Thorn, that you’ve left them all standing on their heads. You’ve turned everything upside down.”

“Well, it is better, isn’t it? Isn’t it better that way?”

“No, Mr. Thorn, because that’s not the way the millions of people understand it. You want to confuse the whole world? Wouldn’t it be better just to confuse yourself?”

Where the hell is she? The sauna. Locked. I strained against it. U-h-h-h-h! Falling. Blast of heat. Her laughing. Breath of her mouth upon me, settling down, heated bricks. Thighs. Sweat, and warm blood racing through my veins. Sweat, like passion, pouring over us. She tasted of brine and smelled of rich odor of woman. I surged. Pride pushing erect. Whipping port-hard. I was suddenly capsized and she was on top of me. Okay. Out of breath. She had my throat in one hand, held me and pushed me inside her with the other. Cry of a bitch dog. She fucked me hard. Hard! Hard! I cradled her buttocks and held on for a wild ride.

Later, we lay spent in the sauna, clasped, steamy, rubbing the sweat and warm semen over our bodies. I smelled of fresh, earthy ferment, the life-stuff that reproduces us again. It could almost sprout into green wheat on our steamed thighs.

She laughed finally. “Now tell me, macho man.” She said derisively. “Just who fucked who?”

“Nice work,” I said.

“Tell me than, Mr. Thorn, why don’t we practice the Golden Rule. It’s a rather simple admonition, isn’t it? Surely, we could do that. And it would be much simpler than going through your dissertation.”

“But it wouldn’t be nearly the experience, sir. Experiences, you know, are all we can really have here. What better experience than to learn the answer to everything?”

“I suppose it would be...interesting.”

“Yes,” I said. “It was.”

Colombine found us in the tub. I was nearly sober. The bubbles that proliferated from the full bottle of Hyatt Regency bubble bath that Chelsea had ceremoniously emptied overflowed into the floor where she stood.

“Hey, Rags,” said Chelsea. “Get naked and hop in. I’ve decided to trust this dude.”

I was too puzzled to respond, but didn’t need to.

“You might as well know, Thorn, that Columbine is asexual right now, which means that she don’t do anything sexually serious, no fuckin’ in other words.”

Colombine was unbuttoning her shirt, revealing her tiny breast and pale slender body.

“But Colombine loves to show affection from time to time...to people we consider our friends. Looks like you can be one, if you want to.”

“You’re both very special to me.” I said it unashamedly.

She was nude, pale white and fragile, wisplike as a pixie, slipping her tiny toes into the huge tub, disappearing into a sea of bubbles.

Chelsea brought my face to her and kissed me. Colombine glided through the water and snuggled into our submerged bodies. She kissed me on the lips, and Chelsea, and me again.

We embraced and laughed and loved one another. Later we towed each other dry and slept together entwined, warmly clasped in peaceful ecstasy, feeling our heartbeats and holding together the pieces of a giant puzzle.

“Mr. Thorn, we’ve decided to grant you a passing grade.”

“Thank you, sir. I’m...gratified.”

“It was the opinion of the panel that you do some excessive things to your body from time to time, but all for good reason – the search for pleasure and enlightenment.”

“True. That keeps me busy too.”

“Quite. And you tend to stay fit and trim. As for your emotional development, it seems that you’re trying to both give and receive love, so you’re okay in that respect.”

“I get a lot of enjoyment out of both.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” said Dr. Ell puffily. “Spiritually, it seems you’ve decided that what you see is what you get, and you’ve looked at quite a few things.”

“I try to get around.”

“You believe in a deity who gave us the earth for our dominion, to love and nurture and learn from, including, of course, each other.”

“In a round-about way, or course,” I explained.

“Of course, Mr. Thorn, “evolution and all that. At any rate, your doctrine tells us that you care about people despite this façade you put on. So we accept it in the spirit that you can think anything you like as long as you don’t hurt anyone.”

“What can I say? I’m easy-going.”

“As far as thinking logically,” Mr. Thorn, “and this was my department...we find that you think well, but too much. For heaven’s sake, cool it!”

“Yeah...well, I’m trying to do that. I’ve just got some unfinished business. Then I’m gonna cool out for real...maybe find myself another woman.”

“That’s no solution to anything. That’s part of the problem...but you already know that. You’re smiling. And of course, that’s the whole point of it, solving problems. Dr. Ell leaned forward. “Anyway, you passed, Dr. Thorn. You’re obviously trying hard and that’s really all we can expect from an ordinary human being. We don’t feel we should discourage you.”

“Thank you. In fact, I’m encouraged.”

“Don’t be,” said Dr. Ell. “We also passed you so we wouldn’t have to read all of your dissertation. None of us could get through the first chapter.

Chapter 7; LAID BARE

When I awoke, they were gone. I raised my head only high enough to peruse the ruffled solitude of the room, hear the shower running, then pulled the covers up, sighed deeply and slept some more.

Sometime later I heard, “Hey, Thorn, roll your ass out. Let’s go take a look at the city. “Fuck you, I thought, remaining silent, still. She’s tryin’ to start runnin’ everything.

And later. “Thorn? Jesus Christ, it’s nine-thirty.”

“Take off, Chelsea. Get the fuck outta here. Ain’t nobody holdin’ you.”

“You asshole,” she retorted. I felt her clutch my covers and jerk them mightily. They came flying off, leaving me huddled in my nakedness. I leaped up, too fast, and gripped the bed groggily, then gave chase. She was laughing, dragging the bulky layers of sheet, blanket and spread across the room.

I caught her and we fell, laughing together. I found her lips, her tangled, corkscrew curls. Her neck was soft and smelled the tantalizing scent of woman. I was lost.

She lied. It was not tequila that remained in her glass, left there on the table. It was water. And I had become drunk, and was beaten.

How had I discovered it? Why had I checked? Why did she want to fight me? Beat me? The slow heat of anger filled my head, compressed energy that tightened itself into a ball of fire. Its containment was precarious. I breathed, in and out, and was in control.

I stepped out into the parlor and she was there, waiting, feet propped up, watching some kind of television pap. Colombine sat nearby, reading a book called "Lie Down In Darkness."

"All right," said Chelsea. "Here's sleeping beauty. Let's get our and see Big D." She bustled to her feet.

I held the glass. "You didn't finish your tequila, Chelsea. How about a shot for the road?" I offered it. She glared.

"No thanks."

"Have it anyway." I dashed it in her face, taking pleasure in her startled expression. Our eyes, hurt and hurtful, angry and anxious, locked onto one another.

"Water," I said. "You're a cheat. You look for any chance to stack the deck."

She stared coldly, wiping the water with hard, swiping gestures. "I can't help it if you're stupid," she said, emulating my confident calm. "I did to you what you was wantin' to do to me. I've just got more ingenuity at my disposal."

"Deceit," I said. "Treachery and deceit. Let's call it what it is. I thought we had gone beyond that."

"Yeah, you hypocrite. It's okay for you to get me drunk and fuck me. But you don't like it when you get a dose of your own medicine."

I contemplated the thought. Medicine? Maybe it was. I laughed aloud. "I liked it," I said. "It was great. It's just too bad you've got to make some kind of battle out of it. Where the hell are you comin' from?"

"Why the fuck would I want to tell you?" she asked quickly.

"No reason, I guess. If you can't be straight with me, I don't really give a shit," I said. "Let's go get some breakfast."

I looked around at Colombine. She sat quietly, looking tiny in a large stuffed chair, and folded book clutched in both hands, where she had sat listening to our complaints. We must have seemed senseless to her, noisily absurd in our vitriolic charges and counter-charges, while she co-existed peacefully in her sanctuary of silence.

"Hope you're not embarrassed by all this childish behavior, Colombine," I said calmly. "Come on." I turned to Chelsea too. "Let's go hit the breakfast buffet and check out the city."

"Thorn," said Chelsea, and she waited to catch my eye. "I've always had to use everything I could just to get by at all. You reckon you could understand that?"

“I don’t know, Chelsea,” I said. “It’s not that I just don’t know where your head is all the time. I don’t know where your heart is, and that’s more important.”

“And I could say the same for you,” she said promptly.

It was certainly true. I guessed we were playing the same game.

I grew weaker in the frivolity of the day. Chelsea was subdued but pleasant, Colombine quietly joyous, filling her eyes with the sights and sound of the city.

The breakfast buffet had yielded up fresh fruits and other bountiful delights. The museum displayed for us massive skeletons of the prehistoric and other wonders. We picnicked in the park, and entertained ourselves with a fluorescent Frisbee that dipped and hop-skipped in the swirling Colorado wind. It was enjoyable, even as I was turning, metamorphosing back into some ordinary, normal, weak-willed and idly drifting speck of humanity. I worried about my purpose, and at the weakness that her hard, soft body could instill in my every pore, to permeate the heart and soul and brain and strip them of all-purpose save to nestle and nurture in her warm bosom.

There was dinner by candlelight, Chelsea there bathed in the amber glow seeming gentle and demure – Eden’s lie! – And startlingly beautiful to me in the low-cut cocktail dress that I insisted she buy and wear. Her power manifested before me in her bare, brown shoulders, the gentle curl of her full lips as they sipped from the glass of wine. Eyes of smoldering fire, waiting for my spark to rekindle again, teasing me with dark ambivalence, daring.

And Colombine, a mystery on innocence at the triangle’s other point. Silent, knowing witness to Chelsea’s excesses, and mine, un-judging, as if to say none of it mattered, only the sound and fury of the idiot, only the passionate lust of the animal, signifying nothing but the indulgences of the human flesh, arrogant and opinionated and defensive and lustful and self-centered and self-indulgent...

Chelsea helped me out of my corduroy jacket. We were sated with food and drink, the tired muscles of a busy day. Kissing my neck. I laid back, breathed deeply, deeply. Warm breath on me, quivering, her finger on my lips. Don’t say anything, say anything, say anything. Click. Colombine, naked, soft and gentle in my arms. Click. Nothing will ever hurt her, hurt her. Never. Click. She is mine too, take care of them. Take care. Darkness.

She stood before me, window glow on her smooth bare shoulders. Buttons opening. One by one. Street sounds strained vigorously at the walls, failing to penetrate our refuge of silence. Joyful silence. A siren wailed in vain. I grasped Colombine’s warm nakedness to me. Protect them both forever, with me, with me. Protect me. My hardness again. She wriggled, struggled and escaped from me. Asexual, I recalled. And then Chelsea came to me, and Colombine slipped quietly away.

Finally, my loins burst inside, and I spewed my lusty passion into her body, again, again, slicing deeper up into her dark well, clutching her sweating flesh to me, slippery arm, reveling in her damp heat, the smell and feel of her deflowered body which was certain to bloom again, nourished by the warm semen that writhed inside her, titillating her with its sensuous squirming against her tender walls. Deep air poured from my mouth; I was spent, sated. We lay there in peace for a while.

Then there was Colombine, with hot water and two warm cloths. She had watched us make love. And now she joined us and we slept deeply and well.

Another day? I guessed so. We went to an afternoon movie, and had a Mexican feast, complete with margaritas and a marimba band that played entrancingly out of tune.

I sat on the balcony that night, looking out over the noisy landscape of concrete and cars and colored lights under the black sky. Thousands of people out there, millions really. Struggling through. Doing all kinds of nothing things. No one will ever know or care that most of them lived. And I felt useless, as most of them should, was no better, no better. We had fucked again but I couldn't sleep this time. Something wrong with me. Bad wrong.

...Self-deluding...self-serving...spoiled to pleasure...lazy...decadent...

A little later it was midnight, or very nearly. The seconds ticked down. The glass door opened and she stood there wrapped in the curtains that swirled in the wind, pushing them aside and stepping out to me. She wore a ribbed white cotton gown with a tiny pink flower stitch on the front. She carried what appeared to be a stiff drink in her long, firm fingers. Her nails were a deep red. Painted. But why?

"You doin' okay?" She was at the rail, nightglow electrifying her black curls.

"No problem," I said. She looked sad, serious.

"You can't sleep?"

"I don't want to."

She looked at me only briefly after my cold remark, turning to survey the cityscape stretching all around us, looking troubled as she sipped quietly from the dark whiskey.

"I'm just trying to straighten out a few things in my mind. A little thinking time."

"Yeah," she said. "You want me to get outta your face?"

"No. I don't. I'd like to sit here and look at you."

"What do you see?"

"A woman. Beautiful. Mature. Who has been hurt and doesn't trust anybody."

"If I trust you, Thorn, you're gonna shit on me one of these days and take off." She looked at me with dead certainty. "And it won't be the first time you've done it." She turned the screw. Of course, she was wrong. She still couldn't see through my shield of toughness.

"I have a question. How can you, in all your wisdom, separate the people who have been shit upon, and those who do the shittin'?"

"They're all the same," she said. "You hurt people even if you like them. Sometimes you can't help it. And you always get hurt. That always happens."

"Why don't you tell me about yourself, Chelsea? I care about you, and I want to know where you're comin' from. I want to understand this pain you're feeling." I got up deliberately and moved to her. Her brow wrinkled above her dark, tortured eyes. I looked into them; my fingers touched her cheek. I wanted to melt down her hardness, make her trust me.

"You're a man," she said, trying to turn away. "You can't understand anything about it. I'm sure you can't help it, but you just ain't got the feeling of it."

How could I make her know me as special? She thought I was just a B-flat hard leg. I had to show her and I took her tenderly in my embrace, gentle lust, ardor, pouring over her like warm wine. My breath was upon her breast, my soft touch searching over her smooth, cool skin under the gown, which I eventually pulled away. On my knees I kissed her, again and again, caressing her thighs, pulling apart her legs to find her damp, warm sanctuary with my soft kisses. She braced herself, nude, against the rail, moaning gently against the clatter of metallic wail of the city night and gave herself to me. I poured myself into her, reveling at the hard grasp of her trembling fingers plowing through my short hair, taking me in, consuming me, taking more and more, and making the giving so rewarding.

We lost ourselves in the cool sky, not noticing until too late that her white gown had slipped over the rail, tumbling and sailing and rolling downward in the lilting breeze, destined to land somewhere on the hard streets. It would surely bring a laugh to whoever happened upon it. The denizens were generally not of serious mind, I knew, and were easily amused.

We were nude, stripped clean, mind and body, and lying in each other's arms on the sofa. A pale lamplight bronzed our bare bodies. Colombine slept peacefully in the bedroom.

Glasses of scotch on ice fortified us for the journey.

"It's really tough, you know, talkin' about yourself," she ventured. "I guess I've never really done it before, and it seems awfully strange, like, who really wants to know? I realize what I'm doin' every now and then and get embarrassed, like somebody's gonna interrupt and say, 'Who cares?'. I couldn't answer that question except to holler, 'Nobody!' And that would probably be the absolute truth because I don't reckon I care anymore either. What's past is past.

"I was born down in east Texas, little town with not much 'a nothing except jobs and housework. My mom got deserted by my daddy when I was about two. Reckon they just fought too much. He left and never came back. Didn't send any money either 'an it was really tough on her raisin' me by herself, getting' just enough money to live on from the garment plant and workin' herself to death tryin' to make... production, they called it, so she could make a little bonus every month. 'An every month, it's dust start over.

"I grew up a little on the mean side, I guess, because it seemed like it was always such a struggle to get by. Sleeping in a worn-out house, with worn-out furniture and frazzled sheets. I couldn't make too many friend 'cause I was ashamed of being poor and had a chip on my shoulder because of it. I knew I shouldn't have been the way I was, but I just felt so wound up inside most of the time... restless... like there's gotta be somethin' better than my poor momma had it – fucked and stuck with me, then abandoned.

"Well... she complained about it. She was loud too when she had been drinkin'. She'd rave about how he was a lazy slob. Ralph was his name, my dad's name. 'An how he was just like all the rest of 'em. All men were sorry. Only she didn't say that when her men friends came, an' sometimes they slept in. She didn't complain at all when there was one on her men over, like she was tryin' to catch another one.

"She never did get what she wanted if it was a man. And if it was just respect, she never got that either. I heard one of 'em tell her one time he had no intention of marryin' her. He was mad as hell because she threw a shoe at him. Told her she was nothin' but a piece of ass, and not a very good one at that. They didn't always get along, but I reckon she couldn't leave the men alone either.

"She got killed in a car wreck. This man she was with pulled out of the parking lot of this damned nightclub, about one in the morning, and got broad sided by a transport truck. The were both drunk. Mama died on Sunday night. She was... all smashed up, an' they say it might have been just as well. The man, he finally got well. He was married and they paid some money to my Aunt Marlina, she was in Oklahoma, to come take me. I was sixteen.

“I finished high school up there. We were still kind of poor, but did okay. The man sent money every now and then, like he promised, but within a year or so he quit, and by that time I guess Aunt Marlina figured I was pretty useful. It was really her husband who never really thought much of my being around. But he kind of got used to the idea, especially since I worked extra hard to try and make sure I was a bigger help than hindrance.

“I guess I liked the boys too, even though I was fellin’ guilty about it all the time. Aunt Marlina thought my having sex would be a sin and desecration, so I tried to keep it from her. But an older boy ate my pussy one night in the back of a school bus. That was my first real time, and I was really turned on. So I let him fuck me, and it hurt, but it felt good too, and he was so gentle and loving I fell in love with him real fast. I was really young and foolish. He didn’t care. I hardly ever saw him again. I thought that was so cold and cruel, but what the hell did I know? I was naïve and ignorant. It doesn’t take long to learn some shit, though, when you’re out there getting’ naked with people. It wasn’t long before I could teach a few tricks.

“Uncle Walt wasn’t a real bad guy when her was sober; he was just simple. When he would get a real opinion in his head, like he did sometimes, it’s just harden there like a boil, and fester and get him all worked up, ‘an he’d get drunk and get over it. and probably the damned idea wouldn’t ever come up again. When him and Aunt Marlina found out that the Lester boy had been feelin’ me up on the porch, they damn near went crazy. About a week after that, Aunt Marlina went to sit up one night with a friend in the hospital, ‘an he got drunk and must’ve had all that on his mind, so he really showed his ass. I came in about midnight; he was sittin’ there on the couch, drunk as a skunk, ‘an when I went to bed he came staggerin’ in there and fell on top of me. Ripped my nightgown in two places but I got up and got out the door. I hit him with an ashtray and put a gash in his eyebrow.

“Well, things really went downhill after that. Hell, I didn’t talk about it with my aunt. She didn’t want to hear that shit. He was drunk anyway. But Uncle Walt sulled up like a rooster and acted like a tough guy, like I better not say anything or he’d beat me ass. It got pretty impossible to ever have any kind of home for me there. So, I was seventeen when I got out of high school the next few weeks, ‘an I was gonna split for somewhere.

“It wound up being Dallas. I worked a little while as a secretary, I didn’t like it, and then I worked at a club, a supper club. I made a lot more money there and got me a steady man. His name was Chaze and he worked for ShowCo, which is a sound and lighting company, for concerts...rock and roll. They were doin’ good work, you know. They did the Paul McCartney tour, Wings, and a Led Zeppelin tour. I got into the music scene, an’ we were doin’ a lot of drugs, too many, some coke, whenever we could afford it. Speed. Downers. Some windowpane, purple microdot, blotter. I don’t know...bunch of stuff. We really expanded our minds, I guess. I could see all the answers sometimes when I was trippin’ my socks off.

“Chaze went to L.A. and left me pregnant. He didn’t send for me, like he said. There was always some excuse when he called. Then, hell, he didn’t even have a job one time, and he still didn’t come home. So fuck him, I said finally. I knew he wanted to stay in L.A. He said he’d wire me money for the abortion, but he never did. I had it anyway and decided I had to see some of the country. I’ve been travelin’ ever since, work awhile, travel awhile. I worked down in Florida, several places. Liked the sun down there. Till my motorcycle crapped out, it was okay.”

She paused.

“What about Colombine?” I asked.

“What about her? I thought you were askin’ about me.”

“Of course. But how did you get together?”

“Oh man! I spill my guts to you and you’re wantin’ to know about somebody else.”

“No.”

“Holy shit!” She clasped her face in both hands.

“No! No!” I grasped her to me. “I love you, Chelsea. You. You. I want to take care of you. I want to give you some happiness.”

She grasped me desperately to her bosom, and showed me finally that she could love me too, my soul, not my body. At least I thought so. She cried and so did I. We were lost together.

Chapter 8; PROVING GROUND

The weakness subdued me. I lusted for pleasure. And the kernel of me knew that I couldn't allow it to happen.

I buried my face in her bosom. I trembled and quaked in the warm flesh of her embrace, beholden to her, corrupted as was Pan, my feet not yet cloven hooves, my hors still inside, but my warm breath as craven as the hyena's laughing smile.

I took the crowbar and pulled open the crate. I sat in the dark van for a while and listened to the city's wailing echoes in the concrete walls. A hundred mute vehicles surrounded me inside the parking garage, cloistered from the thieving world of the night. I decided to go outside. It was three-thirty.

There are strong people in the night, cruel and resourceful. I could be one of them, in control, self-reliant, unafraid to act expediently and decisively. I wanted Chelsea, but I knew that I couldn't abandon the mission. After my great and long preparation, I had to follow through or lose my self-respect, my belief that I could do what I had set out so firmly to do. But she would call me crazy, and worse.

I heard my footsteps clacking on the lonely street. A cat darted quietly out of the shadows, slowed and pranced smartly into an alley. I chuckled. My eyes were electric; my senses tuned in to the night scene, sounds and sights and smell like burned rubber on concrete.

I had to strike the Mafia. I had to unleash the restless demon inside myself, to wreak its havoc, a catharsis, and flee my body. From there I could reach the peace of Pan, and would be deserving of it. And it would be a more positive statement against evil than any unstationed individual had ever made. Chelsea couldn't deny me that accomplishment. She wasn't worth it, I thought. Or was she? Breasts and brain and legs and pussy and feisty fervor. I knew she was worth a lot, but without a spirit of my own, my self-reliance, she would soon devour me, even in love. Strength seemed to me to be everything.

The old man lay sprawled on the park bench, twisted mouth gaping in collapsed sleep, shrouded in dark rags, zipper open and an incredibly shrunken and flattened penis dead and horribly exposed to the city night. Incapable even of self-fornication. I looked to all sides in glass and steel, and a sordid old degenerate without the price of a bowl of soup wallowing amidst it. Certainly this wasn't a strong, reliant creature of the night, only one of its victims.

There were other bedraggled ones in the park. One of them retched and coughed, reeling where he sat on the ground and looking up at me as if I were holding him in bondage. An empty bottle lay nearby, wrapped in brown paper still, crumpled and twisted from the craving clutch of this remnant of a man. He now retched what he once craved and

the cycle would come and go again. Even remorse had probably given way to numbed acceptance in the burned-out minds of the derelicts. I left the part and searched for a bar.

It was a time of peace. Saints and sinners were asleep at three-fifty in the morning. But then the whole thing would start again. The good people would arise first to mark territory for their hours of power, and the night people, the decadent ones, might just be settling in, and would arise much later, saving their energies for the devilment of darkness. Too many generalities in the world though. Nothing precise. Nothing completely good or bad, strong or weak, true or false. Was there right and wrong even? Or only degrees of them?

I found the slum streets. I knew they were there.

Windswept trash and garbage cans gave Roach Street the look of a war zone. The tightly compacted buildings were gray of blood red, stained with the soot of years, their timbers rotted, painted over and rotting again. Dark passageways loomed too close; I moved to the center of the street and eyed all sides. King of the night. Precarious King.

I heard the guttural groan of the car's muffler first. And then it rounded the corner, crawling at the pace of a king snake, lights bright, a muscular black arm arched out of the window. I stepped to the side. The black sedan groaned past, four sets of white eyes perusing me coldly. I walked on at a steady pace as it pulled away.

And then it stopped, near the end of the block, pulled quietly into an alley, backed out and turned around. It came down upon me again. The eyes had changed, but they still stared at me. I followed them with a slight twist of my head as they rolled by.

Whamp! I jerked around. They laughed uproariously. One of them had slapped the outside of the car door hard with his open hand. They wanted to embarrass me, maybe more. Yes. The car stopped with a squeak and jerked into reverse. I was still walking, but looking back as it backed toward me. It pulled even with me and I saw that their eyes were getting eager. Eyes are the key.

“Hey, white boy! I jus’ wanna know you ever been fucked in the ass, huh?”

“Hey! Tell me sumpin’, Honky.”

“Hey, bo-o-oy. You lost, boy?”

They were all young toughs. The driver had huge puffy lips and a surly look. The boney one in back had a pursed mouth and the veiled eyes of a viper.

“I’m gonna give you one warning to leave me along,” I said evenly. “And this is it.”

“Whadda you talkin’ about? You stupid fuck!” The kid in back was getting worked up.

“We ain’t givin’ you no warnin’, shitface!” said the driver. He slammed the accelerator and pulled away, rubber squalling. They hollered other obscenities. I walked on.

Up the street the car turned into another alley, backed out and faced me again, a maybe five hundred yards away, bright lights glaring. The tow in the back seat got out on either side and swaggered away from the car. One of them flipped open a switchblade and held it high. I slowed my walk and stepped to the center of the street again. The engine raced. There were still two of them in there. The tires screeched and it burst toward me, engine roaring.

I pulled the revolver quickly and leveled it at the windshield. The blast jerked my arm back. Shattered glass. I leveled and fired again, exploding more glass. The black sedan swerved and I stepped quickly to the side. It crashed into the side of a parked car with a thundering clap, ricocheting onto two wheels, reeling over onto its side where it skidded furiously in a shower of sparks and collapsing glass, finally rolling over onto its top and smashing against a car on the other side.

I turned my eyes up the street where the other two punks stood dumbfounded. I saw the knives but no gun, glanced back to see that the wreck was smoking desolation quiet for the moment. The heavy revolver felt good. I walked resolutely toward them, with long strides, swinging it by my side. They turned and ran. I smiled and walked on after them.

I counted my steps. The two soon disappeared. Twenty...twenty-one resolute steps. Positive steps. Lights were coming on in upstairs windows, one, then another, and I walked faster. In control. A groan, a clank from the wreck. I whirled around, revolver ready, for only an instant. Saw nothing. Hurried on. I had lost the count but walked on.

There were voices inside me, but I wouldn't listen. I drank coffee instead, as the sun's light appeared silently outside. Dead? Were they dead? I searched through the paper, knowing it wouldn't be there. A doughty waitress refilled my cup and I added sugar again. Dead? Two Die in Southside Crash. But not yet in the papers, where I would, at last make the news, at least by the next edition. Police Suspect Foul Play. I gritted my teeth resolutely.

The man at the end of the bar was a slob. He had a sour demeanor, a hard, puffed face, adorned with prickly stubble. Long, greasy strands of hair traversed his balding scalp. Wolf like eyebrows framed angry eyes that had seen enough violence to turn cold and dispassionate. I eyed him and wished that he would give me a hassle of some kind. I needed more proof.

But I wouldn't start any shit. I had my pride, my countenance.

I slipped the key into the lock and opened the door. They sat there, looking at me. There was Chelsea on the couch, in those tight jeans, eyeing me over the newspaper. Colombine looked at me with clear, blue, gentle eyes, turning from her book, from her curled-up position on the parlor chair. She had been reading "The Night of the Hunter."

Chelsea tossed the paper aside forcefully. "Where the hell have you been? Was it too much for you?"

"What? Was what too much?"

"True confessions time. You know what I mean. Maybe you couldn't sleep 'cause you can't make a commitment. Well it damn sure ain't necessary. You know what I mean?"

"Can't say as I do. I got up and left for my own reasons. I had some thinkin' to do."

"Yeah. Right. About what?" She was still accusing.

"Nothing to do with you. I've got other things to do." I walked in front of her.

"What kind of things? What kind of business you in anyway? Dope? What?"

"Pictures. Photos. Who the hell got you riled up?"

"Bullshit. I don't know what your game is, but it ain't pictures. And you! You're the one that got me riled up 'cause I didn't know what the hell happened to you."

“You’re beautiful when you’re asleep,” I said, smiling. “No need to wake you ‘cause I decide to go for a walk. You even had a smile on your face –almost.”

“You’re bullshittin’ me,” she said quickly. “You don’t think I know that?”

“You think too much, Chelsea. There’s nothin’ to tell you that would do you any good at all. You’re just workin’ for me and...you’re a very good friend. And that’s it.”

“And how long will it last?”

I looked at her hard, searchingly, before I replied. “Not much longer.”

“Then you’re gonna dump me, right?”

“You’re damned insecure, aren’t you? That’s why you’re so tough.”

“Look, Thorn, I’ve been around the block a few times. Hell, you already know that. When the hell do I find out something about you?”

“When the time’s right,” I responded quickly. “You wanna know what’s goin’ down, I’ll tell you. But you may not like it.”

“There’s not a helluva lot I have liked in life, up to now.”

“You like me, don’t you? I like you.” My eyes gave her a rare glimpse of kindness.

Hers were needles, plotting a puncture. Instead, she said: “Yeah. I like you all right. You’re an earthy guy under that macho shit.”

I smiled, but my eyes kept control. “Let’s get outta here and go to the mountains,” I said. “I’m tired of this luxury, and we’ve got some things to talk about.”

I paid for the hotel, a hefty three hundred and fifty odd dollar tab, with a credit card. Then ripped it in four pieces and stuffed it in a trash receptacle by the elevator. Last of the plastic, for better or worse. We left Denver in the sunshine. I felt the cool air flowing over my arm in the van, heard the comforting roar of the engine pulling us up the highway, north to Boulder and east into the Rockies, castles, of rock, ever-silent, waiting to encase our voices.

Dear Delores,

Good earnest conversation could’ve been good therapy. With an outpouring of our hearts and minds. Milk the venom.

“You’re gonna do what?” Chelsea sat in the shade by the brook. Colombine was wading in the rushing water, stepping gingerly over the slippery rocks.

“Goin’ to Las Vegas to blow the shit out of the Mafia. Or maybe New Orleans. I haven’t firmly decided.”

“I didn’t realize you were crazy,” she said, staring at me in disbelief.

“I’m not. It just seems that way because it’s an outrageous thing to do.”

“You’re right about that. What the hell you got against the Mafia? That’s a bunch of dangerous mother-fuckers. They ain’t gonna play games with you.”

“I’m not playing games with them either. I’ve got enough firepower to scorch their ass good.”

“Where?”

“You’ve been riding with it.”

“You’re damn sure crazy. Why the hell are you doin’ this?”

“Did you ever want to do one, just one damn significant...positive thing, Chelsea? Don’t you get tired of being helpless, not able to do a damn thing except read the news every day and see all the hatred and cruelty and corruption while the workin’ people, me and you, God knows, are bustin’ our ass just to make ends meet?”

“All the time.”

“What’s the worse damn thing you know? If you were gonna strike a blow against evil, I mean, lowdown snake shit evil, what would you hit? If you were gonna give the whole fuckin’ world an enema, where would you put the tube?”

“That’s not your job. Thorn. It’s stupid and it’s dangerous, and even if you succeed, what the hell have you done? For every Mafioso you did in, there’d be a hundred at the funeral.”

“Good place for a bomb.”

“And they’d kill you. Thorn. Hell, there’s no way you could get away with jumpin’ on the Mafia, the Goddamned Mafia!”

I twisted her a wry smile. “Believe me, I intend to get away with it. It’s well-planned.”

“What do you know about the Mafia?”

“Everything I could find at the library.”

“The Mafia’s not the only thing wrong with the world, Thorn.”

“Somebody else candela with the rest of the problems. This one seems to suit me. I have the incentive to work on it. It’s the right kind of challenge for right now. It suits me.”

“Yeah. Violence, killing. You’re gonna get down there and wallow with ‘em.”

“It’s a dirty job but somebody has to do it,” I deadpanned.

“You think it’s funny. The truth is, it’s sick. Violence never solved anything. Let the damned law deal with the Mafia. We’ve got the FBI and every cop in the country lined up against ‘em. What the hell do you think you can do?”

“I’ve got an excellent plan.”

“Well, I sure as hell hope it don’t include me.”

“It doesn’t.” I unwrapped the twig of grass twisted around my finger and threw it down, turned and made my way forthrightly back to the van.

Colombine was sunning her pale legs and shoulders on a boulder in the stream. How I wanted to tan her, feed her, discover her secret. And Chelsea... what a woman! I knew I would miss them, and I knew I had to quell the anguish in my heart with the growling gumption to strike my own large blow for justice. And get on with it.

Besides, I planned to get their phone number.

Chapter 9; TABLE STAKES

We moved north and Chelsea was sullen. I was cool about it, but it seemed to bother Colombine, who hadn’t heard our conversation by the brook.

Her tiny brows furrowed and she looked searchingly at Chelsea, who was stoic and uncommunicative. Then she turned to me, as if to ask a burning question, all the while suffering because she couldn’t. I drove on, but I kissed my finger, reached out and touched her cheek with it. She smiled, kissed her own tiny finger and placed it gently on my lips.

I wouldn’t tell her the plan. I was ashamed to talk about violent vengeance to this gentle and innocent fawn. She would see no good to come from it, only a distorted anger that had no meaning to her, no validity. And neither would anyone else. I knew that people were not motivated to rise up and strike at their enemies anymore, not like the old days when people could act upon their own codes of justice. They’re locked in their houses now, watching us all move ever-closer to annihilation on the evening news, impatient for the evening’s first sitcom and the last pat solution by a doctor, lawyer, cop or private eye.

“Are you going to send us to Dallas?” It was Chelsea from the passenger seat, and Colombine, between us, was hanging on every word.

“You can go whenever you want,” I said. “We’re gonna sleep on the road tonight, maybe in a park on the other side of Independence Pass. You can get a bus out of Carbondale tomorrow or you can go with me up past Fair Odds. I’m gonna stay in a cabin up there for a few days.”

“You live in a cabin?”

“I live on the road, or the trail. I’m gonna see an old friend and stay in a cabin he owns if I can. It’ll be rustic; it’s up in the mountains. But it’ll be a good place to get ready.”

“And then where?”

“Off to Cosa Nostra Land.”

“Who’s gonna help you do this crazy thing?”

I looked at her hard. “Just me.”

“Must be a helluva plan. You wanna tell me about it?”

“No. It’s no good to talk about it for no good reason.”

“Maybe you could convince me you ain’t crazy. That would be something.”

“I don’t think you want to be a killer,” she said.

Colombine, frowning, was hearing it all. My temptation was to talk to her, somehow justify my strange conspiracy.

“Chelsea,” I said. “I realized on one has ever done anything like this, but that’s a reason in itself. We’ve become a nation of spoiled and sated people, concerned with our own material possessions and the selfish search for pleasure, and the idea that somebody else should do all the worthwhile things, make the sacrifices, show the courage, and the gumption to make our lives better, while we lay back in a narcissistic stupor, caring only about our own little shrinking worlds, staring at the TV screen like lobotomized zombies. It’s easy to say that violence is no answer, but nothing else has worked against the Mafia, for years and years. I can strike them effectively and turn them against themselves. I can’t destroy them but I can cripple them. I can do a helluva lot for one individual, and I can then let the people know about it. They’ll be amazed. They’ll be inspired. And maybe others will pick up the challenge, and eventually the whole web of evil might even be torn apart. Maybe; maybe not. But somebody had to take the first step, and it’s got to be a bold and courageous initiative to get the fire started.”

“It won’t happen,” said Chelsea. “Hell, the police will be after you. You wanna know how things are? They’ll protect the job and go after you instead. You need to wake up to the real world, Thorn. The Mafia is successful because it has the connections, and they’ll crucify you.”

“Sure they do,” I said. “That’s the part that makes me maddest, the fact that they’ve corrupted and debased a democratic system that’s supposed to be a shining example for the world. And the ones they haven’t corrupted with greed, they’ve frightened to death with their threats. They’re cruel and despicable, and they deserve whatever I can dish out. Hell, it’s their code. They live by violence and intimidation. It’s reasonable to apply that code to them. If they can dish it out, they damn sure deserve to take it.”

“Yeah,” said Chelsea, “if you want to make yourself a murderer too. That’s a big price to pay.”

“Well, I damn sure can’t send them to jail,” I said. “If I could, maybe I would. Besides, there’s a pretty precise definition for murder, and it’s got nothing to do ridding society for murderers.”

“I’ve got to think you’ve got a personal grudge to settle here,” said Chelsea. “Otherwise, how could you work up this much hatred? There’s somethin’ here you ain’t tellin’.”

“You know, that’s a problem with people, Chelsea. They can’t relate to problems, no matter how big they are, unless they’re personally affected by them. That’s selfish and it divides us, alienates us. Most people aren’t concerned with heart disease or multiple sclerosis unless it strikes them or people close to them. They don’t care if ten thousand die in an earthquake in Turkey. They care a little if it’s fifty people in Kansas. And they care a lot more if it’s a single person in their hometown. If it happens in the family, it’s a great tragedy.”

“Of course it is,” said Chelsea. She seemed incredulous. I guessed I was getting carried away.

“What about the ten thousand?” I asked calmly.

“It’s not like no one cares, Thorn. You can’t bleed for everybody.”

“But you can care. And, believe it or not, people have the power to do things about it. And just because the Mafia has never done anything to me, has nothing to do with reality. It could never touch me, but would be no less evil. Hell, just because I’ve lived in Mississippi doesn’t mean I’ve lived in a vacuum. I know what’s happening in the world.”

“You live with paranoia and hatred,” said Chelsea. “Why couldn’t you do something positive?”

“I can’t cure diseases. I can’t reach people with persuasive words or pictures; they’re too busy watching TV. I can’t be elected to office; I’m not a lawyer with fat cat friends. But I can kill part of the cancer. I can do that.”

“Yeah,” she said derisively. “You can kill. That’s what you can do. Congratulations.”

“What can you do, Chelsea?” I asked angrily. “Can you help with the problems, or are you part of them?”

“Whatever I do, it won’t be a hare-brained scheme that’ll get me killed or slapped in prison. It’ll be something positive.”

“Maybe you ought to be a social worker. Maybe you’d like to work on a thousand little problems with a thousand little people one at a time. Some people get off on that.”

“I wouldn’t knock it. It’s a lot more noble tryin’ to help people than takin’ the law and the Lord’s judgment in your own hands.”

I laughed. “You act like I’m usurping somebody’s authority. I’m just trying to fulfill a worthwhile purpose. I don’t want to be one of those faceless millions who live and die without doing anything significant, not much smarter when they die than when they were born, and doin’ nothing in the meantime but tending to their bodily functions and reproducing. Life is what we make of it, Chelsea. It’s all up to us what we do with it.”

Chelsea seemed to give up the argument. She stared out at the bastions of sheer rock rising up around us on the westbound highway. We were left with the sound of the road. Colombine soon made her way back to the cot. I saw her in the rear-view mirror, staring at the top of the van; eyes frozen, miles away, visible troubled by it all. “Don Quixote” lay on the floor beside her. Chelsea, riding next to me, stared into the late afternoon. The sun melted red, washing us in the color of blood and our own feelings.

Dear Delores,

Did you feel satisfaction when you comforted one poor soul? Only one? And then just one more? You said you did. But sometimes you grew very tired of it.

We ate in a formica-plated chain restaurant that offered up the same tired food and faces that we saw everywhere else, the prattering public that dwelled on sweet drinks, foodstuffs and the sucking and blowing of tobacco, and fretful kids, sourdough truckers and occasional pairs of painted women. And us. We could have come from the carnival. Chelsea was iron-jawed, hair frizzled into black drill bits, worldly wary of face, and mindful of all details of the passing scene, summing up people and situations with a quiet eavesdropper's ear and mulling through the minute in the context of all the disappointments that lay behind her, strewn in her wake like shell casings. She sat loaded and charged again, and was just as defensive and paranoid as me, waiting to explode upon provocation.

And Colombine, adult of eye, but childlike in her demeanor, quiet as a forest nymph but having chosen to live with us, the humankind. A woman of words without words. A woman-child, content with her duality. A scholar of literature who spoke nothing of it. Why did it not explode inside her? I knew I had to know. I had to know tonight, before it was too late.

And myself, swaggering in my delusions of power, embarking upon a crusade of comic book dimensions, likely to die or get caught in the act of it, ironic victim of photographers' flashes, exposed naked as a kook, strobe lights reflecting off my close-cropped head, glistening like mojo crystals in my beard. "Here's your page one, Charlie. Some guy tryin' to blow up the Mafia. In Vegas. Musta took a beating at the tables, huh?" I could well fall onto the other side of journalism and become "the story."

I stared at the newspaper rack while we ate. It was the afternoon paper out of Denver, freshly delivered. They probably had a 9 am deadline. I ate quietly and studied Chelsea and Colombine across the table. They were quiet too.

Chelsea gave me a derisive sneer. It seemed calculated. She wasn't as free as I had thought her to be. I knew she would try some other strategy to talk sense to me. I just had to think of it before she did. A game. Where no one ever wins.

Dear Scott,

You don't deserve her. She's just hurt and she caught you on the rebound. Tryin' to get to me. She wasn't ever the same after that day she caught me lying and went outside and sat on the rusty old swing and left me inside on the bedroom floor. There's nothing worse than that and she knew it like I did. And she never

gave me a chance after that. And had to get even and wound up with you. You're still trash and if I see you here again I'll kill you. Kill you...

"Hey, what about you, Thorn?"

I saw Chelsea and the waitress. "No, nothing else, thanks." She ripped off the check and departed.

"What's the matter with you?" Chelsea asked. "You about ready to fritz out on me all the way?"

"You're getting your old rotten disposition back, Chelsea. You think I'm just another of those people who's gonna dump on you and split, right?"

"Hell, no. Why should I think that? It don't make a damn to me what you do."

“I’m glad you feel that way,” I said soothingly. “Because I’m not gonna do that to you. I want you for my woman. And I’m glad you don’t care what I do, because being free to do what I want to do is important to me right now. I’ve never had this kind of power before.”

“That don’t mean you ought to commit suicide.”

Her eyes broke for an instant, fear for me, before she turned away. It was fleeting but I saw it.

“It wouldn’t be the same if it wasn’t dangerous, Chelsea. If it didn’t require... great courage.” I said it deliberately, staring hard into her fearful, doubtful, angry eyes, changed my eyes to the twinkling of a star, slipped by face into a grin, then a smile. I showed her a brace of white teeth and winked at her.

She stared at me in amused amazement. Maybe she considered me mad. But maybe she could see deeper. I wished I could show her the vital importance of a noble act. If anyone could understand it, surely it would be her. Please. I wanted it to be her.

“This is impossible,” she said. “Rags and I are gonna split. We’ll take the bus at Carbondale.”

“Then you’ll be in Dallas. I’ll call you there when it’s over.”

“I don’t think so.”

I stared at her, glanced at Colombine who listened intently by expressionless.

“You’re gonna dump me, huh? Just because you don’t understand something, a man’s way to make things better.”

“Men have been waging war, and maiming and butchering people for thousands of years. Hell, join the crowd. You’re nobody special. You just wanna keep doin’ it. Just don’t think it’s gonna solve anything, though. It never has and never will.”

“Well, it saved the world from the Nazis, and it’s kept the Russians from comin’ over here and stompin’ our ass and takin’ all this great technology and stuff that men have produced. That’s something. Maybe you ought to appreciate the fact that men have traditionally saved the ass of weak women throughout history by havin’ the guts and the strength to stand up and deal with things.”

Chelsea’s eyes blazed hot. “Yeah, and dominated and abused ‘em and forced ‘em into menial, demeaning labor, cleanin’ up their messes. But I’ll tell you one Goddamn thing. Things have finally changed. You and every other pip-faced male meathead can clean up your own God damned messes. In fact,” she rose triumphantly, “you can start with this.” With a wide sweeping gesture, she raked off the table, spraying water and shattering glass across the floor as the restaurant crowd hushed suddenly into silence.

I replied calmly. “The waitress will get it.”

She screamed at me, red-faced. “Pompous ass!”

“I agree,” I said. “You’re acting just like one.”

Before I had finished, she was storming toward the door. Colombine, clutching her arms to herself, was in hot pursuit.

I paid the proprietor an extra fifty dollars for the damages. “She thought the meat was a little overcooked,” I explained dryly.

I stepped into the front alcove and bought a Denver paper, tucked it under my arm and made my way toward the van, searching for them. I knew the van was locked, and I had the keys.

I walked methodically, stride after stride, pulling the keys from my pocket and sorting out the one I needed. But I walked around to the other side and saw her, sour-faced, arms crossed, and leaning against the van. Colombine stood nearby, eyes round and blue, saying ‘hug me, comfort me.’ Between my wildass scheme and Chelsea’s outburst, Colombine looked to be under severe stress. Maybe she would finally have something to say if things got much worse. Now she looked tense, worried.

“Hang in there, Colombine. Things are okay,” I said.

“Open the fuckin’ door, Thorn. We’ll get our stuff out,” said Chelsea, “and you can take the rest of it and stick it up your ass.”

“I don’t know why you got so upset. I agree with what you said. It just doesn’t negate what I said.”

“Who the hell cares?” Chelsea retorted. “We just don’t wanna get caught up in your crazy ass scheme. I got to look after Rags, and declaring war on the mafia sure ain’t gonna be too healthy for anybody that’s around you.”

“Right. You should go to Dallas. I’ll call you there in a month or two.”

“No need. I’ll read about you in the papers.”

“Sure you will. Then I’ll call and tell you the real story.”

“You can’t get away with it. You couldn’t do it right if you had an army.”

“You’re right again.” I unlocked the door. “There’s no way to do it with an army. That’s not the way. Get in. Chelsea. I like you a lot. And Colombine too. I want you to work for me a little while longer, okay?”

“I don’t wanna hear any more God damn crack about women, all right?”

“I’ll make a deal with you. Let’s get the chips off both our shoulders, and let’s not either of us insult anybody. I respect you. Lets’ just cool it, okay?”

She looked at me with a reconstructed face, anger subsided, blending a bit more hurt, worry. Foolish for her to be under stress. I would never hurt her, in fact would defend her. But she thought I was deranged, confused. She couldn’t see my simple clarity.

It was Colombine who broke the impasse, reaching to take Chelsea’s hand, then mine, and pull us closer, squeezing both our hands in hers and forcing us to meet each other’s eyes.

“Come on, Chelsea. Lighten up,” I said, staring into her dark, distrustful eyes, taking her free hand. But she pulled it away.

“I trusted you,” she said. “I poured out all my feelings to you. And it turns out you’re gonna do something totally weird...crazy...dangerous. It’s like I opened up everything to you, and you turned our not to give a damn, ‘cause you’re so obsessed with something that makes no sense at all.”

“It’ll make me satisfied. Then it’ll all be over. There’ll be a new life, with peace and beauty. I do –“

“Why not now? If that’s important, why not have it now?” she implored. Colombine clutched my hand harder, as it to persuade me.

“I haven’t earned it.” I squeezed Colombine’s hand. “I’ve never done anything truly worthwhile. But I will.” I pulled away and grabbed the van door. “You’ve both got to know how important this is – for me. I accept you for how you have to be and what you have to do. You need to accept me. That’s fair.”

We faced each other, the three of us. Colombine looked at both of us with a sudden air of confidence, and then stepped nimbly up into the van, making her way to the back and leaving us standing there.

I held the keys out to Chelsea. “I know you don’t understand all of this right now, Chelsea,” I said, “but I want you to let me be a friend to you.”

She shook her head slightly and looked down, kicked at the bare dirt and gravel once, twice, and looked up again. “Well, there’s always a bus at Carbondale or some place or other,” she said, apparently unconvinced. She grabbed the keys with a flourish. I couldn’t blame her. She had no burning ambitions that I could tell. She hadn’t read all of those books and magazine articles about the mob, hadn’t worked up the kind of righteous indignation that I had somehow, purposefully, mad into a vital cause in my head. And she was a woman, not a man. As sexist as that sounded, and I didn’t mean it to be. Not seeing the differences is naive.

It was on page three of the metro section: ONE DEAD IN GANG CLASH – One member of a Southside street gang died of a gunshot in the wreckage of an automobile on East Russell Street early this morning in an incident police speculated to be gang-related.

Police identified the victim as Marvin “Big Hands” Ballinger, 22. An unidentified male companion in the vehicle was listed in serious condition at Memorial Hospital. They reported to be members of the Black Rock Club, which police say has been engaged in a territorial dispute with a rival club known as the Diablos.

The car in which they rode apparently crashed into a parked car in front of an apartment house at 723 East Russell, then overturned. Residents reported the crash shortly after 4 a.m.

A police spokesman said the car was traveling at a high rate of speed, skidding more than fifty feet on its side after smashing into the parked vehicle.

There were unconfirmed reports that several gunshots were heard before the crash during an altercation between gang members. A spokesman at the Logue County coroner’s office said Bollinger, who was driving the car, died of a single gunshot wound to the head.

The investigation is continuing with more questioning of residents and gang members today.

On one hand, it was a neat job. On another, I had usurped the power of God. I sweated. A chill filled my body with emptiness, ice fear. Mortal sin.

On one had, I had avenged a human code of decency by crushing lice, or two blood-sucking ticks in the crotch of society, and in self-defense too. On another, I was an angry fool, acting beyond reason and in futile arrogance, a

person that society would now want to lock away and forget - if it could only catch me. Perhaps I was going man – with ambivalence.

Dear Rev. Middleton,

Do I have the power to determine right and wrong? That is the criteria, isn't it? It seemed pretty simple to you. Prefab philosophy. Deluded by doctrine. And preaching it with exuberance. I never said you were wrong, though. I just said I had a mind that wouldn't quit.

I put the newspaper away. Colombine was asleep on the other cot. I laid back and felt the rumble of the road. The game was still on. The stakes had been raised and I guess I had raised them. And I knew the more I had invested the harder it would be to get out of the game.

Chapter 10; THE GAMERS

The amber glow of late afternoon gave way to darkness. We set up camp and built a fire, and ate heartily since our lunch had been abbreviated by Chelsea's outburst. There seemed little joy in any of it for Chelsea or Colombine, their demeanor subdued and solemn from knowing that they were traveling with a vengeful vigilante, a man with a mission born of hatred, and not even a personal hatred from some intimate tragedy, but a strangely objective one stemming from a dispassionate logic they were helpless to understand.

I ticked off in my mind the greatest names of history. No one understood them either. They didn't live their lives around a formula, some adopted code of lazy subservience to mass postures. My actions would speak louder than words, which were inadequate, which were doomed to fall on uncomprehending ears because my vision, like the very best ones, was personal, could not be shared. It was a worthy goal – to be accomplished, not to be talked about. Then they would see.

I questioned my purpose less than I questioned my standing with my two radically contrasting companions. They had stirred my inner emotion, the ones I had stored away for safekeeping, and pulled them out to lay exposed. I wondered whether I had hopelessly alienated them, or whether I could bring them back into my embrace. It seemed unlikely with Chelsea, who had rather compete with me, as life had taught, or forced her to do. And Colombine remained a mysterious enigma. I knew I had to make some discoveries about both of them – tonight, before it was too late.

I finished rolling a joint, lit it, and passed it to Chelsea. Maybe it would cool her out for some conversation. She inhaled deeply and held it out to Colombine, her look questioning. She took it, glanced at me, back at Chelsea and took a hit.

"You've even got Rags stress out, Thorn." Said Chelsea. "It's rare that she wants a hit."

"What does she want? It's strange to me that I can't get a straight answer about why she won't talk. Hell, I'd like to talk to her."

I thought better about whom I was addressing and turned to Colombine.

"You...Colombine. I'd love to talk to you because I've learned to like you very much."

"It's not necessary to talk to her," said Chelsea. "Did you ever think about that? Did you ever think that you've gotten to like her and respect her, a lot more than you do me, even though you've never exchanged a word with her?"

“Well, it’s not language that makes a person what they are,” I replied.

“Exactly.”

“You’ve still got to talk, though, to make any kind of meaningful progress in your life?”

“Who said?”

“You have to communicate. You can’t dispute that.”

“There are other ways to communicate. Good ones.”

“She hasn’t written me a note either.”

“She’s communicated how she feels about you. What else do you want? She’s got me around to make all the mundane, trivial decisions that get you through the day.”

“She’s lucky, I guess. Meanwhile, she’s not helping to accomplish anything worthwhile. All those good books she’s reading ought to teach her how to make a success in life, spread some of her intellect and good vibes to her friends who need it.”

“That doesn’t make any sense, Thorn. That’s exactly what she’s doing; she’s leading by example. You’ve had nothing but good vibrations from Colombine until you hit us with that weird trip you’re into. She knows the secret man. We’re still looking for it.”

“Do you really believe that? I don’t.” I looked straight at Colombine, who showed no emotion, then to Chelsea.

“If you really want to know, she’s studying for a Ph.D. incommunicative psychology, at the University of Florida. This is an experiment in non-verbal communication that she’ll use for the dissertation.”

“What’s the experiment?”

“She says nothing for a year. Absorbs all the literary knowledge she can without verbalizing. All the human knowledge – people coming to grips with themselves, and others. The literary treasure chest, you know. She figures oral communication is over-rated and should be de-emphasized. And she figures she can write a helluva dissertation with all that pent-up creative energy.”

“I don’t believe any of that either.”

“Well, then, how about this one? There was this frog that talked her out of a kiss. When it happened, the frog turned...into me! She was shocked so bad she hasn’t been able to speak again. Naturally, I felt responsible, so I’ve been lookin’ after her ever since.”

Colombine burst into a broad smile. Her joyful look sent a quiver of love through my spine.

“Well, I can believe that,” I said. “Why didn’t you just come clean in the first place?”

“Why should I tell you anything?” Chelsea asked. “Colombine is an adult woman. She’s nineteen. And she’s perfectly capable of telling you anything about herself that she wants. Besides, you’ve told us nothing of any substance about yourself. I’ve spilled my guts to you. I don’t know why. Must have been drunk. And every time the conversation

turns to you, you clam up like a damn oyster, and sink down into the sludge pit of a mind that makes you want to go out and kill people.”

“Who gives a shit about me? I haven’t come to any great revelations in life that anybody wants to know.”

“You’ve got a damn nerve sayin’ that after Colombine and I gave you all the love we had, opened our hearts to you and you’ve refused to share anything of yourself with us. You can take but you can’t give.”

“That’s a cruel thing to say, Chelsea. I didn’t know you wanted my life history.”

“I want to know who you are,” she said earnestly. “I don’t think you’re who you seem. I’m not even sure you’re who you think you are.”

I mused over it a few seconds. “Well, in that case,” I said, “there’s no way I could know.”

“No,” she agreed. “So your only chance is if we know, if we understand you because we can save you. And if you want us to be with you, than we’ll have to know. You’ll have to tell us. You’re going to lose us if you don’t.”

I stared hard at both of them, Chelsea adamantly logical, insistent, Colombine begging me with her eyes, effectively. Chelsea had turned the tables on me. No. Not just Chelsea. Both of them.

“I don’t really think there’s much to tell. I grew up in rural Mississippi. My family didn’t have much, but we got by. I started working when I was pretty young, at service stations and such. My dad saved enough to get me in college and I worked enough to stay there. There wasn’t much in the way of aid programs back then.

“I got through college in journalism. I had gotten interested in photography, really can’t tell you a reason why. I liked the excitement of it, the news photography. Deadlines to beat. Spot news is exciting. I was in the National Guard awhile too, but I thought that was mostly bullshit. Too much regulation; not enough common sense. You had to be a licensed operator to mow the grass around the tents. Anything you hung up had to have all the buttons buttoned and every hanger exactly three fingers apart. We had to stand inspections at six a.m. in order to pick up cigarette butts. Hell, college was bad enough for an undisciplined maverick like me.

“I covered a lot of stuff for the newspapers – crime, civil rights protests, plane crashes, sports, society stuff. Sweaty athletes. Women around punch bowls. Grip and grins. I think I used to be more idealistic, then I got more cynical.

There’s no one reason why. Everything just got to seem so phony – played for the media.

“I married a bright woman, a sociologist, a social worker... Delores. We were reasonably happy. Every marriage has some bumps and bruises. She got killed by accident. An old drunk who got his benefits cut came in there one day and started a bunch ‘a shit. She was just lookin’ probably. I don’t know. Somebody said she had come out to help. Her best friend got under a desk. Anyway, she got shot while a security guard was wrestling’ with the guy. One bullet right in the chest. I never have made any sense out of it. All that shit about it being your time. That’s really crap. It wasn’t her time. There was just too much she was involved in, too much she wanted to do, unfinished business.

“Well, that damn near killed me. But then one day I was able to dash all those things that festered in me aside and just think of one thing – when you get knocked down, what do you do? What do you do? You get up. If you get knocked down again, you get up again.

“After that, I’ve figured I was tough enough for anything, or at least I could be. So I trained myself to be tough, even if I’m hurt again. I can handle it. And I was determined to be smart enough, and tough enough to beat anybody that tried to shit on me.

“I read a lot of stuff too. I worked on my head. And I got to looking at the whole world of manmade contrivances as a lot of greedy materialism, that’s been carried much too far, so that we’re fuckin’ over nature and ruining the atmosphere, and the water, and the earth, the only environment that can ever support life like ours that we could possibly get to. I guess I figure I’ve seen enough of all the pain and deceit that people have inflicted on them. I want to get settled into the mountains and study the basics. Maybe I can figure out some other directions we could’ve taken. That’s about, it.” I shrugged. “Not too exciting.”

“Well, yeah. Another disillusioned young man, searching for truth and happiness. It ain’t new, but it’s yours. That make is everything.” She paused to search out my eyes. “Only thing is, that’s not what you’re goin’ after. You’re tryin’ to go to Las Vegas and start a war with the mafia. That doesn’t fit anywhere with peace and happiness.”

“I can be happy knowing I deserve to be, that I’ve earned it, after I show the people that they can deal with evil. They don’t have to sit back and listen to the media, and the politicians and lawyers talk about all their technicalities and why nothing can be done. They know the names of every Mafia kingpin in the country and can’t do a damn thing about it.”

“But you can, right?”

“I don’t need your sarcasm, Chelsea. I don’t deserve it.”

“No. I guess not,” she said resignedly. “You’ve never done anything to me. You’ve tried to be a friend, and you’ve been very generous, more than I’ve deserved from you. We both appreciate it. I just don’t want to see you hurt. They’re gonna get you, Thorn. If the mob doesn’t get you, the police will. All you’re gonna do is put them on the same side.”

“I nodded silently before speaking. “Then maybe people will know something that they didn’t know before about their precious institutions.”

She shook her head. “Arrogance. That’s all I get from you, as if yours are some kind of profound revelations you’re going to share with the world. But, really, all they’re gonna thing is that here is some guy who tried to shoot a gangster or, worse yet, did shoot one.”

I laughed. “And you call me cynical.”

“If I believed you could make a difference, Thorn, believe me, I’d be behind you. But I just don’t think so. I can’t think of anybody, really, who can make a difference. Everything’s going to keep on running pretty much the way it does. It’s just too big for us.”

“That’s the kind of philosophy I’m trying to stamp out, Chelsea, as much as anything else.”

She stared at me across the campfire with a look I’d never seen, a wide-eyed but penetrating gaze that seemed to tell me simultaneously that she understood finally but I was still all wrong, maybe now more than ever.

“You’re just going about it the wrong way,” she said evenly. I was right.

She got up tiredly from her log by the fire. “I’m going for a walk,” she said. “Don’t follow me.”

I nodded acquiescence. She turned and walked into the darkness, on the trail that led downward, past clusters of boulders, and down to the stream.

I looked at Colombine. Before I could speak, she got up hurriedly and made her way quickly toward the van. I guessed it must be my eventual fate to be left alone. If they can't manipulate you, they leave you alone.

It was sometime later. I had thought for a while, and then dozed. My eyes opened and are at their motionless until I harnessed my psyche. My hazy eyes focused on the red coals and gray ash of the campfire. It was eleven until midnight.

Chelsea was still gone, unless she was asleep in the tent. Doubtful. A faint light glowed through the cab window of the van. Or she could be there, yes, sleeping with Colombine and leaving the tent to me. I got up and worked out the soreness from my hard seat on the ground. I walked forthrightly to the van, assertively, demanding to know. After all, Chelsea was still living off me – and in my care.

I opened the cab door gently, lifted myself up and in and saw her in the back. There, by candlelight, Colombine looked at me like a helpless fawn, pencil poised at her diary, or at least a small notebook with a yellow brass lock. She hurriedly began putting it away, frightened, scurrying like a small animal to stash a cache of acorns.

“Hey, no problem, Colombine,” I said softly. “What’s the matter?”

She looked at me hard. Her mind seemed to whirl like a machine, spinning at breakneck speed to calculate my reactions. I shifted into my calm composure and continued to study her eyes.

“I don’t want to read your diary, Colombine. That’s your personal property. Please don’t be afraid of me.” I realized, perhaps for the first time, that this was a devilish lie. There weren’t many things I’d rather do than read her diary. She had tucked it under the covers, as well as the pencil.

“I guess there’s no need to ask where Chelsea is.” She seemed calm now, motioning subtly with her eyes toward... the outside, the dark trees. So she was still in the woods, probably down by the creek, which we could hear rushing steadily in the night. She was probably contemplating life, from a boulder by the water. Typical.

“I think I’ll get out and see if something’s happened to her.” With a quick squinch of her mouth and a tilt of her head, Colombine told me with certainty that she didn’t think it advisable. Sure, Colombine, I know she can take care of herself, but I also know she could get hurt, maybe take a fall. And I want her to know that I care about her, even worry about her. An opportunity to show that.

“Colombine,” I spoke aloud, still leaning between the front seats, “she’s gonna make ya’ll catch the bus tomorrow and you’ll both be gone. Listen... I like both of you. I want to take care of you. Doesn’t that count with you?” I left it hanging.

She nodded gently. I knew, somehow, that she wanted to stay.

“Tell her you want to stay with me then. I’m not gonna let anything happen to you, either of you, I’m just gonna provide for you the best I can. We’ll move into Robert Edd’s cabin, not too many miles from here... and just mellow out for awhile.”

She looked again to the great outdoors, beyond, to where Chelsea was, using head, eyes, brows. It was up to Chelsea then, I understood.

“You’ve got a mind too, Colombine. A very smart one. What is it you want? Do you wanna leave me?” She shrugged her shoulders and brows. She was undecided yet. Probably like Chelsea.

“You don’t know, huh?” It gets real tiring having to do all the talking.”

Her lips and the shake of her head said ‘no.’ No what? It isn’t tiring. Actually, it wasn’t. But it was frustrating.

“Maybe not tiring,” I amended. ”I should have said frustrating.” Her brows and shoulder shrugged; her eyes showed questioning wonder. Why should it be frustrating to me? It was beyond her, and she easily made me understand it.

“Amazing, isn’t it?”

I turned with the voice to see Chelsea, outside. She stood erect, legs apart, her shoulders covered with my rope, in her work shoes and heavy socks, thigh jeans and wool shirt and her olive drab army belt, which held a knife and sheath and other pouches.

I gave Colombine a last look – she was strangely wide-eyed – and swung myself smoothly out of the van, onto the ground in front of her. She stood her place, confronting me there.

“I was getting worried about you,” I said.

“Bullshit!”

“What’s the problem with you?” She was angry for one thing.

“I wanna see what you can do, Thorn. I wanna see what you’re made of since you want to do this crazy thing. I wonder if you’re qualified.”

“Try me.”

“I’m going to.”

“Hop to it.”

“I didn’t tell you all the juicy details in my past, Thorn. I’ve got some qualification you don’t know about.”

“Such as?”

“Chaze, my man in Dallas, was a Special Forces, Viet Nam. He taught me some things, how to use rope, rock climbing, hand-to-hand combat, night work.”

“Guess you’re good too, huh?”

“I’m not as tough as the Mafia, if you know what I mean.”

“Who is?”

“I think I can outdo you by myself. Then you know that the Mafia will make chopped liver out of you.”

“Well, you’re not beyond learning a few things yourself, Chelsea.”

“We’ll see.” Her shadowy eyes stayed steadfastly on me. Of course I fixed my hooded green eyes right back at her, not to be intimidated.

“Across the creek,” she pointed to her left, “there’s a rock cliff, and old fir tree embedded in the rocks, right at the top. My best lace panties are in the tree. If you get them, you can fuck me and I’ll give you three weeks of free labor. You start at 12:30. You’ve got till daylight.”

“No deal.”

She looked puzzled. “What the hell you want then? You name it.”

“Your pussy’s not much prize. I’ll take six weeks of free labor.”

“You’re not gonna win anyway.” She said with certainty. “And when I win, I want you to try to look at things more realistically. I want you to see that you’re no killer. You’ve got no background or aptitude for it. You just want adventure and you can get a damn sight more runnin’ with me than you can tickin’ off the Cosa Nostra.”

I glared at her. “On the other hand you could run with me.”

Her hard lips turned upward, barely perceptible. “You can run with me if I beat your ass...when I beat your ass.”

“I must have left our some juicy details too,” I said cryptically.

“She chuckled derisively. “If you get hurt, we can quit.”

“If you get scared out there in the dark,” I taunted, “you can call it off.”

“I’ve been out there once, and you may be surprised what’s waiting on you, Thorny Horny. You’ll be lucky to even find the place.”

“Always trying to prove yourself, eh, Chelsea?”

“Like somebody else I know.”

“If I win, I want your time. Both of you. And quit givin’ me such grief. Let’s have some good times instead.” I glanced behind me. Colombine was listening from the cab or the van, the door still open.

Chelsea didn’t reply for a moment. I wished I could see her dark eyes. “In the unlikely event you should get there and get the prize – and, believe me, I’ll keep you from it – I’ll take on the damn Mafia with you.”

“I don’t know,” I said with a smirk. “You’re a woman. You might get hurt.”

“Sewage scum,” she growled heavily, flashing her dark eyes at me. She turned and was gone into the blackness.

Chapter 11; TO THE EDGE

The night was quiet. I collected my thoughts and began preparing for the challenge. The moon's light was bright, three-quarters full, to illuminate these mad doings.

There were stars twinkling, as if to add some levity to it all. I listened to the muffled rushing of the water, and thought about my strategy, limited as it was, checked my watch, loosened up my muscles, and thought some more.

I ticked off the rules. If someone is hurt, the game's over. I had until daylight to get the panties. Juvenile objective, huh? And starting time was twelve-thirty. It was twelve thirty-nine; time to get my adrenalin going...metal prowess, strength, stealth, stamina.

Colombine sat huddled, quiet by the fire's dying embers. She studied my every move.

"You may want to stoke up the fire, Colombine," I said. "I can't get into it right now." She nodded, lips pursed, eyes like a wary cat's.

I walked to the van. Chelsea had taken both of the good ropes, leaving me a worn one that I searched over for dangerous frays. I pulled on my ragged cut-off jeans and donned heavy socks under my hiking boots. With a warm flannel shirt and my favorite wool cap, I was soon ready.

Colombine watched me while she added wood to the small blaze she was fostering. "I'll see you later, Colombine," I said matter-of-factly. "You gonna wish me luck?"

She stood up, smiling, and stepped lightly to me. She raised a tiny forefinger in front of her, as if to say, "one minute, please," then stepped away, into the shadows. She reached down in the darkness and emerged again with a fresh-plucked flower from under an aspen tree. She brought it to me, reaching to unbutton my shirt pocket and piercing the buttonhole with the stem, hanging it erect to show its fragile lavender in the lantern light. It was a columbine.

"With you on my side, I can't lose," I told her.

Colombine shrugged coyly, as if unsure I could beat Chelsea in this reckless game. She knew that her aggressive companion was clever and resourceful, up to this challenge. I was forewarned, I guessed. Chelsea was probably still rankled about the lunchtime remark too. There is no fury like a manly woman scorned.

I moved exactly at 1 a.m., down the path to the creek, which I hadn't really seen except in crossing it down at the campground office. Methodically, I adjusted my eyes to the darkness.

The water rushed louder. I arrived at the bank, stunned at its width, some fifty yards or more across, deep and slower upstream to my right but increasingly shallow on the left, into a rushing torrent that swept around boulders and evolved into a crashing waterfall of twenty to thirty feet.

I peered across. Up against the sky loomed a craggy rock face. Skyward, I saw the faint silhouette of what appeared to be an ancient skeleton of a tree, probably my destination. At least it seemed to be at the highest point. I searched the dark terrain vainly for a sign of Chelsea, or for any clue to the scenario she must have planned, perplexed as how she had crossed the creek. I saw no place where it was possible to step across on rocks. I wasn't dressed for a swim, and I knew the water was icy cold. It would be difficult to fight the current here anyway, and keep from pouring like a floundering trout over the falls. So I had to go either upstream or down, below the falls. Upstream made more sense; it was closer to the objective, the high rock cliff, and the terrain was easier to walk. Surely it must have been Chelsea's route. I knew I had to be wary, but for exactly what I didn't know.

It was soon apparent. I was the outline of the loop on the bare path by the creek, inefficiently covered by leaves and debris that looked suspicious in itself. My sensory energy had picked it up in the darkness. I slowed my step, eyed the dark spruces and firs at my right for any sign of movement. None. I slowed again, settled into a quiet crouch on the trail and strained to see where her rope led. It was impossible to make it out in the blackness but – maybe she was looking at me. And maybe I could deal with it positively.

Quickly, I ran for the loop, leaping to seize it in both hands. I was suddenly jerked off the ground, the loop knotted tightly over my fists, dangling heavily like a side of beef for an instant and then tipping in a heap back onto the ground. I pulled hard at the rope while struggling to right myself, and it fell limp in my hands. It had been camouflaged somehow down the broad trunk of a fir tree, upward and onto a huge outcropping of rock, from where she must have jerked him off the ground.

But I had still heard no sound up there. She was stealthy like a cat, to be sure, a worthy opponent. Nimbly, I leaped up to grab hold of a limb, to climb onto the rock and chase her down, then thought better of it and dropped again to the path. Why should I waste energy chasing shadows when I could devote it to the principal objective, the reason for this peculiar adventure? If she were on this side – and I didn't know that for sure – she couldn't be putting up other traps and barriers for me on the other.

I looped my new rope over the old one, quietly and quickly, listening still for any sound above the rush of the creek. I turned my attention back to the trail, moving over it noiselessly, easily in the darkness. Chelsea's effort, though unsuccessful, had stirred my respect, my wariness.

I stood facing the high cliff, which was bathed in darkness but outlined softly in moon and starlight, fifty yards or more across the creek. I stared intently, making out the easiest, most logical route to the top. It was steep but there were pickets of soil and trees, and plenty of hand and footholds and... whatever obstacles Chelsea would lay in the way. Maybe I shouldn't take the logical route, but a longer one, or even an illogical one instead.

Then I saw the rope. Pulled tautly across the creek, it was the access she had apparently used. I didn't know how she had managed it but it was tied up in a spruce tree on this side, disappearing in shadowy foliage on the other. So she was strong enough to cross it by hand. She wanted me to see that. It would require strong arms and a solid grip. It must be her challenge to me, I thought, to test my strength and prowess. She would no doubt be watching to see if I could make the other bank as she had. I would show her – with style.

I scaled the spruce, imagining her doing it. Maybe she strung the rope across earlier, tying it on the other bank and swimming over herewith the other end. Or maybe it was the opposite. In either case she would have swam the icy

creek, a damned gutty accomplishment. I tested the grip on the rope, flexing my arm muscles, loosening them more to withstand the rigors of the crossing. It would take a lot of muscle to do it. But I knew I had as much as Chelsea. She wanted to know; she would find out.

My ropes looped over my neck and shoulders, I tried my weight against the tightrope. It remained relatively taut. It would sag in the middle, but my boots would be locked atop the rope, sliding with me and taking some of the strain of my arms. I labored across. Just like I had read in the book, and the way I had practiced it in my backyard while the neighbors gaped. I smiled to myself. Evidence that my training, my toughening, was paying off.

I strained from one arm, one rough grip to the next, inching across, boots scraping noisily against the rope. My rope. What irony, I heard the gurgling churn of the water, louder and louder, seeming to surround me. I was over the center quickly, muscles till strong, hanging precariously close to the swirling currents that raced for the falls. I puffed to catch my breath. Had to keep moving.

Then I saw her. I had strained to turn my head, twist my neck around so that the other side was backwards. And she. She was bottom-side up, perched comfortably in the tree, next to the rope, looking at me. I stopped coming, hung there like a helpless carcass over the creek. There seemed no way to protect myself, nothing to do, not a damned thing. I couldn't make it back very quickly. I could never make it to her side either if she wished otherwise. She was a dark, expressionless figure.

Or...maybe I could. Desperately, I knew I had to try, to reach even one of the overhanging limbs – I spotted a strong one – and leap for it.

Quickly, I started pulling myself forward again, double-time, to get over the creek, to her side. Catch her! My weight fell heavily to nothingness, and just as quickly crashed noisily into the cold shock of the creek. I held myself taut, ears clogged with silence by the frigid flow, clutching the rope, exploding finally to the surface while being swept relentlessly downstream by the rushing water. The falls! I clutched the rope tighter while my body spun helplessly around into the eye of the current. The rope burned my hands and slipped, but I held tight.

Finally, I was pulled by the current and purposefully pled and kicked and struggled until I reached the quieter waters near the side where I started. Panting and chilled to the bone, I grudging out onto the bank tiredly, holding the old rope, having lost the better one in the rushing water. My hiking boots slogged heavily with creek water. I was drenched and out of breath and newly respectful – even more – of Chelsea. The bitch! I re-assessed the situation.

I felt her presence as my boots squished and sucked noisily in the muck, a wet and shivering shambles of my former self. She was watching, I knew it, silently from the other side, smiling at my teeth-chattering misery. So...I wouldn't shoe her that.

I shook the water from my hair and pulled myself onto solid ground. There I turned and looked around at the broad gray darkness on the other side, straining my eyes into the still, impenetrable foliage where she had been. Silent scourge of the night. She was like no other woman I had ever known. I refused to be embarrassed before her.

“Nice work!” I shouted, hands cupped at my mouth. “I’ll be back.” I turned and, head high, walked back to the trail. I was freezing, and I fought it vain to keep from shivering in convulsions. She wouldn't see that.

Halfway to the camp, I broke into a trot, trying to break the grip of the cold. I couldn't see well, so couldn't run fast enough to cut the chill, but suffered through it and finally reached the camp, encouraged strongly by the light of Colombine's fire.

She sat there on her sleeping bag by the roaring blaze. The turned-down book beside her told me she was still reading “Don Quixote.”

“Hello, beautiful,” I said as evenly as possible, scurrying to peel off my wet shirt. She only looked at me calmly, as if she had fully expected my inglorious return.

I made love to the fire, peeling off my soggy boots and socks. Without my asking, Colombine fetched me a dry towel. Her warm, open eyes didn’t quite mask completely her amusement. Or was it intended to?

“Well, Colombine, are you interested in the story?” I asked her, pulling on clean, dry blue jeans and zipping them.

She smiled and nodded.

“Well, she strung a rope across the creek. I figured she wanted to see if I could cross on it, like she had. And I didn’t think she’d cut my best rope and dump me in the drink. But...she damn sure did.”

From my wet shirt pocket, I carefully pulled out a soggy, broken stem, remnant of the columbine, and held it up.

“I’m getting’ kind of rough on these,” I acknowledged. “Think you could trust me with another?”

She smiled shyly and pulled another blossom from her hair, reached to unbutton the pocket of my fresh shirt and thread it into the buttonhole. She patted it there gently when she had finished.

I laughed out loud, but Colombine only showed her warmest smile, not sound from behind that angelic countenance. I was beginning to feel desperate to know about her secret silence, feeling quiet frustration inside me already from Chelsea’s outrageous victory over me. Not yet, though. I hadn’t lost the war.

“Well, it all makes me understand Chelsea more,” I said to her, “and why she’s so antagonistic toward me. She’s known all along that I need a dose of humility. When she sees that in me, she’ll turn around. She’ll see that I’m a regular person, and not a constant hard case. I think I’ll just sit down here and cool it for a while, and she can come in when she sees that she’s won. I’ll show her that I can have humility, be a reasonable, easygoing guy. That ought to make things all right between us.”

Colombine frowned, shook her head vehemently.

“Why not?” I asked. “She wants to win. Let her win. I’m a big guy. I can handle it. She thinks women get no respect. All right, I’ll show her some respect. I do respect her – a helluva lot.”

Colombine looked distraught, head down, still shaking. No! No? Like I had it all wrong.

“Listen, Colombine, I love the woman. I can’t help it. I want to make things right between us.”

She got up suddenly and ran away from the fire, into the van, as I watched curiously.

Wasn’t it true that Chelsea wanted respect, just respect, and had built up a serious case in her mind that most men thought themselves superior to women while actually being vainly inferior in a number of important ways? Was it not true that I could win her love by stressing our equality above all else? Well...that was undetermined.

Colombine popped out of the shadowy door and pulled it shut again, making her way back to the fire, and clutching...What was it? Her diary.

She came straight to me and knelt by my side, capturing my eyes in hers. I stared intently at her innocent beauty, all washed in amber warmth in the firelight. She handed me the diary, opened to the page she had chosen. I turned the page toward the fire to see.

Chelsea, my protector in my cocoon of silent streams

And my Xavier, caring savior erase my horror that only seems

I can't tell you that I can find it since it's hidden in my dreams.

I can tell you that I want to shine the light on darkened scenes.

But if one of you is winner then love will slowly die

A pride so hurt from yes and no a comet in the sky.

And the victor bitter, cynical that hollow hearts prevail.

Turns back to see and endless road of blacktopped hopes that fail.

I was overwhelmed. Though I couldn't judge the poetry of it, I felt her power for the first time, and the realization that these were truly her first thoughts to me. I looked at her open eyes and felt her radiant goodness pull me like a great yearning to her. Words were inadequate to express anything to her right now. So I reached to pull her to me, from her knees gently into my longing arms, reveling in her soft, cherishing embrace, not as daughter no as lover, but as a loved and loving human person. The ecstasy of our embrace by the warm fire finally soothed my seething desperation and I was redeemed from it, for at least this one, long, eventful moment.

Then there was work to do, and there was still time to do it. I knew for certain now that if she beat me tonight – if I quit – it would be a long, hard uphill struggle to win Chelsea's respect, which was unequivocally tied to her love. If there was a distinction between the two, it eluded me, and it was a finer point I had no time to deal with at the moment. The important tack now was to rally from this temporary setback and deal with Chelsea completely as equal. Finally, maybe, I had reached the point where I could do that, reversing years of brainwashing about the proper role of male and female, dealing with Chelsea human-to-human – a man certainly would have cut the rope! – and now of the special male-to-female consideration that lurked in that murky backwater of my brain. And Colombine too. I loved her as a person. I loved them both.

I made ready to go, soon was kissing Colombine gently on her lips, holding an ecstatic joy inside, and making my way into the darkness again, on the paved road of the campground this time. We could make it – the three of us – I realized. Colombine had kindled the fires of hope again, and I set out to realize them with gumption and positive energy. The Mafia plan had changed in my mind too. Chelsea was right about it, the violence gave no satisfaction, not like love. The challenge had been satisfying in Denver, but not the violence, the cold, foreboding feeling that I felt about the killing...or extermination...or...murder, or whatever. But I still didn't want to think about that precisely, and I hoped that it wouldn't fester in there and one day explode to crack my hard skull.

She was right. But even though I admitted that, I still would carry out the plan against the Mafia. Only...it would be different now.

I walked briskly down the dark road, to the task at hand. Meanwhile, my brains and brawn were being tested tonight. I didn't have to win, but I damn sure better not lose. I took the side road that I guessed had to go down to the creek, guiding myself partly by instinct, partly by the logical thought that there had to be a way across on this road which ran directly toward it. I was also betting strongly that she hadn't swam the freezing waters.

There it was, at the bottom of the hill, a low-water concrete slab that crossed a shallow part of the creek, water flowing over it only an inch or two deep. I pulled off my shoes and socks and slogged across to the other side, the cold numbing my feet. On the other side, there was a cluster of primitive campsites, all empty. The thick socks were hard to pull over my wet feet.

Now I guessed how she may have strung the rope, by tying it to a large rock, or more likely a small but heavy branch, and throwing it across the creek, or nearly so where she could wade out and reach it from the other side. And it was only a trap, not her means of conveyance. How she wanted to show me that I was a vainglorious fool, that I would blithely and boldly stumble into danger. Maybe she didn't want to lose me to Mafia bullets, and was desperate to educate me and cure my cockeyed optimism, make me more like her, so as to love me, before I destroyed myself. But I knew there was no way she could care for me if she broke me. I more or less knew that when I was babbling to Colombina by the fire, trying to trick her into speaking. I never intended to sit there like a half-drowned pup, and let her win by default.

I moved silently up a vague outline of a trail, wary that she may be watching, wondering what trap she would have laid. It grew steeper and narrower, a thin shelf of rocky path banked on the one side by large boulders and on the other facing a precipice of rock-strewn, sliding earth, very steep but with occasional pines and firs, standing stark upright, to break a possible fall.

Then I was suddenly facing a dangerous risk, an opening between massive boulders, upward to what must be the summit. I panted quietly, heard the gritting sound of pebbles under my feet – dammit! – and feeling that she could hear me, had already heard me, if she were close by and truly in tune with the night. I had little doubt that she was.

If I hoisted myself up between the rocks, I would be openly vulnerable, holding on and pulling up and helpless to fend off any parry. She could drip a rock on my head. Dangerous place. She could kill me with a big one if she chose. But, of course, she wouldn't, would she? I got a fleeting impression that I didn't really know Chelsea as well as I thought. I could almost feel myself crashing into the frigid water again. She could be dangerous, as dangerous as...me.

I swung myself quietly up into the keyhole, wary. The rocks rumbled and growled above me, froze me for a split second until the first one pounded against my grasping knuckles, and I slid quickly down the opening and cowered behind the boulder. I shielded my head and watched the cluster of heavy rocks tumble noisily and finally settle in front of me. I worked my sore knuckles. Some big mothers in the pile! Maybe she thought she could permanently stymie me here at this crucial place.

I might be able to climb the rock face to my right, but she could drop more rocks on me from the top. Since I couldn't go back, that narrowed the feasible choices to one. On my left was a precarious ledge that disappeared around the rock to someplace that I couldn't see. There was a sheer drop, a hundred feet or more down toward the sound of the rushing creek. The route hardly looked promising, but it would have to do, at least for a look around the corner. The angle of the rock was such that it gave me some protection from anything dropped, rolled or thrown from above.

I secured the rope around my neck and shoulder and moved cautiously out onto the ledge, feeling rough granite seductively with my fingers, toes trying to feel sensitively too, try to be one with the rock. I only thought of handhold, toehold, to concentrate on reaching the corner, and a clearer vision.

Soon I was almost there, the critical curvature of the precipice, hanging onto the edge of a long fall by my fingers, my cheek pressed against the cold rock, looking forward, scraping the rock with my bearded chin, feeling for a firmer toe grip, and then I could see around the edge. At last!

There in front of me, a tantalizing fifteen or twenty feet away, and at least ten feet higher was the tree. It stood there, dead but stubbornly implanted, twisted and broken repeatedly by the cruel winds and snows, but bearing testimony still with its ash gray trunk and limbs. It bore not a single swatch of green.

It seemed to tease me there, at the very top of the cliff, one of its gray, dead protrusions spearing through her shiny white underpants. They were there, as she had said, and now so was I, very close. But the remaining distance could be precarious indeed.

I could see clearly the area around the tree, for much of it was silhouetted against the gray dark early morning sky. It would be daylight soon, and I would be revealed there in the open if I attempted to climb across and up to reach the tree. She would only need to stand up and laugh. At daybreak, it's over. Down below, I still heard the rush of the creek. From the cliff's edge at the tree down to the water was a drop of well over a hundred feet. I could place the scene now the way it looked from the other side. The creek was deeper below, a last idyllic cove of calm before it quickened its pace, faster and even faster in its rush to the falls.

I had no desire to fall a hundred feet into the creek, but no desire to lose either, to wait out the daybreak helplessly here on the edge of despair. But I would be visible to her climbing across these final feet, and noisy despite all precautions, and she had to be there, somewhere out of sight, guarding that silky white symbol in a position of decided advantage. She had steered me to the cliff's edge by blocking the inland path to me, and now must know where I was, on the only path that I could have tried from the keyhole. Desperately, I tried to tell myself that she hadn't manipulated me and outsmarted me again, but my frantic search for a decisive ploy was yielding no idea. There was little to work with, but there was – the rope.

I shifted my cramped position, perched myself on my heels and faced the nothingness of the sheer drop. I searched up and down the rope for frays, straining my eyes to see, feeling its rough texture with my fingers. I concluded that it was safe if I could keep a solid grip. I wrapped it firmly around my hand, determined to take a chance.

The creek was crucial to my scheme, for I could see in the brightening night that, with a strong leg kick, I could avoid a jagged outcrop below and reach the deep water in case I fell or had to jump free. The long fall certainly wasn't my intention, but I had to prepare myself for it as a definite possibility from my bold gambit.

I made a large loop in the rope. Lassoing the tree -- which might totally surprise her -- was my only idea. I needed to reveal myself there at the corner, make a successful throw the first time -- unlikely -- and get the loop over the tree trunk, not a dead limb that would surely break. Then I had to swing myself across. I would bang hard against the other cliff just under the free, had to be ready for it and not tear up a knee, then pull myself up quickly to reach the tree before she could appear and screw up the whole plan.

I stood there quietly, poised, eyes fixed on the tree, then pulled myself another step forward, open to view there at the curve should she be watching, swinging the rope back and forth to get my bearings. I hurled it. It came up short, falling limply down in the darkness. I had to hurry, quickly pulling it up, rushing to throw again.

I had it. Quickly, I swung it in a clumsy arc and hurled it again, almost slipping off the ledge. The loop plopped ineffectually against the protruding small limbs. My rocky perch crumbled loosely and I grasped the rock wall to regain my balance. The rope slipped off and fell into the cavernous dark again. A projectile struck the rock beside me with a whistling crack, ricocheted and whacked me painfully in the side.

I ducked my head, pulled frantically to reel in the rope. Another projectile -- a rock -- whizzed by my head. It was going to be a guts game. A third rock zipped past. I ducked belatedly for an instant and prepared to throw again. Another rock popped against my forearm, stinging. I threw -- wild! -- missing the tree, and reeled in the rope again. A rock struck hard against my ribs. Another whizzed by.

I got ready to throw. Another missile missed. I threw it hard – as far as I could. A rock rapped hard against my stomach and I struggled to keep my balance. Still another smashed into the cliff and shattered, a sharp piece striking my side.

The rope was hanging loosely, cockeyed over the trunk and one of the larger limbs. Another rock zipped past. I pulled the rope hard and it tightened, precariously, around the trunk and an upright butt of a limb. It might tear off. A heavy rock smacked my chest and I grunted in pain, recoiling behind the cliff edge and pulling the rope tighter, wrapping it around my fist.

Maybe it was secure. Maybe. A rock whistled by my ear. Now my anger was welling. I pulled the rope more taut, testing the weight, eliminating the slack. The missiles continued unabated, zipping by or cracking loudly against the rock while I cowered, seething now with anger, gritting my teeth, damned and determined to take the chance.

I pulled myself daringly into the open, rope twisted through both hands, and jumped, feet first, off the side.

My rapid flight ended abruptly with a jar as my feet pounded hard against the rock. I bent my knees to lessen the impact and furiously started to climb. The rope held strong, but the tree pulled forward, tearing its roots from the shallow soil, and I slid helplessly with it down the side. The tree trunk made a resounding crack and split down the middle. Desperately, I tore at the rock for a handhold or foothold, to relieve the pressure of my weight, reaching a measure of stability for a second as crumbling rock and grit from above peppered my head.

I looked up, hung there like a wounded animal, to see her. She had climbed onto the tree in a vain effort to stretch and reach my rope. Her weight! Then quickly it all collapsed upon me. I tried to fend off the crashing tree but the very effort pulled me off the cliff while I kicked desperately to clear the rocks below.

For long second, we fell free, in silence that seemed deadly. She was tangled in the tree below me, crashing hard into the water just before I, too, pounded into the chilling deep.

I blasted through the breathtaking cold, water rushing noisily through my ears and head. My nose burbled and I struggled to subdue a cough, battling to keep control. Finally, I fought my way to the surface, noisily gulping precious air, coughing, choking, treading water. I had survived it, and maybe not even hurt. And in the instant that I knew that, I was frantically searching about for her, and doing something I wouldn't have expected. Please God, I begged. Save her. Save her. Let me save her.

I saw the tree's carcass bobbing and turning cross the dark water. The falls rushed loudly downstream but I heard the coughing above it, and saw through my blurry wet eyes what seemed to be her struggling body clutching the split tree trunk with its jagged protrusions of limbs. I kicked quickly into a hard swim, slowed by the heavy shoes, but bolstered by the increasingly hard blow of the water moving toward the falls.

Within seconds, I could see her, scrambling to stay afloat with the tree, which pitched and rolled as it fell under the strong flow. Her scalp was bloody and she appeared dazed, in pain, as I strained hard to reach her. I grasped the tree finally and pulled myself against it, grabbing her wrist with my free hand as the current pulled us harder. The blood from her head streaked with the water and washed down her forehead. She clutched my shirt collar, fighting to regain or hold onto her senses. I was exhausted and out of breath too, and the strong current was sweeping us with it. My God. Now there was no escaping the falls.

I yelled at her, "Chelsea! Hold on! We've got to grab something before we go over." She grabbed harder at the trunk.

“Hold on!” I commanded. “I’ll get the other end and we’ll get hold of something! We’ve got to wedge in somewhere.” I hoped she was understanding me. Precious time was flying away. I struggled to reach the front-end of our derelict raft. Too late to swim ashore, I knew. Current too strong. Even if Chelsea weren’t hurt.

The trunk flowed straightforward into the eye of the current. I could see no chance of putting it around sideways. I was too weak, the current too hard. But I had to act somehow, and quickly. In the last few seconds before going over, I might see a chance, something, rock, debris, anything to grab onto, and fight the hard pull of the water long enough to get off on a foothold, or even lodge the log against the rocks. Given the speed and strength of the water, the chance seemed remote. And the falls were dead ahead, looming up fast along with my second of decision.

The rope, tied tightly around the trunk, caught my eye. I grasped and pulled it up out of the flow, my mind fast developing a plan to increase our odds. I strained to pull my drenched body onto the rolling trunk, slipping promptly and banging my knee painfully, then quickly pulling up again, gaining my balance for just a second or two by wedging my feet against two protruding butts of limbs, grasping one of them hard with both hands, still clutching rope. The crucial second was here, the loud rush hurtling off the precipice. I saw a chance and leaped forward – hard!

I crashed painfully against the protrusions of rock at the edge, wrapping one arm around its jagged point and wrenching desperately at the rope to pull the log around the rock, struggling to wedge it somehow against the barrier. The log spun around crazily, leaving Chelsea’s legs kicking in the air over the falls. My burning hands were torn raw by the wet rope, but I held hard. Then her hands were tearing at me, pulling at my shirt collar, choking me. The log flipped upward and plunged down the falls, giving a loud, splintering crack as it dashed against the rocks below. The wet rope burned across my cheek as it flew away.

I grabbed frantically for her in the roaring rush, clinging desperately to the rock with one arm, finally locking my hands in hers. She thrashed at the edge of the precipice, struggling to climb over my back and atop the fortuitous, life-giving boulder and out of the churning flow.

I panted hard to get my breath, my body jammed by the terrible force of the current against the boulder, I strained hard to keep my head above the powerful flow. Then her strong, small, boney hands were pulling me, helping my up to share her perch. She gagged and coughed, heaving to get a breath while we huddled there on the edge of the falls, me trying to regain my breath too.

Dismay. I was hung out helplessly again, now Chelsea caught me. But we were still alive, though maybe hard-pressed to stay that way, trapped by the surging current on both sides and immersed in the done-chilling cold. Another predicament; another decision to make.

“Are you all right?” I literally hollered at her to be heard above the crashing water.

To my surprise, she hollered back with real vehemence, “Hell, yes! No sweat!” She had real grit. God, how I loved that.

Chapter 12; A PEACE NOT LASTING

Those weeks remain vividly in my mind, stormy as they were, as I got to know Chelsea and Colombine and care about them, and learned that we could fit together warmly into our biological cocoon that gave us so much pleasure in the time ahead. We nurtured our selves with love, and it made us strong for the tragic reckoning we would face in our lives.

Chelsea and I truly learned to love each other that brightening morning, submerged and pushed upon each other by the relentless current of Pan, bruised and cut and deeply chilled, hanging on for dear life while the cold world crashed all around us. We caught our breath together, lost it again when I pulled her to me and kissed her hard. Warm breath, ours, sucked and blown together in desperate, shivering embrace. It soothed me. We plotted an escape from the predicament, only a problem to be solved.

It was matter of pulling ourselves cautiously onto a larger boulder, maneuvering to another strategic rocky finger and then, with a running leap, hurling ourselves skyward, past the worst of the turbulent water, and swimming a hundred yards or so downstream before we could pull ourselves out.

We trudged back to camp, laughing, still too exhausted to talk, fingering our wounds and shivering madly. Colombine was worried. She stoked up the fire, we stripped and warmed our naked bodies, hopping like daft Indians around the friendly flames. We doctored the superficial cut and nasty scratches on her head.

Chelsea pulled a pair of soggy panties from her pocket, mashed the water out of them while she gave me that sexy smirk of hers. I was hardly surprised when she tossed them to me. "I win," she said. "No Mafia."

She didn't say anything else about it so neither did I. As Colombine would know, it wasn't entirely necessary sometimes. In the end, I knew I would do what I had to do.

Colombine's secret was not revealed for some time yet, but it didn't matter much to me for I had quickly decided that the only logical course to solve the riddle was for me to gain her complete confidence – and Chelsea's I wanted both of them to trust me, and think that confiding in me would only soothe whatever bound-up hurts they held inside. So I was patient.

Chelsea and I talked little about that night, just a laugh or two now and then in wonder that our damn fool, uptight antics didn't cause us death or serious injury. We made no apologies to one another; certainly they weren't needed. But I complimented her prowess, and called her "one outstandingly tough woman." And she called me "a hardnosed, dice chunkin' mother fucker." It didn't sound like a compliment, but when she kissed me she meant it.

Robert Edd and Missy were glad to see us. Missy made us hot chocolate and served it with nut brad at her cozy kitchen table. The wood cook stove warmed us as we sat together that first night and talked about people and things we remembered in Mississippi. Chelsea said little but seemed more at peace than she had at any time I had known her. She explained to my old Mississippi friends that she and Colombine were seeing the country and that only she could talk now "since the operation." The remark made me wonder firefly, but I realized that Colombine bore no scar from any surgery and that Chelsea, this deliciously dangerous woman, could lie with a straight face.

Robert Edd and Missy were nice people, lovers of the land and the simple life. They had a modest house and general store, a modest garden and orchard, a modest collection of farm animals and modest disability check from the Army. But for all this modesty, in some ways they seemed rich. Robert Edd had suffered a back and butt full of shrapnel when a North Korean grenade dropped into his shelter one day, and after months in a veterans hospital he came home to marry Missy and finally go home to Colorado with her. The country life suited them; their skin was bronzed and leathery, his sense of self-reliance stronger than I remembered it when they were in Mississippi and he was scratching out a living as a darkroom technician at the newspaper. They didn't ask much of life, so they usually got what they asked for.

They were glad for us to use her granddaddy's old cabin, so Robert Edd carried us up there, about two miles, in his jeep. We cleared rocks and debris of the old mining camp roadbed as we went, carrying brooms and cleaners and making the old place reasonably clean. With some repair, the road was made passable for the van and within a week we had set up a decent household up on the mountainside.

The cabin was sturdy, heavy logs laced with concrete, with a few pieces of homemade furniture and a broad fireplace. It nestled snugly into a grassy, boulder-strewn field beside a stand of snow-white aspen trees.

We brought a mattress up in the van and stocked our provisions. When we had made our last trip I blocked the grassy roadbed with logs and rocks and left the van in Robert Edd's care. They needed the van; we needed the cabin. It was a fair swap for a while. Just how long we didn't decide. I was able to block the road almost a half-mile from the main road, leaving a long walk indeed for anyone wanting to visit us.

We didn't need company, only ourselves, and just an occasional walk down to the store to get ice cream, a news paper and the magazines they saved for us. It was good to know a little something about the world, just in case a nuclear attack was imminent or something like that.

I hiked the countryside vigorously, made a peace with Chelsea that seemed forged of a newfound respect. And I did respect her more now that her temperament had cooled. She had been fooled for a long time by my hardpan

exterior, but eventually had developed an appreciation of me as she learned how moralistic and idealistic I was below the surface, and realized I wasn't the arrogant and self-centered tough nut that I projected myself to be. I guess we seemed like idealists to one another, really compassionate for all good things but hardbitten from life's constant peppering of absurdities, those multitudes of magnified little hassles of regulated society that had seemed to fester inside us and sour our disposition of all things. Now we had each other – the three of us – to retreat into.

All the while, Colombine had tried to show us, I thought, and we couldn't see it, her microcosm of perfection radiant there beside us. And we had the audacity to ignore it. I guess I had thought she was a helpless waif, out of touch with reality and son an aberration, an unreal thing to be cared for, another responsibility for us that made us both more entrapped, at the same time blessed, in this life of constant contradiction. We had to tough it out and, if she had any responsibility, so would she. Poor Rags, always sweet but bedraggled, clutching her books to her bosom as if to stand helpless against the noisy world, pure and therefore ostracized from it.

Well, it wasn't true. Not in the mountains anyway. Her voice was not required, and her gentle disposition was a blessing to us, helping us meld ourselves into our new lives. She bloomed in the warm air of summer, into a mountain flower, enriching our now basic existence in the cabin with a suddenly burgeoning air of industrious action, as if she had found her true niche. She cooked delightful meals for us, sewed together my loose buttons, split kindling with a clumsy hatchet and rocked blissfully outside, under the largest pine tree, when the course were done. She even read happier books.

We were all happy together, free and sharing with one another. Colombine maintained her asexual flavor, although she often shared intimate moments with Chelsea and me. She was suddenly distressed by any sexual initiative on my part, real or perceived. She would frown and flutter away, leaving Chelsea and I naked in the firelight, like a shy butterfly afraid of getting her precious wings crushed by these sweaty, thrashing sexualists.

“What's the problem with her?” I asked Chelsea.

“Don't worry,“ she told me. “Everything's fine. You just can't rush it, okay. Beside, I've still got a few new tricks for you.”

Being a trio of love makers seemed somewhat exciting to me, but not so much as to want to force the issue. Our loving feelings ere foremost, and the sharing of our warm and naked bodies then my sexual culmination with Chelsea alone filled my needs. As for Colombine, I only wanted to meet hers, whatever they might be, to indulge or to refrain, but always to love her.

There seemed to be tow kinds of love at first, but as the summer days went by, they blurred into one. I realized that love was all encompassing, a shelter for all these things we did in its name. Sex was only one practice of it, a particular thing you did as only part of the glory of the whole.

The riches of the mountains were all round us – spotted fawns with twinkling muffs or tail in the meadow at daybreak, the warm sun splashing on our need bodies stretched upon the rocks, a cool rink of spring water.

And the mission. Ah, the mission. It drifted from my mind and for a time I thought I might attain some peace from it, and from my driven mind. But although happiness was all around me, I came to a shocking realization. There may never be any peace for those like me, those among the mass of humanity planet who are driven, who are doomed to be eternally restless for some new conquest, even an idle thrill. I guessed I was one of those who went on crusades and explorations, pushed westward, searched for wealth, clamored for position and power, even vengeance, each in his or her own way, by modest means and massive ones alike. By August of this most exquisite summer of my life, the gnawing was back.

There was much to think about, and the place and time for it seemed perfect. Just as my life's absorption with the news of the day had made me cynical at the Courier, so had the peaceful refuge I had found mellowed my mind and caused me to re-think my values. The strike against the Mafia now seemed an insane gesture in some ways, and I might die doing it. What a waste. But on the other hand, if I didn't follow through on my elaborate project, it seemed to me that I would always doubt my personal will, whether I would ever have the gumption to do anything worthwhile, much less something I had put so much time and effort and commitment into.

It seemed, too, that I would always doubt my sanity, my ability to think rationally. For if the scheme were irrational, and I admitted that to myself, then I wasn't rational myself, and never would be.

I was just restless. Our battle at the creek – in the creek! – had been thrilling. In Denver, I had blasted a pair of street vermin who had been hell bent on assaulting me – or worse! And had kept my cool. I could've shot another one of them – one of the two with the knives, whose eyes turned around and white when I walked toward them with the pistol. Hard. With a cool edge. I was together. And they scattered like alley rats.

The incident promptly disappeared from the Denver papers. I read the closely for a few days and stopped. The news. I knew I was finished with it forever, too depressing. It did depress me; it didn't excite me any more. I didn't want to report the news any more. I wanted to make it.

I was just restless.

I walked out to Spiral Point to watch the sunset. It fully amazed me that this idyllic mountain retreat was really what I wanted in life, yet I couldn't fully enjoy it. I equated my emptiness with my lack of self-esteem, something I had never looked at flush in the face before. Would a great act – brave, courageous and bold – make me the hero I longed to be?

Probably. And if I survived, I'd come back here.

I hiked for miles in three directions, scaled boulders and repelled down the side of sheer rock to get my thrills and temper the beast inside. I could see roads far below and far away from my mountain perches, but I never longed to go to them. I only needed my backpack and warm bag and this opportunity to feel pure and clean and supremely self-reliant, just me and the father mountains, stalking the wilderness, catching glimpses of the enigmatic Pan every now and then, slipping into the dark trees.

Chelsea hiked with me some in the beginning, but soon opted for more languid days in or near the cabin. She went more often to see Missy down at the road, and since the walk was so long, she would sometimes stay the night, leaving Colombine and me to spend the evening in silence. I didn't like her staying overnight much but said nothing, for sometime my ambitious hiking would leave me overnight in some rocky mountain shelter, as I told her it might. So what was fair for me had to be fair for her as well.

It shouldn't have surprised me the day she decided to speak to me, but it did. It was all too boring now; she wanted us to hit the road, go to Denver or Aspen or Glenwood Springs. Too much peace on earth made Chelsea a dull girl. She couldn't help it; she was a creature of the road, and adventurer like me, but not the kink to take as much pleasure from the wilderness. For Chelsea, granite had no glitter.

Then, she said, we would come back for a while, but she had to hit the road every now and then. It was a perfect time for me to ask her what she wanted to do with her life. And, of course, she reminded me promptly that she knew too little of my plans. In fact, she well knew that I had avoided the subject. She told me she was still considering the future, and a lot of it depended on me. That greatly pleased me.

I told her the plan that night by the fire. Colombine rocked and listened, a folded-down copy of "Fools Die" in her lap. Chelsea accepted it and we became partners after a fashion. I confirmed with her that I would now be testing my weapons, one of the reasons we had come to this secluded place. It still waited for me in two heavy wooden crates, tied down and covered by a tarp just behind the cabin. Now, I told her, she could take my adventurous explosions in the proper context. A boy had to have fun, even though the Mafia plan was subtler now, not designed for bloodshed.

The next night she came to me while I sat in front of the cabin, listening to the night sounds.

"You wanna talk?" she asked me.

"If you'll sit close to me," I said, "and let our feeling slow over one another." and she did. We snuggled on the hard homemade chair there in the moonlight.

"We're doing the right thing, going to New Orleans," she said. "I know it because I know how important adventure is to our souls. Knowing peace like we've known it here really helped me realize that meeting challenges and seeking out opportunities is what life is all about for us."

"Some people could get enough challenge out of growing a garden up here in these rocks." I reminded her.

"But we're not fulfilled. You and I have to have greater adventure than that."

"It won't always be that way. We'll mellow out, then we'll just have the memories of what we did – and didn't do. I'd say we better get in while we can."

"I'm worried about Colombine here alone. She'll need to stay with Robert Edd and Missy."

"Sure," I grunted,

"She understands exactly what we're doing, you know," Chelsea reminded me.

"I don't believe in keeping secrets from her," I said. "We'll destroy what we have if we do."

"She loves us. She needs us here."

"I can't tie myself down again, Chelsea. I can't get tied up doing things or not doing them because other people want it."

"Well, some people would call you selfish for that, but I wouldn't." Chelsea said. "You're very kind and generous to both of us, and if you don't live your own life beyond that, you fall into the same quicksand most people are in, depending on other people for their welfare and happiness, blaming their wants and needs on other people when their lives aren't what they want them to be. They're lost in all that working together philosophy and can't rely on themselves any more to do anything except cooperate with somebody or something else."

"Damn," I muttered. "You've gotten as alienated as I am." I laughed and pressed her closer to me.

"You have to make love to Colombine," she said, "before we go."

That surprised me.

And so finally she told me the story, part of it anyway.

Chapter 13; FROM WITHIN

“I just didn’t tell you all there was to tell about Aunt Marlena and Uncle Walt,” said Chelsea. “I just didn’t say that Colombine lived there too. She was a foster child, put there by the court, and the court paid money for her upkeep. I reckon that was one reason they wanted her, but than Aunt Marlena couldn’t have kid for some reason or other that she wouldn’t talk about, so she really did want Colombine, and did a reasonably good job of taking care of her. I really think they got her, though, because of somebody they knew.

“Aunt Marlena really didn’t know it but Uncle Walt was abusing the kid, and I didn’t know it either, but I suspected it before she did. She was eleven, and she just seemed to be scared all the time, and she acted peculiar, and acted afraid of Uncle Walt if he said much to her at all. I should’ve really found out about it before I did. I should’ve asked questions. But I was busy sewin’ some wild oats myself, and tryin’ to stay out of that gloomy house as much as I could.

“But I came in early from a date one night. I had had a helluva fight with a boy, and I was still mad to start with. I found out that was the worst if had ever been, ‘cause Colombine tried to fight back. Jesus Christ, he had her bruised and cryin’. He was drunk and had her tied to the bed and was...well, I’m not gonna say. God, I was sick and mad, and he had told her, time after time, that if she hollered or told anybody he had some kinda something to keep her quiet, some kind of mysterious shit, that she better not breathe a word or she’d never say anything again.”

A tear trickled down Chelsea’s cheek and glistened in the moonlight.

“I came up behind him and I had a poker from the fireplace. I swung it – oh God!” she sobbed”...too hard ‘an...” I clutched her to my bosom, like a child.

“Jesus! He was dead and Colombine was in shock. She struggled and screamed and I got her untied and tried to get her calmed down. I told her, for God’s sake, never to say anything, never, never say what happened. I dragged him to the foot of the stairs – God, I couldn’t believe he was dead, and I shook him and he wouldn’t move. I was really fucked-up too. I laid him out there like he fell down the stairs, drunk. I called the ambulance and I just let myself fall apart. I...just let it come.”

In a moment, Chelsea was calmer. She wiped the tears from her face roughly, as if they angered her, and started again.

“Well, that’s what they thought. He fell, and we helped him in there, and they came and got him off the bed with my cold washrag on his head. I’ve been living with that lie ever since, and the guilt of it. I’ve just racked my brain so many times about why I swung that pike so hard and...I just couldn’t ever tell anybody until now.

“And Colombine, well, she never said anything...never said anything at all. They got her out of that first shock and she was better, but she just seemed to sink into a melancholy state that everybody figured was a deep depression, and I guess it was. She cried at the grave and she cried sometimes at home, and shrank into some little isolated world that none of us could get into. I couldn’t reach her. I talked to her, again and again, but it didn’t do no good. She wouldn’t come back to us. I don’t know if she thought he would rise up from the grave and cut out her tongue, or if she thought by some incredible associations that if she talked about it, or spoke of anything, that it would all turn horrible

again. Maybe... 'an I know I shouldn't 'a told her what I did, not when she was that upset and me too. She thought they'd take me away. I believe that.

"I felt like I was really responsible for all of it. When they took her away and put her in that home down on Northfield, I felt like I had let her down, just lettin' her go like that, lettin' that dried-up old man drive her away like that. I never will forget them drivin' off. Tore my fuckin' heart out. After I thought about it, I found out where the damned place was. I had moved out and was down in Dallas, and Chaze had split for his great Hollywood adventure, and I went up there and got her out."

"How'd you do it?"

"I just busted her out. Hell, they ain't got much in the way of guards at places like that, especially if you catch 'em by surprise. I took off on my motorcycle with her on the back and we hauled ass to Florida. Boy, she was so happy to see me, it made it all worthwhile.

"She was still readin' a lot. I got her interested in good books before they took her away, and she was getting' a lot of pleasure out of it. They comforted her, I guess. She could relate to the tragedies she read about, I think, and they helped her see her own awful luck more objectively, and the joys she read about, when they came, were all the more joyous by comparison. The lows make you appreciate the highs, you know, or maybe that's just bullshit. Or maybe her books are what gives Colombine the adventure that you and I feel like we have to experience.

"Anyway, she loved our life on the motorcycle. We went on down into the Florida Keys and laid low for a while. I made a few bucks workin' at a seafood house, and then a restaurant, and, of course, she's never been able to do anything much in the way of makin' money but she'd wash dishes some, and beg a few bucks on the street if we were really hard up. That's why we dressed her up to look so pitiful sometimes. Whatever she could do, I wanted her with me, and I felt like I owned her, too, 'cause all the shit that happened was my fault."

"Not completely," I said.

"Hell yes it was," she retorted quickly. "I know I didn't have to...do what I did. It could've all been different. I could've handled it differently if I hadn't been mad and lost my shit."

"I can't say what you did was right, Chelsea, but you've punished yourself enough for what was really an accident."

"Oh, Jesus, Xavier," she said. "He wasn't dead that night. He died the next day..." Her face felt apart with grief and remorse. "He...died in the hospital and Aunt..." She shattered in convulsions.

I held her and comforted her in the cool night.

Chelsea couldn't tell me then, but the next day she could. I looked at Colombine with a new wave of love and compassion that day, and made extra efforts to show her kindnesses. Of course, I said nothing of Chelsea's confession.

She came to me as I chopped wood, and I pause to talk to her.

"Do you remember what I told you?" she asked, "about you and Colombine?"

"You told me I should...make love to her." I chose the gentler phrase. "Do you think it's a good idea?"

"She's ready for you. She said so, and she needs to do this thing. It should break a barrier for her. She's never experienced it since that damned night she got fucked over." Chelsea had re-assembled her tough façade.

“If we do it right, “ I amended, “or else it’s going to be traumatic for her. I couldn’t stand to hurt her.”

“You’re her only chance,” said Chelsea, “and I think it’s important to do it before we leave for New Orleans.”

“Why? You don’t think we’ll get back?”

She ignored my question. “Because she’s ready to take the step, and you’re ideal for it, because you care about her, and she can conquer her fear with you. Hell, she’s been with us so many times already. I mean, like, we’ve done the next best thing to fuckin’.”

“Maybe you’re right. I’ve sure got to take your word for it.” I said, sounding dubious. But I knew that I would do it. I just hadn’t explained to myself the reasons why yet. There might even be a lustful one in there, but I knew that it would be a noble effort.

“We can try, Xavier,” said Chelsea. “Maybe it won’t work the first time, but maybe it would the second.”

“No. I want it to be right if we do it,” I said. “It needs to work the first time to really be right. Or else, it might create another barrier, or another frustration for her that would sap her confidence – and maybe even mine too.”

“Yours” That would be hard to believe,” she said.

“How do you know these things? How have you talked with her?”

“I talk to her and she listens. And I read her diary every day or two. She writes it partly for me, and partly because I asked her to, for therapy.”

“Maybe I should read it.”

“Only if she give it to you. But it’s not necessary. You have love for her. You just have to show it.”

“Will you be there?”

Chelsea frowned. “I think it’s best to make a clean break with her for this one. She’s been depending on me for a long time, and it’s not right for her sexual adjustment to depend on me. She should be able to act alone – or at least alone with a man is what I mean. But it has to be a man she’s not afraid of. She has to learn she doesn’t have to be afraid.”

Chelsea and I stared into each other’s labored eyes.

“Will you do it?” she asked.

“Of course,” I replied.

It was an opportunity, I realized, one of those opportunities that came too seldom to do something truly worthwhile. And a challenge, one of those challenges of life that made it so damned worthwhile when you succeeded. It would require no gutsy climb up a cliff, no intellectual reasoning to choose the best plan of action, no determined standing of ground in an argument of fistfight. It was an emotional challenge, and I felt no mastery over my emotions. I had hidden them for so long, impacted them like a boulder-hard clot of blood in my gut, or soul, so no one would see. These two women, remarkable in their own ways, had pulled those cloistered emotions from me, saw me more clearly

because of it, and now wanted to use these swirling new feelings in my heart to free them – to free them both. One from her fear, the other from her guilt. Maybe, in a way, it would free me too.

Chelsea hiked down to Missy's for the night, being certain to leave early enough to be there before dark, laden with clean underwear and trail mix and a paperback about space monsters of some kind. She carried Missy a needlepoint of a rocking chair which looked much like the one Missy sat in by the fireplace, gently creaking to the fro while her hard little fingers punched out a stitched creation of her own.

I kissed and held Chelsea when she left, and reveled in the onrushing feelings within me. They washed me in gentle waves of warm ocean, cleaning my mind of its evil dark moss, showing me a sweet little utopia that amazed me with its brilliance. A gnawing gut feeling told me it wouldn't last, but I clung to it anyway, as if by being absolutely gentle and giving and deserving I could preserve it there on its sparkling pinnacle. With each deep caress of Chelsea, I felt it inside me.

Then she was gone down the trail. I watched her grow smaller and finally disappear on the downhill path, hesitating to move. For the first time, Colombine and I were alone. She was alone with a man. I was alone without Chelsea's guiding hand. With a challenge to resources that I had long, and perhaps foolishly, buried inside.

Chapter 14; EXPLOSIONS

Darkness slipped peacefully over the mountain sky. Stars appeared all around me, making me think of my minute existence. Massive worlds of fire, twinkling at me, held at bay up there by the sheer force of distance. And here I was in my own minuscule personal world, atop a space crumb, which was billions of times larger than me. I felt really small. My little affairs seemed just as important as the most consequential – even a cataclysmic event like a shooting star, a world flaming out in a heartbeat, cutting a fiery, final swathe across the heavens. A gigantic sun suddenly disappearing. So what? It's not as important to me as my own little personal mission with Colombine, a night's pastime for two, here among the multi-millions of surging lives on a tiny wet clot of debris somewhere in the endless reaches of the world of galaxies. It was good weed. We were all that mattered anyway – Chelsea, Colombine and me. And beyond that, this single night, this one situation at this time was all that mattered. Just this infinitesimal event.

I chuckled to myself and took another toke off the pipe. It would either bring my proper perspective into sharp focus or send my mind into some oblique never land. I had never fully decided which. But it certainly provided a fresh and optimistic perspective on everything. And it would enhance my passivity, which should help me show a gentle love to Colombine. Should be easy to do. I wanted to take care of Chelsea too, help her and myself learn to love more, care more, and find some peace. Damn! I admitted how I loved the woman. She had the same fiery blood as me, candid about sex, ready to get some heart-thrills in adventure and risk. An important, if odd, trait in a woman. I would make her a good companion to me, and in the midst of adventure we could take a break and fuck ourselves on the ground. I liked her speed.

And the mission had also become a positive symbol now, and not an act of angry destructiveness as I had originally conceived it. The change had been from Chelsea's inspiration, this profane woman of the road, her goodness masked over from the well-placed blows of the dark empire on her malleable flesh. She had inspired me to be better. I knew I had to inspire her in like measure; to be free of her poisoned head.

Then I worried about whether this passionate loving that was welling in me was another symptom of my advancing slide back into societal entanglements. Our coalescence, beautiful as it was, carried a price tag. I didn't care much at the moment. I even felt a tinge of good about it. I was within the web, enthralled by its shiny, sticky glow, twisting myself into like cotton candy, glistening sweet on the outside by congealing me into its syrupy grasp so that I

might never break free again. Responsibilities. Obligations. Requirements. Directions. Necessities. Needs. Demands. I probably never could have gotten free of those things anyway, but I could still pull them down to a more satisfying level.

And maybe I could have my freedom and maintain a loving bond with both these lovable women too. Could I have both? There was no answer. If there were, some enterprising male at some time over the centuries of grappling with this male dilemma would have put something definitive on paper, passed it on where it could do some good. There were, of course, endless stories about it, of poor bastards trying to decide whether to answer their prudence or their peckers, the call of freedom or the call to fornicate, a joyous and caring life of companionship or the cold indifference of a night in the wilds. But there's a nothing anywhere of much instructive value. Guess we shouldn't have accepted that first apple. My last thought was that I was too fuckin' stoned to think straight. Potent weed, especially in this light mountain air.

It was dark. I had to go inside, I considered myself peaceful and ready. Besides, the front yard had gotten knee-deep in bullshit. Marijuana-induced mental meanderings.

I was quickly surprised.

There was a fresh blaze in the fireplace and it crackled cheerily. The cabin was pleasantly dark, the fire glow illuminating the warm rocks of the hearth and a coal oil lamp glowing dimly to my left, casting a sheen upon the turned-down bed. It was homemade, of oak, with a puffily robust feather mattress, a place where Chelsea and I had often made love. She was more than two miles away tonight. And Colombine stood watching me from near the fire.

The vision of her stopped me rigid at the door. The fire glow reflected a hypnotizing light from her large eyes, wells of dark water, warmed by the sensuous steam that roiled and tumbled up wetly from her thighs. The golden light followed the sloping lines of her petite body, as she stood there naked, looking at me, as if to say everything and nothing at all. Her face was not suggestive, not lewd, not seductive, not inviting, not coy, not blatantly sensuous, only open and finely tuned. Whatever she was exuding, it was straightforward and honest and unashamed.

"I'm surprised," I said softly. "I thought you'd be a bit shy."

She put her forefinger gently to her lips. Sh-h-h. To speak, she implied, would break the spell.

Like a flash, it struck me (good weed). Speaking was a lower form of communication. She had risen above it and become a stronger person in that way. If we wouldn't speak, maybe we could develop telepathy and other things, even astral projection, learn to feel with one another, live fruitfully with one another.

I took off my jacket and hung it on the back of the door. She came to me and I could now see her clearly. Her nude body was beautiful to me, as she knew it was, but there was much more to see in her eyes. Within them, I could see how she felt. Open to pleasure, but pride intact. Reveling in my appreciation of her beauty and purity, the reflections on her body invigorating me. A fine balance explained her triumph, the physical vision controlled by those compelling eyes, altogether projecting a quiet and self-satisfied peace. Such a powerful woman might save embattled man by making him more human, tempering his rage into reason, inspiring him to more meaningful achievements, all while holding the power to make him explode in ecstasy inside.

Colombine kissed me gently on the lips and began unbuttoning my shirt. The roaring fire filled the cabin with a deep warmth. She took my shirt away to hang on a chair. I walked to the fire and sat down to remove my boots.

We lay naked by the flames, kissing each other softly upon our bodies, over slopes and upon the soft ridges and hills and hollows. A single word would have shattered the spell, and so it remained unspoken. Until the hardness of me welled up into a shaft that pressed hotly against her softness. And she tensed. And she drew into a knot and covered

there. And I looked into her face and saw that she was gripped by a horror that attacked her from inside. Her body trembled in tiny jerks and quivers. She bit her lip and stared blindly away from me, her elbows pulled tightly into her stomach, braced in fear for the hurting, the puncturing, thrusting, defiling thing that would tear her inside.

I caressed her gently, pulled her into my warm embrace and lay there with her quietly for a while. I stroked her hair, felt a warm tear trickle upon my neck. I was a comforting angel. She trembled again and again. And I reached to take her hand, to kiss her fingers, again and again. And I place her hand upon me. I had become soft and pliable to her touch again. She kept her hand there, and the trembling lessened and stopped, and she was not afraid, was unafraid of me. As I breathed my love into her, I again flexed my muscles and slowly surged to a hard, sensual, sexual life again.

In her eyes I saw a quiet, tear-strained joy rising out of her. I kissed her eyes, her nose, her lips and kissed her again, and eased myself above her, searching, with my lips, for all the hidden fields and crevices of her nymph-like body. I was her master and slave, and she was mine. My lips touched her soft, flat stomach and brushed gently to her thighs. The soft curls of maidenhair tickled my cheeks.

“EEE—e-e-e-e-i-i-i-i-!”

My eyes bolted open. Her cry was high-pitched, hoarse, but mournful, a wail, wailing out of control like a steam kettle, crying out a pent-up, hurtful pleasure. I tightened my grip upon her tiny, thrashing buttocks.

She gasped, out of breath, and squealed hoarsely again and again between her desperate gulps of air, her spastic body jerking out of control in her ecstatic throes, her knees pressing hard against by ribs. She howled mournfully, bursting her bonds of fear, exploding out of the dark shadows of her memories in a total erotic release. I ejaculated inside her, my own hoarse cry blending with hers to permeate our warm sanctuary with a loud joy.

Later, I picked up her limp body from the floor and carried her to our bed. I placed her inside the covers, searching her blissful eyes as she searched mine for another unsaid piece of understanding. We dipped again into a new well of emotional revelation and drank of its rich, organic juices. We laid together in our warmth, and finally slept.

I awoke. Her warm breath was upon me. I languished in her embrace, feeling vividly her knowing touch. Knowing. Somewhere, in the cavern of my consciousness, I knew something was wrong.

But how could there be? Her touch had sprung me to erotic life again, and her eyes told me that she had taken pleasure in the triumph of doing it to me. The barrier she had broken down, she now trampled into splinters. She was no longer afraid at all, at least not of me. How could she have ever been? And she certainly had seemed to be only briefly.

She squealed again upon my penetration and our climax, then turned her newfound voice into triumphant moaning and humming, even laughter. I laughed with her and inundated her with my physical love. Could words be far behind her? Her sounds were the sweet elixir of my gift and her gift to me. Ourselves. Mournful cries of sound from deep inside her. Us.

We slept again, peacefully, for the rest of the night.

My eyes resisted the daylight. I turned over to re-plant myself under the warm covers and get a firmer grip on comfort, more sleep. But a nagging dream, a nagging answer kept escaping me and it was no use.

I pulled back the covers and sat up, perusing an empty cabin. I got up and sleepily found my jeans, my shoes and shirt, and made my way to the coffeepot, staying warm on the embers in the woodstove. With coffee, I made my way to the window, to see of Colombine was outside.

She was there, near the woodpile, under the white trunks of the aspen trees. And Chelsea, surprisingly, was there too, talking to her. I watched them carefully, not hearing any of Chelsea's words, but studying their faces.

Chelsea was telling her something with real earnestness, and Colombine was listening intently, as if she hungered for these words that I couldn't hear. Then Chelsea took her face into her gentle fingers, reached forward and kissed her softly on the lips, once, twice. Then they kissed much more passionately and fell together in a full embrace.

I should have known. I had been a fool.

I stepped outside into the sunlight. Clumsily they pulled themselves apart. Chelsea looked as if she had been discovered with stolen goods, or forbidden fruit. Colombine looked at me like a trapped animal, open to the mercy of its captor. I said nothing.

"I came back early," said Chelsea. "It's nice out walking in the morning."

"Sure," I said. "That's when all the animals are out."

Colombine stared intently at me, came forward and took my hand with a beatific smile. She gazed at me but I avoided her eyes. I held the coffee steadily with my free hand.

"Everything worked out fine, I understand," said Chelsea, betraying a trace of anxiety.

"She told you?"

"I read some passages that she wrote early this morning," she said. "They're beautiful."

I saw Colombine's diary for the first time, wedged into the waist of her faded jeans. She had released my hand and moved away, sensing my coldness.

"I'm glad you like them," I said. "Looks like you're still number one with the little lady."

"I'm sure she want you to read them too," said Chelsea, sounding apprehensive. I only looked at her.

"Well, I could use some coffee," she said finally. "Five o'clock cam pretty early this morning."

"Maybe Colombine will fetch it for you," I said, turning my eyes to her for the first time. She was tense. I turned back to Chelsea. "I'd like you to walk over to the Point with me. I need to talk to you."

She hesitated for long seconds, then spoke the inevitable with a hint of dread.

"Okay." She knew she had a reckoning with me, and now. I'm sure Colombine did too.

"I'll just be a minute," I said stiffly. "While you're getting your coffee."

I made my way around to the back of the cabin and tore away the tarp. I took the short crowbar and prized open the crate, the nails I had loosened before to get and then replace the revolver. I stretched my arm deep into the thick straw packing, pulled out one grenade, then another, shucked their wax paper wrapping, juggled one of them assuredly and stuffed both into my coat pockets. I closed the crate hastily and threw the tarp over it.

When I re-appeared in front of the cabin, Chelsea was waiting one me, hands clasped around the warm coffee mug, looking askance at me, trying to capture my mood.

“I’m not much up for a walk,” she said. “I guess you really want to talk, huh?”

“In private,” I said.

Colombine stood in the doorway. I looked in her direction for only a second, to see her concern, then back to Chelsea.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I want you to tell me the rest of it. The whole truth.”

“There’s nothing else that matters.”

“I’ll be the judge of that when you level with me.”

“I’m not going with you. If you have a gun, you’ll have to use it now,” she told me.

“Do you think I’d ever do anything to hurt you, or Colombine?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know!” she said it furiously, as if to purge a nervous tension.

“There’s a dark side to every emotion.” I said. “You touch mine and awaken it when you live in deceit, and lie to me, and play me for a fool.”

“No,” she said quickly. “We didn’t do that.”

“Colombine’s a very proficient love maker. Now I know why. She did the same things with you. She took the same initiatives with you.

“That doesn’t mean we don’t care about you. We were afraid to do anything but hide our feeling from you. But it doesn’t matter. It shouldn’t change our relationship with you. We’re big people. We can all love each other.”

“Sometimes, she has,” said Chelsea, “once or twice in the past, some time ago. She still had a great desire for you. She did make a breakthrough with you. You were beautiful together. She told me.”

“How can I tell when you’re lying and when you’re telling the truth?” I asked her.

“I haven’t lied to you,” said Chelsea. “Everything I’ve told you has been true.”

“You just didn’t tell all of it. You didn’t tell me you were lesbian lovers. But I was a fool not to know,” I said, “blinded by some kind of damned infatuation with both of you. But you’ve ruined that for good.” I pulled the grenade from my left pocket and brandished it in front of Chelsea’s wide eyes. I jerked out the pin, grasping the lever hard until I had taken two, three, five steps down the trail. I loosened the lever, took two more running steps and hurled it as far as I could into the ravine, back-stepping quickly toward the cabin to stand near Chelsea. She shrank against the cabin door next to Colombine.

The explosion ripped rocks and earth skyward, tore a pine tree asunder and sent it crashing back upon itself in the ravine. Colombine shattered into tears, crying in anguish, burying her face into Chelsea's bosom in the doorway. The noise echoed through the mountains and faded away. I could hear Colombine's sobs. I could feel Chelsea's tension.

"I thought there was something beautiful here," I said. "Then you shattered my...illusions, and made me a fool and turned it all into something cheap and tawdry. Lying to me, deceiving me all this time after I trusted you. You exploded it all. You blew it up in my face."

"I'm sorry, Xavier! I'm sorry," said Chelsea desperately. "If we had told you, you'd have kicked us out."

"And then you couldn't use me any more."

"We didn't use you any more than you used us, Thorn," she said. "And it grew into something much better than that for all of us. We've shared everything with you, everything we could give. I thought you knew me from the start, really, and knew that I'm a free spirit just like you, that we had a special love that e all shared, the three of us."

I looked in my right hand and saw that I was holding the other grenade.

"Xavier, for God's sake, there's love enough for all of us. Don't destroy what we have."

"Uncle Walt never did make complete sense to me," I said. "He knew about it, didn't her?"

Chelsea nodded. Colombine's head was still buried in her breasts.

"You killed him." I said it coldly.

"It happened like I told you," said Chelsea. "I sweat it. He knew about it. He was mad about it. That's what motivated him, I admit it, and the booze. Even though it had happened between us only two or three times. He wanted to make her normal again to start with, to make her enjoy it with a man. It was a fool thing to do. Then it was an angry thing, and it cause us to fight and me to run away, and then we'd fight again."

"And now I know why you feeling of guilt is so deep," I prodded her, "because you don't know if you meant to kill him or not. And you've never figured it out."

Now Chelsea, too, was crying, tears streaking down both cheeks as she leaned against the threshold of the cabin, too spent, emotionally, to look in my eyes, my angry oracles that flashed like the cauldron of a warlock. The sight of them embracing was maddening to me, clutched together there in loving common bond, enduring the ravings and rantings of a frustrated demon of a fool. I didn't think I deserved the condemnation.

"Just tell my why," I implored with my calculated calm, fingering the grenade, rolling it over and over in my hand. "Tell me why you had to start makin' it with one another."

"Because we had to," said Chelsea. "We just had to have the love. We needed it in order to keep going." She looked up at me, tired, beaten down, and ready to be open to anything.

"Colombine's father killed her mother when she was nine," said Chelsea. Colombine tore herself free and ran inside the cabin. Chelsea pause in her story, then finally continued.

“He said he killed her because she was a sorry mother. Couldn’t keep the kid quiet, that she cried all the time and was always sick with something or other. He was unemployed, depressed, sick himself... they argued. All the papers said he shot her because the kid cried too much. That was the headline. Colombine has seen it. She read the stories.

“They put the man away in a mental institution. Then he hung himself a few months later. That was in the papers too, and she’s read that. That’s what started it. That’s why it was so hard for her to talk about things out loud, even to get the words out. And she begged me to never tell anybody, she felt so hurt, and so grieved and embarrassed and full of guilt.”

Chelsea looked hard at me. “And now I’m telling you, and I’ll be damned if I know whether I should have or not.”

I stared at them, dumbfounded by these new revelations, as Chelsea talked.

“She didn’t say anything much at Aunt Marlena’s. I tried to be some comfort to her there. I wanted to be. I wanted to show her how much I cared, how I wanted to help if I just knew how.” Chelsea shook her head. “And in the end I just made it worse. It grew into something neither of us wanted. After... Uncle Walt died, everything we had tried to build just fell apart again.”

The bright morning was silent save for the distant cawing of a large bird. Chelsea had run out of words and I couldn’t summon up any that seemed relevant to the anguish I was now feeling. I looked at the grenade and thought briefly that I could walk calmly away with it. And somewhere on the trail, end it all. No. Not my style.

I remembered anew that both Chelsea and Colombine had shown me love that could not be faked. I had felt their sincerity. Now I had subjected them to this hateful scene, to my fiery jealousy. It had made me furious that they also loved one another. Maybe it was selfish of me, after all, given the pain in their lives and their mutual needs. Not only did it not seem so important any more but somehow in my mind their love for each other seemed the only right thing for them. We could have talked about it. My angry scene was totally unjustified.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I love you both. Please don’t ever deceive me again.”

It sounded so inadequate, clumsy, confused. “You do what you want to do,” I said. “You’ve earned it.” Then, embarrassed, I turned and walked hurriedly away.

Chelsea said she heard the explosion less than an hour after I left.

Chapter 15; RECKONINGS

I sat on the cliff's edge and stared into my beloved wilderness, and wondered why I should or shouldn't be jealous of them, trying to rationalize whatever choice I could make. I knew jealousy was an evil trait and had done me no good. The desperate love these wounded and maimed children shared seemed even a natural thing to me in a way. Maybe it had been a blessing they had had each other given their circumstances. If they had gone too far, well, who was to say? Who should condemn? Who was to cast the first stone? It had been Uncle Walt, in his cruel and sorry way. And it had been me.

The reality of our happiness and peace these last few weeks together fell all around me. And when I enjoined it with the realization that their immoral passion had indeed hurt one and, in fact, may have forged a more loving bond between them, one which I admired, then I knew even more strongly that I had been wrong. My rash and rude actions with the grenades, my senseless anger in the face of what could have been a grand and glorious moment of realization and fulfillment for all of us, demanded an apology – or more. I could rationalize nothing to my side of the issue except for the shock of being deceived all this time. Why hadn't I seen it? I had been too enthralled with myself. And Chelsea had naturally been afraid to speak of it. And Colombine. I was still not sure the mystery of Colombine had been completely solved.

I realized something very strongly. Their love for each other was not an evil obsession, but a natural refuge from their troubled lives. They were not constantly mad to sneak around and satisfy their lust. (Were they?) No. They had not. They had loved me. Their relationship had been no deterrent to my sharing and satisfying repasts with Chelsea, nor our titillating trysts together, the three of us, from which Colombine might now feel no need to flee. The three of us! The deep, growling urges of passion surfaced in me, and I imagined our sweaty choreography of nakedness – the powerful, life-giving force of a sexual abandonment to pleasure. Soaring free, of mind, body, spirit.

But would they choose one another and exclude me? That was the ultimate fear of it – rejection, choosing one another over me. I was back to jealousy again. But I didn't want to be. I rejected it. I just wanted the love of them to love me.

And not just vice versa.

Maybe, now, at this moment, my love was all that mattered. Since I loved them both, whether I had consciously chosen to or not, I had to act upon the fact. I had to give it a chance. I had to show my love and hope that it would be returned. I had to give them the space that I demanded for myself. I had to overcome my own personality, which I admitted was steeped in paranoia. And I had to apologize for scaring the hell out of them.

Dammit!

I struggled to my feet and stared at the grenade. Ludicrous killing bomb devised and built at love-starved aliens to one another, in the alienated, fear-stricken world. Not a part of what I wanted mine to be, the one I had almost destroyed in my blind rage. In these women, at this place in time, I saw an opportunity to build our own personal environment, our charmed circle, live by our own values and keep the alien outer-world away. When I left Jackson City, I set out to do it alone, stripped of love. And I could have done it, but at a price of being lonely with it. But now a miracle had unfolded to me, from the first sprouting seeds at the Louisiana truck stop, growing daily to become a full-grown tree, maturing in the baptism of the creek, blossoming in the cabin by the aspen grove, and now setting fruit. The both of them were a magical, cosmic gift to me. We must now ripen the fruit. We had to transcend sex and stereotypes.

With angry disdain, I ripped out the grenade pin, gripping the handle tight.

Oh, shit!

I stood there staring at it.

Dammit to hell! I had yanked the pin, fully intending to throw the grenade down into the basin, to explode in the boulder field while I ducked to safety up on the cliff. But I realized suddenly that I was less than a mile from the cabin. I didn't want them to hear an explosion and be frightened by it. I had already imposed upon them too much ugliness today. Now I stood there foolishly, holding power of life and death in my steady grip. I realized that, as much as I loved now at this moment, that I was hopelessly ambivalent between adventure and peace, that I was capable of hatred as well as love. I could turn passion that dark way if I needed, and if it came down to violence I knew I was capable of it – and could even enjoy it in a righteous case. And probably the key to being good at it was that very enjoyment. My ambivalence between peace and violence drowned me in confusion.

I stood there, jaw tight, liking and hating the feel of the compressed explosion in my grip, a heavy-duty answer to a heavy-duty problem and within my power to deliver.

I looked at it and gritted my teeth. My hand was tiring, quivering against the lever that could slip away and light the fuse. It suddenly occurred to me that for all my preparation, I didn't know the length of the fuse – the number of seconds before detonation. A forgotten detail. How many more?

Then it happened. There was a click. I stared at the lever, slipping askew. Was it armed? Throw it! Take no chance. In my haste, it slipped off my hand and fell in front of me. Fear struck me hard. Lying on the ground. Swiftly I grabbed for it. In a fluid motion, I hurled it, fell down, covered my head. Waited. A long second. Wait. Wait.

The explosion shattered the sky, reverberating across the canyon in dying crescendos. I looked up, then down into the basin at the smoky aftermath, a spruce tree, splattered and splintered next to a smoking dark hole. The tree was destroyed. Dammit! Better a tree than me. Ha! A poet and don't know it. I shook my head in wonder, exhilaration, laughing quietly. Then laughing out loud. Tension rolled out. And the thrill of action. Laughing is silly triumph.

I realized again that the explosion would upset them both. Would it? I didn't know, but I had to get back there fast, spill my guts to them, get back what we had before. I began to run. I laughed. And I ran.

I was out of breath when I finally saw Chelsea. She was standing at the edge of the woods. Thank God she was there, as if she cared. She did care. They both did. I hated myself for scaring them with the grenade as if I, irrational, distraught me, might do myself in. A dumb thing to do. I had to slow to a walk, just for a breather, to get my breath before I reached her. I panted and watched her growing form framed against a stand of pines, walking on. I struggled to even my breathing so that I could tell her at least part of what I felt. She was standing there, unmoving, growing larger in my eyes. She seemed...concerned.

And then she drew the pistol. Mine, from the crate.

She leveled it at me and I slowed my step, then stopped altogether, maybe twenty paces away.

I was surprised. I guessed the first words would have to be hers.

"I thought maybe you'd blown yourself up," she said. "Is that what you wanted me to think?" Her voice had a hard, daring edge.

"No. Not at all. It was an accident."

“Little boys shouldn’t play with big toys.”

“You’re probably right. I ran back as hard as I could. I owe you and Colombine an apology. I went crazy with jealousy.”

“Or else you’re lying since I’ve got this gun on you.”

“I’m not worried about the gun. I’m surprised but I’m now worried. I’m worried you won’t forgive me for acting like a damned fool.”

“You already apologized,” said Chelsea hardly. “But you still used your damned arsenal to scare the hell out of Colombine and I don’t appreciate that worth a damn.”

“I’ll make it up to you, both of you. You’ve just got to be honest with me from now on. I care so much about you it makes me crazy.”

“We didn’t lie to you. That’s no excuse,” she said. “I don’t want anybody around me that’s subject to going crazy for any reason.”

“Me either.” I force a chuckle. “Come on, Chelsea, let’s don’t rub it in. The shock has worn off now and we need to sit down and talk about it.”

“I think you need to know what it’s like to have to confront somebody who’s raving mad and waving a hand grenade at you, or a pistol.” Chelsea wasn’t backing down. She turned the revolver toward the trees and fired. Bark blasted loose from one of the larger ones. The ringing echo roared away into the mountains.

“All right,” I said, shrugging. “Now you can see. So how about calling off the war?”

“You don’t believe I’ll use it on you?”

I recognized that she was faking her anger, had no resolve to shoot me.

“No, I don’t,” I said. “I’m standing here begging for forgiveness and telling you I love you, both of you, no matter what you want to do in your life or with yourselves, and wanting to be good to you, both of you, the rest of my life. And you’re gonna shoot me? Hell no. You’re a smart woman, Chelsea.”

I walked toward her as I spoke and reached for the pistol. She allowed me to take it and looked at me thoughtfully, straight into my eyes, still wondering what made me tick. Sometimes, so did I.

“I didn’t plan to shoot you, Xavier. You know that. I just wanted you to see how it feels.” Colombine is still upset.

I shook my head. “I’ve really fucked up, Chelsea.” I reached for her, and brought her to me in a loving embrace. I kissed her and we were together again.

But there was Colombine.

I went to see her in the cabin and poured out my heart to her, into those frightened and confused eyes. My heart ached for what I had done to her in my outburst.

She saw my sincerity. She was very perceptive, gifted one might say. Her gifts had overflowed upon me more than once. And on that evening, we were washed in our special passions for one another, a circle of three again. There were joyous tears and laughter deep into the night. And it was the most glorious night of my life.

I saw our circle as a joyous phenomena. No matter what anyone would say, it seemed right, cosmic, a higher plane of consciousness, a truer and more exalted reality. There would have been no adequate words to defend it, much less deify it, to the masses, or even to Robert Edd and Missy, but I felt no missionary seal on its behalf. Best to have it for us only, in our sanctuary.

As we talked, Chelsea and I, other truths poured forth that I had only vaguely understood.

Why had she held the gun on me? Yes, it was to make me realize the fear that I had thrust upon them. And also, she told me, because she wondered if she, as I, had the power to use that deadly tool, the fortitude to hold it upon someone as a threat. Like me, she had fascinations of courage and daring, of bold adventure and the power to strike against the injustices of life that had forever seemed to strike at her. Perhaps we were truly the aliens, misfits locked into a false reality. But as long as our zest for life surged within us, as long as our passions burned clean and hot, as long as our anger took shape against the acknowledged evils of the world, what did it matter?

And there was more to understand about Colombine. She didn't share our thirst for challenge and adventure, for righteous vengeance. None of that. She seemed to be our link to a peaceful side, an island of virtue to which we could retreat and find solace, a visible evidence of that gentle nature that Jesus showed us, but which we could never achieve for ourselves. She was our mode, our shining example, a work of art, which we could only shallowly emulate.

The whole truth of her had to be explained to me, and still I didn't understand fully until I had thoroughly mulled it over. Her father's horrible crime, and his subsequent self-destruction had left her at once afraid to speak and pained to do so. She could speak, but each work or noisy spilling of emotion subjected her to so much fearful mental anguish that she was strongly inclined to say nothing at all. For in silence she could not err, she could not be too loud, could not be a destructive catalyst again, would not feel that gasping, helpless, guilty hurt that came involuntarily from deep inside her body which caused every work to be painfully extracted, one by one, until she fell into tears.

Still, she had spoken on the Oklahoma household. But not often. With Chelsea's aunt and uncle her progress was slow. Often, when she tried to talk, hesitatingly, word by word, even of mundane things, she would soon be crying, to be comforted awkwardly by Chelsea's aunt, who herself could not fully understand, or by Chelsea, whose self-centered and rebellious teenage psyche was even less capable of coping with this complicated, psychotic misery. A doctor said time would heal, and it may have helped considerably but for ignorant and misguided Uncle Walt, who verged on alcoholism, and who finally went into an angry shock because he had discovered their passion for one another. That very love that incensed him may have been, finally, how Chelsea had touched the tortured girl, had shown her the love and compassion that she held for her, after failing repeatedly in ordinary ways.

It hadn't been something they had planned, or even consciously fell into, Chelsea said. It just happened, as feelings do, without planning or calculation. Sometimes we do things, then we reason out why. Then we say that must be why we did them.

If Uncle Walt had honestly felt he was performing some rectifying educational service by stirring Colombine's feelings toward a heterosexual relationship, he might be grudgingly and partially excused. But that was unacceptable. And I decided from the evidence that her felt it to be an erotic opportunity, spurred by his own desires, emboldened by the liquor, justified by his blinding aversion to lesbianism, and encouraged by Colombine's meek and fearful demeanor which would greatly reduce the likelihood of his getting caught. I might also have swung the poker.

But, of course, Chelsea felt guilty. She was a murderer in fact, even though it was painful for me to accept her as that. And she had, in a sense, corrupted Colombine even as she was showing her compassion. In a sense like Uncle

Walt, but only in a vague sense, since she had obviously brought love into the encounter, while her uncle had brought only lust. Perhaps she had persuaded Colombine, or perhaps they had fallen together naturally. It was unlikely that I would ever know for sure. But it seemed likely that Chelsea was telling the truth about Uncle Walt's corrupting drunkenness and forceful violation of this gentle girl on his last night alive. At least I supposed I would accept it that way. I had to accept something as some shade of the truth and go on, and I was happy with Chelsea – a murderer – and I was happy with Colombine, a crushed flower which had shed its damaged bloom, and now was flowering again.

My worries of jealousy between us – mine or theirs – was unfounded. I watched their passions unleashed with one another without envy or anger or disdain. And they embraced me. And it was good. There was no shame upon the mountain. We were incredibly high. Their new freedom was exhilarating to them, and to me. With my mind finally purged of the alienation that had befouled my insides, I seemed by my personality and my pure, clean thoughts to be exhilarating to them. We flourished on positive vibrations.

And I was busy. We prepared for our monumental trip to New Orleans, I had long ago tucked away my pad and pen, no longer feeling the need to write mind-purging notes to people I had know of to myself. I was living in the everyday – and vibrantly.

I pulled the pad out now though, along with my reference books on the Mafia. I had to be implicitly correct in my treatise. Sometimes I wrote late into the night. In the end, I had eleven well-conceived, written and re-written pages, typed neatly with double –spacing. I was satisfied with it. Chelsea thought it effective too. And I speculated endlessly of which passages the press would pull and feature, knowing that it was against the media's self-serving rules to tell a complete story or to allow any source the opportunity for a full explanation. They had to chop it into bits and pieces, selectively include and exclude so that it became theirs by usurpation. Lack of space, they would say, lack of time. Then they would always find the space and time to waste on fillers. No matter. They could be manipulated by the clever, as they often were. My actions could hardly be given short shrift. It had a helluva news peg. If you can give the media what it wants, it will give you what you want.

We were making ready every day. Colombine was being acclimated for a stay with Robert Edd and Missy. We retrieved the van and loaded it. And despite the fact that our new plan would not actually do violence to the Mafia, Chelsea and I knew we had to be prepared for the aftermath. I hid the revolver and two boxes of bullets in a secret compartment affixed under the van, safely away from the engine's heat in a modified metal box.

We left on an October day, with winter winds blowing ominously through the graying mountains. The winter's first snowfall was late this year, but it would surely be blowing in very soon, perhaps that very day. I refused to think about my apprehensions, no source of strength there, only weakness. But the cold, swirling winds seemed to be speaking to me somehow. I looked into the massive rolling clouds, turned my collar up against the biting gusts.

There was a great force behind me. Pan, it seemed, was driving my away.

Chapter 16; IN THE FACE

New Orleans rises out of a bog known as South Louisiana. By all rights, it should be underwater, being below sea level. But it provided too many economic opportunities to be allowed to sink and run to alligators. Here, just as close to the gaping mouth of the great Mississippi River as ingenuity and pilings could carry them, watery people forged the foundation for an intercultural, aqua cultural commerce capitol.

Seafaring people have been depositing sea weary opportunists there for centuries, and the inland territories have contributed money-hungry rednecks, flowing like rubes into a carnival. It has resulted in an unstable brew of blacks and whites, browns and yellow. The city can sometimes impress a visitor with its sociological mingling, and sometimes shock with its excesses and perversions.

The historic streetcars on St. Charles Avenue will carry you past bums and flophouses and on to the mansions of the Garden District. In the wicked, witty Vieux Carre, bohemians fleece the tourists. Dark and austere shops impacted with precious antiques commingle with smoke flesh pits. Sexual alternatives abound. Artists wrapped in down jackets and wool scarves will paint you or caricature you if you'll sit for them in the fold-up lawn chair from TG&Y, at the iron fence around Jackson Square or on the cobblestones of Pirate's Alley. The Super Dome sits gigantic and ominous against the downtown cityscape, like a mother ship that brought in many weird settlers.

Sprawling suburbs of bedroom communities stretch out into erstwhile marshlands, across the huge river bridge into Algiers and Gretna, and up north toward vast Lake Pontchartrain and its causeway bridge. A network of canals keeps the water out of the multi-laned highways, which carry people in and out of the city of hordes.

We came in from the west, across the south Louisiana lowlands, From Opelousas eastward, I looked glumly out at passing scene of Interstate 20, feeling in no festive Cajun mood. It was my first tangible evidence of Carlos Marcel, Mafia kingpin not only of New Orleans but up across the strip of Mississippi and Alabama coast as well. Provincial henchmen looked after his interests there and plied their own smaller ones. Marcel had been tipped to buy much of the swampland along the Interstate, and sell it later at windfall profits when the highway was announced.

In addition to legitimate real estate and exporting interests, Marcel controlled hard drugs, prostitution, pornography, and had profitable ties to sports gambling. I knew a lot about him. He smoked Camel Lights and was keeping women in two hotels.

Jack Burnmeyer was an old friend from the Courier, also a photographer. He left to work for the Associated Press in New Orleans. The bureau serviced both Louisiana and Mississippi news media, but the nerve center of the district was its international city. This is where the crack news photographer had to be, the guy who could be sent out quickly and would invariably come back with a good photo, even a great one. There were more newsmakers to shoot here, more crime, more disasters.

He sat across from us at the bar of the French Quarter hotel where Chelsea and I were staying, gray streaks intruding upon his bushy dark hair and mustache, heavier in the midsection from too many beers and home-cooked meals. He lived out in Kenner, in a flat little house much like everyone else's, with its back to the noisy Interstate. He had a wife and two children who had come with the marriage, and I had seen their pictures already.

He told me everything he knew about Marcel and his underworld, which was considerable because The Times-Picayune, where the AP offices were located, had been embroiled a year earlier in an investigative series emanating from an incident in which Jack was involved. He had photographed Marcel, under tax fraud indictment, slugging a rude photographer, who turned out to be an FBI agent working under cover. Marcel was still extricating himself from the resulting legal furor. Jack had had some anxious moments in the beginning, considering whether he and his family might become mafia targets. He and his news photos were well-known to Marcel.

We were taking a breather in the bar. The serious conversation had already taken place up in our hotel room, with Jack asking many questions to verify what he understood from my long and winding letter. I answered them calmly, elaborating often.

Another round of drinks came. Jack lofted his.

"I want to propose a toast to a good friend who's...crazy as a fox." He tipped his glass toward me. "and to a woman who has a taste for adventure." Chelsea permitted herself a wry smile.

We clinked glasses. The deal was made. Jack couldn't pass up a good photo opportunity.

There in an oyster bar called "The Pearl Bed," a half-block from the cacophony of Canal Street. On Wednesday afternoons around four, it was Carlo Marcel's habit to leave the thirty-third floor of the nearby Port Tower building, two goons in tow, and often one or more of his associates in the Windward Investments Corporation. They had met at two, reviewed things that could only be imagined given the tight security, and adjourned near four to the reveries of the evening. On the street level, Marcel and retinue would cross the street to the oyster bar and go inside to clamorous hospitality. Iced delicacies and expensive wines awaited them in a private niche in the back.

Now, at ten until five, they were preparing to leave. A long gray luxury automobile rolled down out of a parking garage down the street and a large, flat-nosed man in a black overcoat took the keys. He shelled out two bills to the carboy at the foot of the ramp and climbed behind the wheel. The carboy gently closed the door and rushed away.

I was weary of waiting by now, constantly changing positions, walking up and down the crowded street, staying away from the others, crossing and re-crossing the street at two corners to keep our distance from one another, to not appear suspicious. My heart beat with anticipation now and I eyed Chelsea some twenty feet away, eyeing me back, moving in my direction slowly over the crowded sidewalk. We prepared to come together, the three of us, just as the proper time, the right second. Timing was vital. My move was the key. I eyed the long gray car, which slid along the curb and stopped in front of the oyster bar, red lights flashing. An underling shoved open the heavy wooden door of the Pearl Bed, saw the car and disappeared back inside.

In a moment, the door swung open again, a henchman stretched to hold it open. Through it walked Carlo Marcel, robust and short, dapper in a charcoal gray topcoat pulled about his shoulders, sporting a dark felt hat and a red carnation in the lapel of his three-piece suit. Except for the cruel and hard look in his aging eyes, the nattily-at-tired gray-haired man might have easily been taken for a banker or stockbroker. He moved fluidly, comfortably, accustomed as he was to having doors and other obstacles cleared from his path by subordinates. The large, flat-nosed man had stepped out of the car and held open the back door. At the same time, we were coming together.

I threw down the empty box from the Bon Ton Bakery and stepped forward quickly. The flat-nosed man stared at me in bewilderment. In that brief second, Marcel turned slightly and looked directly at me as I lofted the Boston cream pie and shoved it squarely into his surprised face.

Jack's camera clicked, again and again, he hanging over the fender of Marcel's car, his motor drive whirring to advance the film as fast as he could shoot it.

I was grabbed and shoved in the ensuing melee, struggled with the flat-nosed man who twisted my arm and held me against the car. Chelsea's swift kick struck him somewhere and I wrestled myself free. I caught him flush on the jaw with a left jab before I was jerked to the pavement again.

"Who is that crazy son-of-a-bitch?" It was Marcel screaming, cream pie splattered over his expensive wardrobe, pulling the goo out of his eyes.

"Call the police!" hollered the hoarse-voiced henchman.

"Grab that son-of-a-bitch!"

"Hold him! Hold him right there!"

Click. Click. Click. Jack's camera fired on. The strongarms had me pinned to the car again. "That crazy bastard attacked me from nowhere." Marcel again. I struggled in vain with the dark overcoats. "Get the police. Call the police." A crowd of passers-by stood their distance. Open faces. "He don't have no gun." I heard a police whistle. My arms were pinned. I was jerked around roughly. I saw Chelsea, struggling and kicking at a fat man. A hard fist struck my temple and I fell back dizzily, my arms still held securely, painfully. The whistle was louder, shrilling in my ears. Somebody was pushing through. The man loosened his hold and I fell to my knees on the concrete. Another arm grabbed me. "All right. Everybody calm down. What the hell's goin' on here?"

I leaned groggily against the policeman's arm, trying to hear the jumbled voices, the cop's hard grip twisting my jacket collar, straining my neck. I touched my eyebrow, hurting, and pulled back my hand to find blood. I was dizzy but could see Chelsea, verbally lambasting the goon, trying to jerk free of his clutch, Marcel being wiped frantically by two men, smearing the pie over his suit.

“That son-of-a-bitch is crazy!” Another stooge held his topcoat, brushing uneasily at the largest globs of yellow cream. “Stop, God dammit! You’re just rubbin’ it in!”

“All right, buddy,” the officer said. “You may have gotten yourself in a helluva mess here.” He still had a rough grip on my collar. I didn’t resist. Another officer was holding two of Marcel’s protesting bodyguards at bay.

“I want that man locked up,” Marcel demanded, calmer now. “And that God damn photographer. Where the hell did he go?” he was nowhere to be seen in the gathering throng. Jack had run hard and escaped with the film, as planned, and no doubt had a news photo that would move nationwide.

The flat-nosed man bulled his way up to my face, ignoring the officer who had me in his grip. “Man, you’re crazy,” he rasped. “You don’t know who you’re messin’ with.”

“All right, leave him alone,” said the officer. “You’ve got some questions to answer too. Did you hit this man?” “What the hell. I got to protect Mr. Marcel. That’s my job.”

“Are you ready to file a complaint?”

“Hell, yes,” said Marcel. “Lock that bastard up!”

Then I was hearing my rights recited. The second officer was pushing back the noisy crowd. Some were laughing now. Then, finally, the second part of my plan...

Paper folders, pocket-sized were tumbling from the sky, dumped in piles office hundred by Jack’s friend, the elevator operator, from atop the Sheraton Hotel. They fluttered all around us. Spectators strained their eyes upward, and grabbed them from the air to read:

THE MAFIA PIE PROJECT

This is the story of a national disgrace.....

They came and got me from a stinking cell the next morning. I hadn’t slept well. My back and shoulders were sore, my eyebrow cut and swollen. They carried me to a small plain room with a bare table and five scattered metal chairs. I was alone for a moment before the door opened again and two detectives stepped in with orders to sit down.

One of them, a dark-haired and mustached man of Latin descent, a face ravaged with acne scars, sat on the edge of the table. The other, a heavy-set black man, walked to the other side of the room, almost behind me, at I one of the metal chairs and scratched another one around upon which to prop his feet. He slouched back but kept his eyes on me.

“I’m Lieutenant Morales,” said the man in front of me. “This is Lieutenant Barfield. We’re going to be asking you a few questions, okay?”

“Guess you’re gonna do what you want.”

“And I think you’d better be straight with us. We’re not our here to hang you, you know, but your ass could be in a wringer if we said so.”

“You’re not telling me anything I don’t know. But I’ve already told my story to everybody down here but the cleaning lady.”

“We heard your story, “ Morales snapped. “And we’re not interested in your God damned story. I think you better listen to our story. But first I want to know if you think you’ve got good sense. You reckon we ought to send you out for a psychiatric evaluation?”

“I don’t think so,” I responded calmly.

“Well, you don’t have much to think with then. Because you’ve made some mighty important people mad at you. Dangerous people. They could have you throat cut before tomorrow morning if they took the notion.”

“That’s why I don’t like them, lieutenant.”

“Don’t like ‘em. Jesus Christ, fella. You’re fuckin’ with people that’ll cut your nuts out. They kill people they don’t even know.”

“You ought to lock up people like that.”

“Don’t think we’re not tryin’. We’ve got Marcel under investigation right now. But you can’t bend the law. And you can’t do a damn thing about it with all this horseshit in your little pamphlet and throwing a God damn pie in his face.”

“I thought you’d have a better sense of humor,” I said. “Aren’t we on the same side?”

Morales got up and walked around the table, leaned over with his hands on it and stared me straight in the face. “Don’t you see there’s not a damn thing in the world we can do to guarantee your safety? We can’t put a guard on you twenty-four hours a day. They can send a killer down here from Chicago, or a dozen other places, with no way to ever trace him. Or they can put you in an accident. Or they can get a hundred common street hoods to do you in. They’ve got a million connections and a million ways to use them, and a million ways to keep from being connected with it at all.”

“I was counting on my notoriety. You think they’ll come after me.”

“Depends on how mad you made the main man. Trouble is, you can’t ever rest. You don’t know when they might come after you, or how.”

“That would make the news too.”

“What the hell does that mean? They might like that being in the news. The news is not gonna do a damn thing for you. Hell, you’ve already made the news.” Morales turned to the door abruptly, jerked it open and walked outside, leaving the door ajar.

I turned in my seat and eyed the black man. He stared at me with hooded eyes. Morales stepped back inside, tossed a crumpled newspaper on the table and closed the door again. I opened it and saw Jack’s photo – three columns wide. Pie splatters hung defiantly in mid-air as my hand came forward. Marcel’s face was obliterated. A confederate stood by, wide-eyed. Marcel’s hand was frozen in front of him, at his waist. He wore a large ring. It was a splendid action shot, worthy of Jack’s reputation, reminiscent of Ruby shooting Oswald. I could see it on front pages throughout the country, in the AP yearbook, on Jack’s office wall, in the hands of mobsters coast-to-coast.

“You see,” said Morales, “What you’ve done is gotten a contract issued on yourself. I feel pretty sure of that. I don’t think Marcel can just let it go. He’s been embarrassed. He’s being laughed at by every big and little dick in the organization, and everybody in the whole country that reads a newspaper.”

“That’s the way I planned it.”

“Yeah, and maybe you’re crazy enough to face up to them. But I know you must have family. What about them? What about people you’re close to? They might not be any safer than you are.”

“Maybe they won’t fine us. Or maybe they don’t want to make headline again.” I turned to an inside page for the story.

MOUNTAIN MAN SPLATTERS MARCEL

Pie-in-the-face opens one-man campaign against alleged mobsters.

“I think the first thing on your mind better be getting’ out of town and the layin’ real low,” said Morales. “Now, they’re not pressing any charges. They could’ve kept you here for simple assault, but they don’t want you in jail. That ought to tell you something. So you’re gonna have to post bond on a misdemeanor, then you can leave here. You better go to your hotel, pack up fast and go. If I have to, I’ll send an officer with you to make sure you do.”

“No need for that. I’ll be glad to leave here and get some fresh air.”

“You just be advised that they know all about you,” said Morales. “Their lawyer had been down here. They know everything we know. They know where you’re staying, what you’re driving. They’ve got the address you gave us of that little place where you live up in Colorado – Montrose. If they want you, they’re gonna find you.”

“And as usual, there’s nothing the law can do about it.”

“We do a damn sight more than we get credit for,” he said. “It’s the courts that turns ’em loose sometimes. I’m just tellin’ you what the facts are. You better be damn careful.”

“I didn’t expect any help from the police,” I said. “I didn’t plan on any. I don’t expect any. I don’t want any. If I thought you could help, I would have made you part of the plan.”

Morales stared at me for long seconds. Then he put out his hand to shake. His grip was firm. “Listen, you didn’t do yourself any favors but, off the record, that was a helluva set-up. You did a good job of pulling it off. But don’t tell a damn soul I said that, and other than that it was a damn fool thing to do. I hope you know how to disappear for good.”

“Thanks for the advice,” I said. “Did you let my woman friend go?”

“She’s at the hotel, I guess. I talked to her a little while ago. I talked to that photographer too, Burnmeyer. I think I sobered him up a little bit.”

“You think he’ll be all right?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I think so. He’s probably too much in the public eye down here for Marcel to mess with him. The man’s already under indictment, you know. And I think if they want anybody, it’ll be you, and anybody up in Colorado you’re close to, maybe. But I’m just guessing now and, listen, I’m going to give you a phone number, a police lieutenant with the Denver PD. If you’re going to be back out there in Montrose for awhile, I think you ought to go by and see him on your way back, and then you can call him if anything suspicious happens.”

“Damn, lieutenant, you think we’ll even make it out of town?” I forced a smile.

Morales hesitated. “I think I better send a officer to the hotel with you. Come on.”

I started to follow him out the door.

“Hey!”

I looked around to the black officer. He didn’t budge from his chair, feet still up in the other one. I looked into his worn face.

“Nice work, man,” he said gruffly.

Less than an hour later, I was blinking in the bright sunshine outside the downtown police station, waiting for the police car to come around and get me. I spied a newspaper rack and stepped over to get the afternoon paper – the States-Item.

There were fresh pictures on the front page – a sequence of four showing the seconds before my left-handed lob, an impact shot, and the confused aftermath, being wrestled up against the car. Jack apparently had fled before the hood busted me in the head. And there was a fresh story: “Pie Thrower Pops Marcel.” It reiterated the basic facts, then got into the propriety of a wire service photographer being part to a staged news situation. Jack was going to have to wriggle and squirm a little too.

I looked up to see a dark green sedan with shaded windows across the street, just now pulling away from the curb. I didn’t need to see inside. I stared defiantly into the dark reflections while the car pulled away.

Chapter 17; DARES AND DARING

The plainclothesman had little to say while we plied our way through downtown traffic to the hotel. Neither did I, having too much to think about, worrying that the police were right and Marcel would wreak his vengeance in some way that I was helpless to prevent. I had counted on my notoriety protesting us, perhaps unwisely.

Even the unqualified success of our mission was of little satisfaction in the face of the danger to which I may have subjected Chelsea and others. I eyed the traffic all around for the green sedan. While it was nowhere to be seen, my fears were not allayed, for they knew where we were staying.

We pulled into the hotel loading zone. The detective checked in by radio, advised me again to check our and leave. I almost asked him to stay a while longer, but didn't I was not used to asking for help. I watched him pull away, combed the street again for the car, and walking into the bustling lobby.

Upstairs, I slipped my key into the door. Inside, Chelsea's wide eyes greeted me. We embraced, she was hungry to pull me to her. It felt good that she worried about me, cared about me, fretted over my bruised head.

"We did great," I told her.

"I've seen the paper, both of them. Jack's a helluva photographer."

I ignored the remark. "We've got to get the hell out of here. I don't know what might happen."

I put on the night latch. Chelsea wanted to take quick shower. I agreed to it, and began pulling my things together.

A few minutes later, I heard a knock. I moved toward the door, quickly, suspiciously. I heard the shower running. I heard unmistakable black voice say it was the maid. Another knock.

"All right."

I unlocked the door and open it a crack. The chain lock stretched.

"I got some clean towels for you."

"No thanks. We don't need them."

The door jerked suddenly hard against the lock. Two large arms wedged through, up to their shoulder. I pushed hard against them, but they were too strong, and one of them had a short, sharpened bar the he jabbed into the facing to

rip off the night latch. I pushed hard, but the facing cracked, then splintered and gave way. The door flung open and I stood staring into the barrel of a snub-nosed pistol.

“All right, mother fucker! Just back up and keep on backin’ up.” A ruddy-faced man with puffed jowls and a scarred forehead pushed me backwards and pressed after me while the other, a stooped-over fat man with beady eyes threw a bill on the crowded maid’s car, which was pulled away by someone unseen. He closed the door behind him.

“So, here’s that stupid son-of-a-bitch I read about in the paper, huh?” said the first man, holding the pistol directly at my face. “You don’t look so good, boy. Whatsa matter? You eat too much pie?”

The fat one pushed open the bathroom door. I tensed.

“Don’t you move an inch, mother fucker, or I’ll blow your head up against the wall.”

I heard the shower curtain jerked back. “Hey, look what we got in here,” growled the fat man. “We got a cunt in here takin’ a shower. Reckon I oughta shoot her ass, or fuck it?”

I heard Chelsea’s reply over the shower water. “What the hell you doin’ in here, lardass? Get the hell out!” Her angry voice echoed off the tiles.

“You see this rod, baby. I’ll splatter your good lookin’ ass all over the shower if you fuck with me.”

I heard the noises of a struggle, bare limbs striking against the tub, grunting, Chelsea’s cursing, slapping sounds against bare flesh.

“I’ll blow your head off, bitch!” The water still ran. More scuffling noises. “You wanna play rough...yeah?...fuck you! How about a dose of this?” I heard the sudden screech of the water knob. I leaned forward, lips tight.

“You getting’ a little tense, boy?” The scar-faced man poked the cold gun barrel against my forehead and pushed me backwards. I lost my balance and plopped into a parlor chair.

I heard Chelsea cry out in pain, then: “Damn! Damn you!” I saw the hot steam pouring out of the bathroom. He was scalding her. She was crying out in pain, anger, frustration. I started to rise. The hood swung his backhand and slapped me hard across the face. I fell back into the chair, cheek stinging.

Chelsea screamed and my frustration swelled. Red-faced. I gripped myself to keep control, begging for life, and escape from this mad violence. For one reason only at this instant – to take revenge. Finally, the fat man dragged her out by an arm, hurled her drenched and burned body onto the carpet where she wept quietly, face sc! Cowering in a helpless, naked fetal position.

The fat man approached me. “How about you, pie man? How about a nice hot shower?”

I got up and faced him. “You’re really a brave and courageous fellow,” I said defiantly. I didn’t want Chelsea to suffer alone.

The fat man stepped up to me without hesitation and drove a hard fist into my stomach. I double over with the breath taking pain. His pudgy hand on my head shoved me hard, back into the chair, which skidded into the wall.

“Hey, I believe this is the dumbest mother fucker I ever did see.” It was the scarred man talking again. “Maybe you ought to educate ’em a little bit more, huh?”

“Yeah, okay. Hey, cunt!” The fat man kicked Chelsea in the buttocks. “Get your ass up and listen.”

She just lay there in a heap, her face covered, shivering, I guessed, in pain. It hurt me deep inside. I had never seen her like this, beaten down.

“I said, get up bitch.” He grabbed her by an arm and jerked her roughly to her feet, then shoved her onto our mused-over bed. “You sit there and listen while I tell your boy friend here the facts of life.” He turned to me and took a couple of strutting steps. I was still fighting the bruising pain, and the wave of nausea that was sweeping over me.

“Now you, asshole!” he shoved his snub-nosed twenty-two against my nose and pushed it to give me pain. “You been fuckin’ with the main man. I mean... number one. That means you’re stupid and... you may have to die for it – in time” He pulled the pistol back, then slapped me hard across the cheek with his open hand, then a hard backhand. My face stung.

Right now, you’re gonna be okay. See... you may die some time form now ‘cause all this publicity got to die down first, okay? So you got time to think about it.” from the corner of my eye, I saw the other one harassing Chelsea, nudging her covered body with the pistol barrel, jerking down the bedspread which she was clutching for cover. Her face was tear-stained. She appeared to be in shock.

“Right now, we ain’t raisin’ no questions, see,” the hoodlum continued. “No scars on you, no? No scars on this little cunt neither. ‘Course I could cooked her in there just like a steak, huh?” his laugh was a hoarse growl. “but see, we was not supposed to hurt you so anybody could see it, huh? This ain’t been nothin’ but a picnic. You oughta see us when we really get worked up, when the boss says your ass is mine. Am I getting’ through to you, boy?”

“I her you,” I said flatly.

“We just come by to show you out of town and tell you not to talk to no God damned reporters. ‘Cause if you do, you’ll never be safe anywhere again.”

“You said you were gonna kill me anyway,” I said evenly.

“Oh, yeah? Did I say that? Well, maybe you’ll just have to guess about that, pie man. Why don’t you figure that one out? Hell, maybe you will live awhile. But I don’t know about any folks you left back up there in the hills. See, you gave the police the name of the town where you live. Well, hell, there ain’t no tellin’ what might happen up there before you get back. Maybe you left somebody up there. You a long way from home, boy.”

“They’ve got nothing to do with this. Nothing. It’s between you and me. It’s not fair dragging innocent people into it.”

“Fair? What is this fair shit?” rasped the hood. “You think you’re playin’ a game, don’t you? This ain’t no game, shitface. This is the real thing. Whatever’s yours we may have to fuck over, just for the hell of it. You’re a God damn celebrity for the time being, but whatever some... motorcycle gang, say, out of Denver, whatever they wanted to do, well, we don’t know nothin’ about that. Not a God damned thing.”

Damn! I had underestimated them. Imagine that. They had tentacles everywhere and I had insanely implicated innocent people. Motorcycle gangs did the mob’s dirty work. And it could never be traced to them. If we could only squeeze out of this mess, I could call Robert Edd, worn them.

“Hey, you look a little white around the mouth, boy. Tell you what, we’re gonna step out of here and let you folks get dressed and go check out. And don’t even stop for coffee. See, we run this town. You had to learn that. And we want your asses out of it – just as quick as you can move ‘em.” He looked at his watch. “Let’s say, a half-hour, and if you talk to any press people, you gonna find out what happens when we really get serious.”

Both men replaced their pistols in shoulder holsters. The fat one adjusted his suit. His arms were wet from the shower. The phone rang. He stepped over by the bed and picked it up.

I could only hear his reply: “Right, I still want you to hold the calls...right. Mr. Thorn said he’s not talkin’ to any press people. That’s right...No, you tell them they might as well leave.”

So there were reporters in the lobby, and probably at least one photographer, maybe a television station.

The fat man replied again. “Okay, maybe they won’t. Maybe you don’t want to tell ‘em. But tell ‘em they’re wastin’ their time if they stay...That’s right.” He hung up, and looked dead at me. His fat jowls gave his swarthy, black-stubbled face a sinister look. Just like in the movies. Only this time, I was knee-deep myself in the quagmire.

“All right, mountain boy. There’s reporters downstairs. And if you talk to ‘em you ain’t gonna die easy, neither of you. I promised you that.” He pointed a pudgy finger at me. They turned and walked to the door. The scar faced one gave us one more tough sneer before he pulled the door closed behind him, the night latch dangling helplessly from the splintered wood.

Instantly, I was with Chelsea, cradling her.

“Are you all right? Chelsea?”

“Sure. Yeah, I’m okay.” I pulled back the spread she clutched to see that her skin, though burned painfully, probably wasn’t serious.

“Get dressed,” I said hurriedly. “We owe these bastards one.” I was out the door before she could reply, in a feverish run. No time to wait for the elevator. That’s where they would be. I raced headlong to the stairs, down them, one flight, two, to the mezzanine. I crashed out the stairwell door and ran to the railing that overlooked the lobby. I searched the bustle of faces below, businessmen having cocktails and beers in the open lobby bar, bellmen laboring with bags, people lining up to check out.

I saw the reporters near the Royal Street entrance. Three to them, it seemed, two of them women. They were obvious by the equipment-laden photographer, cameras and flashes hanging off him. Then I saw a television reporter, cameraman in tow, standing at the information desk.

Now, where were the victims? I searched in vain for Marcel’s men – nowhere! – but they had to be leaving. Please...let it be out of the lobby. I was about to lose hope. The elevator opened and disgorged its occupants, a bellman with a rack of bags, two women, two teenagers in jeans, and them! They stepped out into the busy lobby. I didn’t wait to see in which direction they would move.

“Hey! Reporters! Reporter!”

They looked up. So did a lot of other people.

“Hey!” I called to the television news team and the press photographer. “those two guys in the dark suits. Over there. They’re Mafia men. I’m Thorn. They threatened me. Get them on camera before they get away.” The television cameraman stood alert, moving forward. The newspaper photographer strained his neck.

“Those two. Right! Right! Those two going out.” I raced to the wide staircase and down, reached the lobby in seconds and jostled my way through a flabbergasted crowd. By that time, they had already reached the sidewalk outside. The fat man was arguing loudly.

“I don’t know nothin’ about that,” her was protesting. “He’s crazy. I don’t know this guy.” The TV cameraman was shooting it all, the fat man resisting the young, nattily dressed newsman, the newspaper photographer moving around at different angles, clicking and clicking again. I ran up to join the confused scene, speaking quickly.

“They were in my room. They roughed my up, and my friend. I’ll show you the lock they tore off. They threatened to kill us if I talked to you and didn’t get out of town.” The TV cameraman was recording my now. I moved closer to the fat man. “Hey, get a shot of us together.”

He pushed me away, incredulous. “I never saw this crazy man. Somebody’s makin’ a mistake.”

I pointed to him: “Get a shot of these huge, overhanging jowls, okay? Get his name. Get both of ‘em. I may want to press assault charges.”

“You’re crazy, man...crazy. I ain’t gonna be no part of this.” The fat man and the other backed off, out of the growing crowd blocking the sidewalk. They pushed through the people and began jogging clumsily down the street to get away. The TV cameraman began jogging after them.

“They’ve got guns,” I yelled. “Get them to show ‘em to you.”

The green sedan pulled up to the curb a half-block away and the hoods clamored inside. The TV cameraman recorded the car as it pulled away, close enough to read the tag.

“Mr. Thorn...Mr. Thorn,” said one of the women reporters. “Aren’t you afraid of these people if they’re as bad as you say?”

“Damned scared,” I said with forced calm. “That’s why I’m trying to stay on the front page, in order to say our of the obituaries.”

Chapter 18; TROUBLE IN MIND

The police came, belatedly, and we talked to them, the reporters and I. I carried them to my room and Chelsea, subdued, angry, talked to them too. They photographed the broken lock, felt the wet carpet. It was embarrassing, having to spill all this information into the voracious appetite of the press, and the eternal, detailed recounting to the police.

The press became well aware that I was afraid for the safety of friends, though I thought it best not to reveal names, especially Colombine's, given her anonymity and the fact that she was a mental institution escapee.

And before they left, I gave them one more excellent quote.

"Remember, I'm counting on you press people. They're waiting to kill me when the publicity dies down. Please. Do your research on the Mafia. Do a series. Tell what their activities cost the citizens of New Orleans every year, every day, in money, in lives destroyed by heroin and cocaine and corruption. It'll sure help me stay alive awhile longer."

Finally the police ushered them from our room, and Lt. Morales soon walked in. his hard face was expressionless.

"You love to get in the newspapers, don't you?" he asked me, turning then to Chelsea. "TV too. You like to be on TV, young lady?"

"Not really," she said.

"Yeah, I don't blame you. You think that these people are helpin' you, but they're not. They're kind of like buzzards. They come in and get what they want. Then in a few days, they couldn't care less what happens to you." He walked back toward me, pausing. "Oh yeah, they'll cover the story. If you both get bumped off, or go out in an accident. They'll cover that too. But it's just for the story, you know. Did you know that, Mr. Thorn?"

"I know what they want," I said calmly. "They can have it as long as I get what I want."

“And what is that?”

“To point the finger at these people. To impress upon everybody – millions of people – what they’re doing to us.”

“Hey, Thorn. Don’t be naïve. People know about the Mafia. Hell, they’ve seen ‘The Godfather.’ They read the papers. They know about crime. What the hell you think people are gonna do that they haven’t already done? And they haven’t done a damned thing. Excuse my French, lady. And they’re not going to.”

“Maybe, you’re right,” I said, too tired to argue after a trying two days and night. “I’m probably an idealistic fool to think I can get people worked up to do anything about a minor problem like organized crime.”

“You’re beginning to make a little sense,” said Morales. “We’ve been in this fight for a long time now, and we’ve found damned few people who would give us a hand. Most of ‘em just don’t care about it unless it affects them. And if it does affect them, they’re too scared to talk.”

“I’m giving you a hand.”

“You don’t know anything that can help us. It’s not going to help us for them to kill you.”

“Cynical business, isn’t it?”

“Why didn’t the man I sent with you stay until you left?” her asked me.

“I don’t know.”

“What reason did he give?”

“He just dropped me in front of the hotel. He talked to somebody on the radio and told us to pack and take off. So he left.”

Morales turned to one of the uniformed officers. “Talk to Briggs. Call him on the radio. Tell him to call Curtis into my office...at three o’clock. Tell him to make sure he’s there.”

He turned back tome, “Do you know anything about motorcycle gangs, Mr. Thorn?”

“Not much.”

“Well, they do things for people like Carlo Marcel, like that hood told you. We’ve been told they put the word out on you. Before long, we think whomever they’ve talked to is going to try to collect the price that’s on your head. It maybe a sizeable contract.”

“How about my friends in Colorado?”

“They’ll use them to get to you if they can,” said Morales. “I have to figure the guy was telling you the truth about the bunch out in Denver. I’m just surprised eh told you anything about it. That’s not typical. He must have been showin’ his ass a little bit.”

“Are you gonna talk to the gang? Who are they?”

“Probably the Iron Horsemen, but we don’t know. Yeah, they’ll talk to them out there but they’ll be subtle about it. These things get a little delicate sometimes.”

“Are you going to pick up those meatheads down here?”

“We’ll make an effort.”

“What do you mean, ‘effort’? You’ve got the tag number. Their faces will be on TV tonight.”

“Are you gonna stay down here and press charges?”

“Don’t think so. It’s gettin’ knee-deep to a giraffe down here.”

“Well, you’ll have to come back eventually if we pick ‘em up.”

“What to you mean, if?”

“I don’t think those guys are gonna be too popular when they get back, especially after the evening news. We may not see ‘em again – ever.”

“Are you serious?”

“These people like to keep a low profile,” said Morales. “They really don’t like people like you callin’ attention to ‘em, or people they’ve got working for them that wind up on the news because they can’t do the job. They were supposed to scare the hell out of you. It looks like they didn’t do too good a job of it.”

“Well, scared is part of it,” I reasoned. “We decided we were going to fight ‘em with publicity. Hell, we might as well keep it coming.”

“That’ll probably be your last chance,” said Morales. “Frankly, I think they screwed up. In the first place, this wasn’t necessary, so I figure Marcel must be mad as hell. Else he wouldn’t have taken a risk here. In the second place, they underestimated you. They’re used to people shuttin’ up when they tell ‘em to. Now, they’ve got to let things cool down, at least from this end.”

“What do you mean, this end?” I subdued a feeling of pride that they had underestimated my resolve, my ingenuity.

“Well, like I said, Thorn, if the word is out to one of the gangs, then you ought to be concerned with it right now. They’re not worried about publicity. Hell, they may like it. The sheriff’s office can keep an eye out up there, but there’s no telling when they might hit you and how. They’ve got the initiative. There’s no way I’m gonna stand here and say you’re gonna be absolutely safe. I told you that.”

“Look, I told you, you’re not obligated,” I said.

“The law is already my obligation,” said Morales, “but, see, you screwed up the system when you turned into a vigilante. Now, I got no serious quarrel with you about what you’ve done. I’m just tellin’ you the way things are. I can’t change ‘em. You can’t change ‘em. We’ll do what we can, and...I advise you to clear on our. If we pick up those tow thugs – and I’d say it’s damned unlikely, we’ll call you.”

“Sure.”

“And this time I’m leaving two officers to follow you out of town. They’ll be with you to the city limits this time.”

“It’s probably not necessary, lieutenant,” I said. “Everything has worked out perfectly so far. They’ve played tight into our hands. But they probably won’t be stupid enough to do it again.”

Morales stared hard at me, then showed me a quirky smile. “Better watch out for accidents,” he said. “and you ought to consider changing your place of residence.”

Calling Robert Edd was hard. We had told him that New Orleans was a vacation. Now I had to level with him. He was irritated. I told him I didn’t blame him, that I would do anything not to have implicated them, and maybe they weren’t. But they had best be watchful. No one knew their names, only that we were from Fair Odds. But it is such a small place. Only a few stores at which to inquire, including theirs. I told him we would be home within four days and then we’d clear out for a while. He agreed to tell Colombine what had happened. She would be ready to leave with us.

The police looked over the van, presumably for a bomb. They didn’t find the compartment with the pistol, fortunately, for a weapons possession charge – it not being registered – would have entangled us even deeper in the legal web.

We took a side road off the Interstate, wary of being followed, and checked into a small motel for the night. We missed the early news, but saw the altercation at ten o’clock. It gave me little feeling of satisfaction. Chelsea and I talked about going down to Big Bend National Park in Texas, maybe on into Mexico.

The road back to Colorado was riddled with coffee shops and newspapers. We followed the story we made, watching it quickly slip to inside pages. I rubbed Chelsea’s blistered skin with ointment that first night, and caressed her like a child. Her anger and hurt, altogether, was enough to deflate her personality and withdraw her inside that shell with which she was so intimately familiar. All that I could give her were my kindnesses, my loving embraces, which helped pull her, over the course of the trip, back to a semblance of what passed for normality.

And she could talk then.

“Do you have any regrets now?” I asked her that night in Artesia, New Mexico. We ere in a candlelit restaurant, waiting for a steak.

“I hate the son-of-a-bitches,” she said coldly. “And I know it’s not good to hate this much. It poisons the head.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I know.”

She didn’t reply. So I continued. “Anyway, it’s not as bad if you can focus it on something. These people are worth hating.”

I guessed that’s what I had done in my own head, focused all my frustrations on to one thing.

“Not at the expense of my peace of mind,” she said, “as little as I’ve got. It might’ve been better not to get involved, just to keep my head on straight.”

“That’s what most people do,” I said.

She looked at me across the candlelight. “Where did you get all that venom inside you?” she asked me.

“Same place as you.” I wouldn’t give ground. “Seeing too many things like they are.”

She chuckled. “We’re a couple of real hardasses, aren’t we?”

I didn’t have to reply. My steady gaze probably told her I was proud of it.

“Are we gonna get out of this, Xavier? I’m not ready to die yet.”

“If they fuck with us,” I deadpanned. “They’re gonna be in serious trouble.”

“It’s nothing to laugh about any more. Don’t you see?” she asked me. “Look, I’ve been a blowhard. I’ve put on a tough facade same as you have, for a long time. And I’ve longed for the open road and adventure. And most of it has been plenty exciting. But we’re caught up in something different this time. This isn’t an adventure trip any more. It’s just nasty and violent and evil. It’s all just God damned business to these people. They’re just like the politicians and businessmen we cursed and discussed, except a damn sight more dangerous.”

She made a lot of sense, of course, but I didn’t want to agree with her.

“Danger is adventure,” I said earnestly. “It all works together. That’s just the way it is.”

“Well, I don’t know if it’s something I want to be part of,” she said wearily. “I don’t know... I thought we could avoid the nasty side with this caper. I should’ve known it would turn out to be a matter of pride with these people. I don’t know if we’re ever gonna be safe now, and I can’t live that way, always wondering who’s gonna show up with a gun in his coat.”

“We can get lost. The road is a big place. We’ll go into the mountains. It’s a big country. There’s lots to see and do.”

“You told me you were happy at the cabin. I thought you wanted to stay there. I thought you wanted to cool out, get a little peace of mind. What do you really want?”

It was a difficult question for me. Sometime it was this; sometimes that. A time for everything under Heaven, said the song, especially my ambivalence.

“I guess I crave adventure,” I said with a shrug, “and I guess I need a retreat, a place to come to, for love and caring. Maybe we have two sides. Maybe somehow they’re supposed to work together. Or maybe they’re not supposed to work together, and that’s the mess we find ourselves in.”

She shook her head. “I wish I knew what I wanted too. But... I guess I always have wished that. I’ve done some hard lookin’ but it never has really come together. Maybe it never will.”

“Maybe...” I fumbled for the right words, “we can help each other. We make a good team. And both of us will be there for Colombine.”

“Maybe,” she said, her dark liquid eyes in mine, pleading somehow. “Maybe Colombine can save us both – from ourselves.”

Chapter 19; DOWN TO YOU

Our four-day return trip gave us time to talk, to think and to rest our bruised bodies from the ordeals we had faced. I summoned up the painful memories one by one – the fearful anticipation of splattering Marcel, the stinkhole of a jail shared with spitting winos, the stern reprimands of the police, the siege of terror at the hotel, the feverish spilling of facts and fears to the press. There had been plenty of opportunities to back down, but I hadn't. I still had my pride, which was almost everything. And as I called up the events and dealt with them, one-by-one and interrelated, I put

them away again, into a more well-ordered file. By the time we had driven over fifteen hundred miles, everything seemed to be in place and could be viewed from a broader, more logical perspective.

Most important item: Mission was successful. Media blitz was solid. For whatever it was worth.

Danger zone: Fair Odds. But we would pack up and hit the road. South to Big Bend (not as cold there) and maybe into Mexico for a few weeks.

Situation: My money was holding out reasonably well, helped by the fact that I had hit the limit on three credit cards and gotten rid of them. My billfold was getting lighter, loosening my link to society. I still have enough to get settled somewhere.

Needs: To get on the road, with Colombine joining us. Maybe come back in the spring. It would be safer then. And I had my weapons, Except for Chelsea and Colombine, I wished they'd come after me. I had played society's game in New Orleans, reined-in and under control, playing the ridiculous legal and media exercises. I wished I could kick loose.

Immediately: Check the papers for a while, See if the mission bore any fruit. I had a nagging feeling that the thing would die quickly. I would see no major investigative series. I would see no specific names and organizations run by Cosa Nostra in the media. That attention would turn quickly back to politics, the economy, foreign policy, major crime, wars and insurrections, the want ads, comics, crossword puzzles and TV schedule. My eye-catching escapade might just come and go as the ravings of another kook, slide off the evening news as fast as they could substitute and Iowa pig farmer who can't pay his banknote, or a plug for an upcoming flea market sponsored by the Symphony League. I guessed my general feeling of pessimism was natural considering the kind of people I had dealt with over the past few days.

Plan: Arrive and get back on the road within three days. Thank God for Chelsea and Colombine. It would be so wonderful seeing Colombine again. Rekindle our spirits, together, after this downer of a trip.

The further north we drove, the colder the weather. We hit hard winds and snow in the Texas panhandle and had to wait it out in a coffee shop. With chains on the tires, we left there at a slow pace and reached Pueblo well after dark. The snowfall was light but continuous. The winds died down and we were hopeful of continuing on to Fair Odds the next day. We tried to call Robert Edd but a continuous busy signal made me think that the weather had knocked down some telephone lines. An operator confirmed that some were down but couldn't tell me which ones.

We got up to a cold but clear overcast day and were quickly on the road again. I stopped in Denver, at Lt. Morales' request, to call the number he gave me. I saw nothing of the incidents in the morning paper.

"Lt. Wingate?"

A clear, deep voice. "Speaking."

"This is Xavier Thorn. Lt. Sal Morales with the New Orleans police asked me to call you when I came back through." I tried to sound positive...sane.

A second's hesitation. "I'm glad you called, Mr. Thorn. Give me a minute to get to another phone."

When he returned, he was pleasant. "Well, Mr. Thorn, did you have a good trip, considering the weather? Are you in Denver?"

"A restaurant south of town. Do you have anything to talk to me about?"

“A couple of things,” said Wingate. “I’m glad you called. We’ve talked to the sheriff, over in Logan, you know, close to where you live.”

“Right.”

“He promised me he’d keep an eye out up there as best he can. He wanted to know if you lived close to Robert Edd Carpenter.”

“I don’t want them involved.”

“No, of course not. He was just trying to figure out who you were. He said he’d get up there the first day the weather breaks and speak to you. He read about you in the papers.”

“Guess people will think I’m crazy. Might be better if I moved.”

“Not necessarily,” said Wingate. “I think most people got a real kick out of it. Hell, I know I did. I know what those people got their fingers in. It’s the people that’s paying for those expensive suits and fine automobiles while they’re selling our kids dope and spreading corruption from one end of the country to another. We got ‘em, right here in Denver.”

“Well, I appreciate your support. Are we going to be safe up there, in your opinion?”

“Well, we’ve been trying to find out if these Iron Horsemen motorcycle peoples – that’s our biggest bunch of no-goods – are working anything up, without using your name, of course, or telling ‘em anything that might give ‘em any ideas. You sure as hell don’t want to ask for trouble.”

“And what did you find out?”

“Hadn’t found out anything yet. I don’t think we have to worry too much right now, the weather being what it is, but we’ve got ways of finding out if anything is in the air. So we’ll keep our ears posted and you do the same. Understand you don’t have a phone though. Do you have a gun?”

I hesitated. “Yes.”

“Well... just in case. I’m not telling you to be trigger-happy, you understand. But let’s keep our eyes out.”

“Good idea. But we’re going to clear out of here in the next few days. We may stay gone the rest of the winter – on the road to different places. Lay low for awhile.”

“That’s a real good idea, Mr. Thorn,” he said. “They found those two men down in New Orleans, the ones that gave you the hard time.”

“Did they bring ‘em in?”

“Yeah. To the morgue. A couple of duck hunters found ‘em. Both of ‘em shot in the back of the head. Mafia trademark.”

We made our way slowly over the mountain roads. The news of the two thugs sobered Chelsea. And the more I considered they had gotten what they deserved, the more irrelevant it became in the face of the truths that it pounded home to me. The utter savagery of these people. Marcel’s blinding anger that would drive him to this extreme. Was it

really necessary to kill them? Because they were pictured on the evening news? And it was me who fingered them for it – finger of death. Chalk up two for me.

Killing the pair might not be such a big deal for them, I guessed. It was having the bodies found that would prove the hassle. Duck hunters. The alligators were probably supposed to get rid of the remains. Another news story for the media. Marcel was sinking a little deeper in the quicksand. Maybe I'd get him yet.

In the meantime, we had to get home, and we accomplished it with a minimum of stopping and sliding. The last few miles seemed the longest, but finally we pulled up to the Carpenters' store. A mantle of snow covered the landscape; a hesitant sun peeked through the cloudy day. We had barely touched the ground when Robert Edd appeared in the doorway, pulling open the squeaking screen door and clomping out onto the porch of the store.

"Lord Jesus," her said. "Missy! They're back. They're all right. Here's Thorn and Chelsea." He came down the steps and I saw that his face was battered, both eyes blackened, and his arm in a homemade sling.

They poured out their story to us, still scared and perplexed.

"I don't know how many there were, but they were all on motorcycles. Got here before the snow started good. I thought they was gonna kill us."

Robert Edd thought there were nine of them. They took over the household, brandishing knives, chains and at least three handguns, and one bit fellow had a shotgun. They roughed him up when he didn't provide the information they wanted, my whereabouts. Robert Edd told them we were still in New Orleans, and when they trussed up Missy and hung her from a ceiling rafter and started taking off her clothes, he told them about the cabin. They didn't rape her. The big one ordered them off, and told Robert Edd if they had any problems they would be back to do much worse to them and burn down the store. They flattened all of his tires, pillaged the store and ripped out the phone. They bound and gagged them both, but Robert Edd had finally worked free. He had been hoping to flag down a vehicle.

But where was Colombine? Where? Where?

"Lord, I don't know, Xavier. She was out back when they come up. She was havin' a great time in the snow. She never came back in and I didn't tell 'em about her of course. So we ain't seen her. I reckon she ran, down the highway, or maybe up to the cabin. I don't know."

I stormed outside, plodding over the snow into the backyard, then to the side of the house, following the partially covered tracks in the snow that might be hers, seeing the half-built snowman and the area of scuffled and scooped snow where she had worked. On the ground lay a ball of snow fashioned into the intended head, two dark eyes and a nose made of wood chips and a grin formed from a twisted stick that now appeared demonic. Her tracks were unmistakable to the window, where she must have heard or seen the horror inside, then off toward the cabin, up the hill where they blended with the torn paths of motorcycles that had cut through the snow and followed her up the path.

I was quickly back inside.

"How long have they been gone?" I demanded impatiently, when I told them what I had discovered.

"they got up and left around eight or eight-thirty. We was tied up all night. They was headin' up there to burn down the place, they said. Then the one that was runnin' things, he said you was already dead, that their friends killed you in New Orleans, and a woman, and said they was just moppin' up. By that time, I didn't know what to believe."

“What was your plan, Robert Edd? What were you going to do?” I looked at my watch. It was eleven forty-five. They had already reached the cabin.

“I was waiting on a car or truck to come by,” he said. “I was gonna flag it down and me and Missy were gonna go somewhere can call the sheriff. They was just one pickup come by and I got out to the road too late to flag it down.”

“Now you can take the van,” I said. “Call the sheriff and call this detective in Denver.” I thrust the note at him. “I’ll never be able to say I’m sorry enough times for what’s happened, but right now I’ve got to go after Colombine. Please, take Chelsea too, and get our of here where it’s safe.”

“Like hell,” Chelsea retorted. ”I’m going with you.”

“No. hell no,” I said. “I’ve got to take off on foot. I’ve got one pistol. It’ll be a hellva lot better if I go alone.”

“We’ve been through all this bullshit, Thorn,” she said defiantly. “You’re gonna treat me like and equal – with respect, God dammit!” She got up from her knees beside Missy, where she had been comforting her, and strode confidently toward me. “I’m mad took dammit! This thing was already boiling inside me just like you, and I’m damn sure not going to let you have all the fun when you catch up to these mother fucker.”

I stared at her to see if she meant it.

“Where’s your rifle, Robert Edd?” she demanded.

“They took it. Ya’ll ought to just come with us and let the police handle it. Them damned people is dangerous.”

“No time to wait. Every minute counts,” I said. “Come on, Chelsea. I’ll worry about you but we’re partners.”

“Damn right,” she said. “It’s time to quit worrying and start kickin’ some ass.”

“There’s an ole shotgun out in the woodshed, if it’s still there,” said Robert Edd. “Belonged to my daddy. An’ they oughta be some shells therein the chiffrobe.”

It was there, dusty but serviceable. I loaded both barrels and pocketed the other five shells.

I got the pistol and gave it to Chelsea. We bundled up in our warmest clothes, hastily stashed food, matches, binoculars and a flashlight in two daypacks, tied sleeping bags under them, and struck out into the snow-covered country, following the torn path of the bikers. My gut had the empty feel of fear, but the aching worry for Colombine and the burning desire for vengeance was much stronger. This time, there were no reporters or policemen. We were on our own. In the end, I figured, that’s the way it always happens. You can’t lean on a bunch of manmade laws and rules and regulations and contrivances forever. You have to fight your own battles sooner or later. It always comes down to you.

Chapter 20; NO MERCY

We plodded uphill in the snow, feet getting colder, panting misty breath as we grew bone-weary. I knew we had to hurry, had precious little time to catch our breath on the trail for fear that Colombine had fallen into their clutches.

If she had gone back to the cabin, then they either had found her there, or else she had escaped into the snow swept wilderness. We had to be concerned with the numbing cold that would come with nightfall. Colombine was in dander either way.

Finally, we had to stop, just for a moment, to recapture our wind after a long, steady uphill stretch.

Chelsea looked at me, red-faced, stressed, worried, out –of-breath. “What are we going to do when we get there? Have you got a plan?”

“Try to surprise the. Kill them if we can, anyway we can,” I panted. “We’ve got to worry first about Colombine. If they’ve got her, we’ve got to be careful, try to surprise the, try to get her free.”

“Do you think they’ll burn the cabin?”

“Hell, no. Not until they’re through with it. The bastards are in there where it’s warm.”

“There’s too damned many of them,” she said.

“Yeah,” I replied matter-of-factly. “We’ll just kill all of them we can.”

We plodded on.

We had covered almost three-quarters of the distance, I estimated, when we first heard the noise. Like a chainsaw. Or a lawnmower, no? It was getting louder. Of course, it was a motorcycle, one or...more. Within a minute I was convinced that there was more than one and coming toward us.

We rushed forward to find a good place to ambush them. It was a huge overhanging boulder by the old roadbed. We took cover behind it and I climbed to a vantage point from where I could peek over. I could see a long stretch of trail from there. The guttural growls grew louder. I made a hurried pan with Chelsea.

The obscene growling grew ever-louder, defiling the beautiful winter landscape. Like barbaric cretins, the cycles had invaded Pan’s majestic kingdom with their ugly evil. I was the first biker appear, then another, as they tore their way noisily through the mud and snow. The ripped and rutted earth would long be befouled by their damned machines. And that was all, two of them.

I showed Chelsea two fingers from my perch. I slid down to join her and await the confrontation. Louder. And louder. My hand sweated on the trigger. They were upon us. No room for error.

I stepped out quickly, in front of the first bike. He skidded to a mushy halt.

His wide eyes stared at the shotgun. I held it loosely, its barrel almost touching the snow. He had a Fu Manchu mustache curled around his lips and bushy black eyebrows. Black leather jacket festooned with filthy patches, a swastika. An angry teeth-gritting sneer. He revved the bike into a vulgar roar and leaped forward. My barrel swung up.

I pressed the trigger and blew him backwards. Off the seat, stepping aside quickly to avoid the flying cycle. It landed hard on its side, skidding, tearing up clumps of snow.

“Stop, asshole!” I yelled at the next one. “Don’t move a muscle.”

He froze at my command, staring wide-eyed at me, and at Chelsea leveling the pistol on him. The echo of the shotgun blast reverberated through the trees. I looked through the dissipating cloud of smoke to see that he was scared, almost panicked.

The other, fallen in a heap, quivered his last gasp of life, then fell still. The rumbling bike kicked and growled on its side, stalled helplessly and squalling about it. I walked over calmly and clicked it off.

I walked forward then to the second, one, eyeing the torn body. Red splatters gashed across the snow. The second one sat thunderstruck. He had the pointed face of a rodent, tiny pursed lips, a scraggly stubble of dark beard and cloudy eyes. He held his hands up, trembling and jerking, sitting start still and stoop-shouldered astride his customized Harley.

I cocked the second barrel of the shotgun demonstratively, and stuck it in his face. I eased forward and clicked off his ignition.

“Lift them higher,” I said with measured calm. He thrust both arms skyward. I frisked him and found a pistol in his coat pocket, a white-handled snub-nosed .22.

“I have a few questions.” I said softly. “If I get the answers I need, I won’t feel like I have to blow you away like your friend her. Do you understand?”

The biker’s face quivered. He couldn’t speak, but he nodded in quick little jerks.

“You see I really needed to ex-out our comrade here, so you would believe that I’m serious, okay?”

Another jerky nod.

“There’s a blonde-haired girl up there. Where is she?”

“She ran. She ran and got away. She ain’t at the cabin. Buster sent some of us to fend her, followin’ the tracks, but they didn’t. They couldn’t find her and come back.”

“Which way? Which way did she go?”

“Don’t know, just up. Just cleared outta there. I swear she ain’t been hurt.”

“How many more are up there? How many of you?”

“Well...seven...please, mister. We had to do what Buster said. You let me go ‘an I’ll never come back here. I won’t never say nothin’.” His eyes glanced nervously at his fallen cohort. The blood splatters had sunk into dark holes in the snow.

Chelsea was pulling another pistol from the crumpled body – a .45 this time. Excellent. A good piece. And something else – one of my grenades.

“They found your stash,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said, “I was afraid of that.” I hadn’t taken my eyes off the biker for more and a split-second. “All right, Scumbag. What were you doin’ comin’ back down?”

“Buster...he decided not to burn the place and come back. They...were gonna wait there for a while, overnight, and see if you come back, or that girl. It was you they was after, I reckon. He sent us back down to get that other couple. He wanted ’em brung up here. He’s scared they was gonna get loose and get away.”

“Guess it was too good a hideout to pass up,” I said to Chelsea. “They just figured the Carpenters were the only people that could get ‘em in trouble.”

“That’s right,” blurted the biker. “He figured we’d close up the store, get some of the stuff out of it, and get the fellow to leave a note that would tell ya’ll to come on up. He done wrote it out for me to get him to copy. But it wasn’t my idea, none of this. Oh, man, you got to do what they say. I ain’t never been mixed up in nothin’ like this before. You got to believe me.”

“What are they planning for me when I get there?”

“I don’t know. I swear it. They got the machine guns of yours and hand grenades and stuff. I reckon they just figured they’d wait for a while and shoot it out with you. Buster said...he said they was a big price on your head. Somebody done give him a little of the money. He said they was lots more.”

Chelsea stepped up closer. “You think that bastard’s tellin’ the truth about her?” Her chief concern, as mine, was still with Colombine.

“I don’t know. If she’s out tonight...it’s tool damned cold up here unless she’s really wrapped up.”

“We got to get moving.” Chelsea was anxious.

“We’ve got to deal with this character first. He’s too damn much trouble to bring along. I don’t think he’s worth shit as a bargaining tool. We could tie him up here, but he’d probably freeze to death.”

“We can’t let him go,” she said with certainty. “He’ll make trouble.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he’ll go back to Robert Edd’s and hassle them again. Maybe he’ll get back and get some of his asshole friends.”

“Not likely,” I said, still undecided.

“Please,” begged the biker. “I won’t cause nobody no trouble.”

“Shut the fuck up,” I said. “If we could rig up a chain, we could chain him to a tree, with some firewood and matches until the police come.”

“We’re partners, Thorn. Let’s vote on it.”

“Vote” What the hell do you mean?”

She stared at me coldly. “We don’t have time for all this bullshit.”

“So vote,” I said. “What’s your vote?”

She leveled the .45 and fired. The shock-eyed biker clutched at his torn jacket, leaned crazily and fell face over, with the bike, into the snow.

“One less biker, one less problem,” she said calmly.

I eased down the hammer of the shotgun and looked at her. “You really know how to make your vote count,” I said. “Remind me to always run on your ticket.”

We searched the bodies. I found my gold chain with the peace symbol, the one that Delores gave me for Christmas a long time ago, on the weasel-faced one.

Peace. I remembered my naïve innocence in the sixties. Where had it gone? Who was this desperate and angry man inside me? Who was the woman beside me, too much like me almost an alter-ego in feminine wrap – and, like me, a cold-blooded killer?

I didn’t care. Colombine was all I cared about, beautiful, innocent Colombine. I hid my teary eyes from Chelsea while we pulled the bodies and bikes behind the boulder, pushing over great globs of snow to cover all of it.

I didn’t want to use the motorcycles for the remaining distance. Already, the guns may have alerted them. We had to move quickly and quietly on foot the remaining distance. And when we got there, I knew my guilty tears must be frozen back to anger.

We were racing time. The late afternoon was bringing a low canopy of dark clouds. It seemed they were sitting right over our heads, churning and rolling from within, boiling a devil’s brew. The clouds shadowed out all sunlight, would soon send temperatures plummeting with the first signs of darkness, the killing cold. I hoped desperately there would be more snowfall. And I hoped just as desperately the Colombine had her sleeping bag. It certainly seemed unlikely that we could roust seven tough bikers out of our cabin. I wondered if we could expect police to try to make it up the mountain this afternoon, or tonight. I taxed my brain on the trail, as Chelsea must have been, to guess the response of the police to Robert Edd’s story, and the most likely place where Colombine would have fled.

The best guess for Colombine was a shallow cave, an effective wind shelter where she had climbed before, high up in the rocks from the cabin and safe from motorcycle pursuit. It was the only logical place Chelsea and I agreed to look. We thought it possible that she could walk a wide arc to reach the downhill trail at some point. She would have to ford the stream. In that unlikely case, we could even run into her on the trail. Please, God, let her be just up ahead. But I realized I had no right to pray for anything. It was just Chelsea and me in this one. I wasn’t even sure we were on the same side with Pan any more.

As for the police, I assumed that the sheriff's office might radio from a helicopter, probably out of Denver. I wondered if the sheriff's deputies or state troopers might be trying to get up by foot or snowmobile. I wondered if a helicopter was available, and whether it could even fly in this heavy overcast.

Chelsea and I decide we might climb to the sheltered overlook, but it was difficult and would take a lot of time. But if Colombine was there, the nightmare was over. We could get through the night and escape with sunrise, leaving the bikers to take it and be damned.

On the other hand, we decided the weasel could have been lying. Her safety would be the one thing he would lie about because he would figure I would blast him if he admitted she was dead or hurt. She could still be in the cabin, being raped and tortured. It would be extremely difficult to get her out, considering they had my two fully-automatic Uzi nine millimeter submachine guns and forty fifty-shot clips, as well as a cache of seven more grenades, three teargas canisters and what every guns and knives they brought with them.

Against that array we could muster one grenade, three pistols and the aged shotgun, and most importantly the element of offense, surprise. We had the initiative. We had to make it count for all it could. We had to think it through, Chelsea and I together, and make it work.

We left the trail near the cabin and fought our way through the deep snow of the surrounding forest, tearing through drifts and low limbs to make our way to a tree-shrouded overlook. I took the binoculars and sighted on it. The black Harleys were clustered to the left of the front door, the cabin's only entrance. They could be blown up with the grenade, but the bikers would then have nothing to escape on. We might be thankful for some of them to retreat in the end.

I thought I could hear an occasional loud voice inside, but from the distance of the overlook couldn't be sure.

The long minutes we were using in surveillance was wearing my patience, and Chelsea's. But I was waiting for a sign, a clue with which I could read the situation. Was Colombine there or not?

We could wait a while for a sign, then would still have time to climb to the shelter before pitch dark. But we couldn't dally long here. We had to take the initiative or Pan was going to take it. The freezing night would soon be upon us. And it was as merciless as the rest of us.

Chapter 21; BLOOD AND SNOW

The cabin door opened and a rangy, red-haired man in a down jacket stepped outside, fumbling with his zipper.

“You ain’t satisfied?” he was heard to say. “Get out here and look yourself. It’s cold as a God damned well digger’s ass.”

He was urinating. A second man, bearded, stepped out to join him. A third face was in the threshold. “You could close the fuckin’ door.”

Someone inside the house turned the attention of the man in the doorway, who turned back and said something, and then turned back to the men peeing in the snow. “Buster said come back inside. If she sees your ugly ass out here, she damned sure ain’t comin’ back.”

“Aw, fuck off, Greasy,” one of them replied, finally shaking his organ vehemently, squatting slightly as he tucked it away and zipped. The two of them scurried back inside with a parting curse.

“God damn, it’s cold!”

“Shit fire,” said the other. “Save matches.”

It was the gray twilight before darkness, a time for ghostly images and a blueish aura on the fresh snow. The cabin looked warm and cozy from the outside, where the grueling cold was beginning to bear down for the night, embrace all of nature in its biting grip.

The door opened and a dark figure emerged, closing the door behind him. He stepped cautiously through the snow, boots crunching, and made his way to the tiny wooden outhouse back near the woodshed. He pulled from his coat pocket a roll of paper, stepped inside and closed the door.

A moment later the door opened. I stared straight into his surprised eyes, stuffed my .38 caliber revolver into his coat and pulled the trigger.

“What the hell was that?” Two faces were at the door. There. Two to them stepped cautiously outside, both with weapons.

“Lynch!”

No answer.

“Lynch!”

“That son-of-a-bitch’s shot himself.”

“Bullshit! Keep your eyes peeled.”

“That was a shot. I know damn well.”

“Hell, yes. I heard it.”

“You’re crazy as hell. Lynch!”

“All right, get outta the door. Get outta the fuckin’ door.”

“You go around that way. Come on. We’ll meet you around back.”

“He’s in the can.”

“I know he’s in the God damned can. You go around that way.”

One of them hugged the cabin wall. Two more of them stood at the door.

“Ya’ll are getting fuckin’ paranoid. That was a God damn limb breakin’. The fuckin’ snow’s weightin’ ‘em down.”

“Lynch?”

“Where the hell’s Lynch then?”

“We ain’t takin’ no chances.”

“Lynch! Where the fuck are you?”

The three men rejoined behind the cabin.

“Hell, maybe he fell in. Where is the fuckin’ john?”

It’s around back. Snake, you see anything back there?”

“One of them scurried back inside. “I got to get my coat.”

“I don’t see nothin’. Lynch, you all right?” They stood together, cautiously, the two submachine guns scanning the dark landscape. The tiny outhouse sat with its peaceful mantle of snow.

The one in the front came back out the door to join the other two, brandishing a pistol. He was followed by the seventh man, a huge, hulking mass in along fur coat and carrying a large-barreled shotgun strapped to his shoulder. He scanned the surrounding landscape and stepped out with the other four.

“Ya’ll stay inside, “ he told someone at the door. “Get your guns and plant yourself in them windows.”

In the back, one of the men moved cautiously to the side of the outhouse. The other two covered him with the machine guns. He poked at the door with his rifle barrel once...twice, than used it to pull it open.

They stared at Lynch’s body, slumped forward on the seat, head down, pants down.

“Lynch!”

“God damn, Lynch! He’s shot. He’s dead.”

The big man in the fur coat called to them. “All right, God dammit! Spray them trees.” He leveled the shotgun and fired a thunderous blast into the woodshed wall. It exploded into splinters.

The air quickly became a thundering cacophony of shellfire. Fiery blasts tore through the trees, sending snow flurrying, and ripped splintered holes across the woodshed.

“All right,” hollered the big man. “Get him out of there. That’s enough. Get him inside.” He wheeled and pushed one of the men in front of him and they made their way back toward the front.

Two of them reached in to pull at the body, drag it out. One of them had slung one of my Uzi’s on his shoulder. From the cabin roof, I lobbed the grenade. It landed just behind them, almost under their feet.

“God damn. Is he tied up?”

“What was that noise?”

The outhouse exploded into sky-blown debris. I was already clamoring across the snow-covered roof. I heard Chelsea’s opening fire, once, twice, into the front doorway. With a rush, the huge snowdrift on the roof collapsed in front of me, sliding down to inundate the front yard and the scrambling bikers. A hail of shattered wood fell around me.

I grabbed for the stone chimney and braced myself there with the revolver. It was rough and warm from the fireplace fire, smoke billowing. Chelsea’s fie kept ringing. I heard a loud grunt of pain. Run! Dammit! Run Chelsea! She was supposed to fire a few times with the .45 and retreat fast – haul ass to the second firing position.

Now they were firing back, in the direction of Chelsea's shots. I hoped she had hit at least one of them. It was my turn. I leaned against the chimney. One of them emerged with the other Uzi, spraying the trees with a barrage of streaking shots.

I gripped the revolver hard and fired – once, twice – and leaped back to cover. Flying bullets sprayed the roof, tearing chunks from the rock chimney. I covered behind it. Missed the son-of-a-bitch. Missed!

I heard muffled cursing, hurrying footsteps, daring not look. The cabin door slammed shut and I heard loud rumblings inside. I struggled in my cramped position to get my heavy jacket off. The door flew open again. More gunfire into the woods.

“Cover, me,” someone yelled. “I’m goin’ after that bastard!”

They were back outside – at least one. I had reached the roof by an overhanging limb of the elm tree. Maybe he would try it. I sat quietly, searching the roof edge with the pistol barrel. No. He would move away from the cabin, to a vantage point for seeing me.

I heard window glass shattering. More gunfire directed at Chelsea's last position. I couldn't hear the man outside. He had to be behind the cabin now. He would get position and fire another salvo all over me. Where the hell was the guy? Cautiously, I eased myself around to the front of the chimney and wrapped my coat over the top, smothering the billowing smoke, still searching wide-eyed for a sign of anything, still gripping the pistol.

Everything had suddenly become quiet. I felt doomed. It was too dark to see. The outhouse was a smoldering ruin. They were going to blast me off the roof. Fuck it! I held the coat tightly, stifling the smoke as best I could, some of it still escaping around the fabric and burning my eyes. Then there was cursing inside, something crashed to the floor. I clutched the pistol and held my weight over the coat, forcing down the smoke. Choke 'em out.

Chelsea should have reached the second vantage point, if she hadn't been hit. I heard more muffled curses inside.

“Son-of-a-bitch...burnin’ down...stopped up the flue...blow that son-of-a-bitch...” Snatches of words.

The thundering boom of the shotgun blew a hole under me, sending wood shingles flying. A not pain tore through my leg. My grip loosened and I began sliding, helplessly, off the roof, leaving my coat over the chimney. I skidded, trying in vain to grab a finger hold, still gripping the pistol, scraping my sliding knuckles painfully down the rough shingles. Then I was hanging there, spread-eagled, feet hanging off the front side of the cabin.

Another shotgun blast blew a gaping hole in the roof in front of me.

Then a volley from the Uzi tore across the chimney from the back and whizzed by. I was hanging precariously, in desperate shape. My coat still blocked the flue, smoking as if it would catch fire any second. Smoke billowed out the shattered windows. Inside, I heard coughing, another loud crash to the floor.

A light clicked on, illuminating the chimney in harsh light from behind, then racing all over the roof above me.

“We got him! He’s gone!”

“Watch out now.” A second voice. The light beam whipped here and there, rapidly across the roof. I cocked the hammer.

I heard a loud clomp on to the back of the roof, a leap from the elm tree. Then another clomp. Damn! Two of them. I clung there with my hurting fingers, considered letting go for a second to fall in front of the cabin. But they would shoot me from the window. I was trapped.

And where was Chelsea? Maybe she was hit, badly, dead. My leg was mostly numb, but a throbbing pain was beginning to take hold. I heard steps across the roof, heavy ones.

I aimed the pistol as best I could, barely clinging to the steep slope, scraped knuckles stinging. A bright light struck my eyes suddenly, blinding me. I fired quickly, then fired again into the glare. A cry of pain. The heavy flashlight hit the roof and bounced over me. The biker plunged forward, head-first, on top of me, smashing my face into the shingles, and we skidded off the roof, airborne for an instant and then landing squarely on my back on the snow-covered ground.

I gasped, the breath knocked out of me. Helpless. I had lost the pistol.

Another window shattered somewhere. Smoke poured out the front one. I was dazed but realized someone was scrambling out the back one. I tried to regain my breath and looked up. There was a dim outline on the roof, retrieving the stub-barreled Uzi in front of him. I rolled over and groped desperately for the pistol in the snow, under the dead biker, dragging my blood-splattered leg. It was lost. I stared at my hand, covered with snow and blood.

My smoking coat came flying off the roof and plopped into a steaming mass nearby. I heard firm, hard steps on the wood shingles.

Damn!

I realized for the first time that the flashlight lay nearby, casting a beam of light directly on me. I stared blindly into its betraying glare, looked back up to see the shadowy figure standing on the front of the roof.

“You sorry son-of-a-bitch,” the man growled. “I’m gonna blow ‘you ass into a million pieces.”

A loud boom split the air. Then another. I clenched my eyes shut, heard an incredible gasp for breath, and opened them to see the dark shadow crash heavily onto the ground beside me, and roll over slightly to reveal the wide, stricken eyes of the dying. He wheezed hard and jerked a final rigor before falling still, staring yet in shocked surprise.

I struggled to look around. Chelsea stepped out of the shadows with the shotgun.

I looked at the carnage for the first time. Two lifeless bodies lay beside me, both fallen from the roof. Then I heard the labored breathing of a third shadowy mass over behind the clustered cycles, propped against the cabin, soaked in blood. She walked past me deliberately, feet crunching in the snow, paying me no heed, step by measured step. She stood finally in front of him.

I rolled over and dragged myself forward, grappling for the light. I grasped it and trained it on the downed biker. It was the tall one with the red hair. He was spent, harrowed. He reached a feeble bloody hand up from his chest. I flinched at the thundering boom of the .45, looked up again slowly to see that the body had slumped forward.

I struggled to get on my feet, able to support no weight on my left leg. It was beginning to hurt badly. I saw that it was mangled, and embedded with heavy shot. I pulled myself up to stand, weaving, on my right leg, and limped, painfully, to pick up the Uzi, then to the door. I hugged the wall beside it, pushed it open cautiously and was engulfed in the rolling smoke.

It was a shambles inside, but empty. The last one, the big man in the long fur coat, had torn his way out the back window and escaped into the frigid night. But there were blood splatters on the sill.

I struggled back to the door in time to see Chelsea standing in the light from the doorway. She appeared in shock. I saw for the first time that she was bleeding from her left arm, which dangled limply, dripping blood on the white snow, staring at me, or through me.

She held up the .45 in front of her, as if to question its very existence, staring at it dumbly for a few seconds, then dropping it in the snow. Then she collapsed.

Chapter 22; AFTERSHOCKS

Somehow I was able to take control. I revived Chelsea from her faint and we helped each other inside. With one of them at large, even though apparently wounded, I locked the door and we stayed clear of the windows. I kept the Uzi close at hand.

Chelsea's shoulder had only a flesh wound. The bullet tore through the muscle and exited and would cause no problem. Once we stopped the bleeding and bandaged the wound, we turned the first aid resources to my leg. It was peppered with an array of painfully embedded pellets from the shotgun, some of which we could remove while I grimaced and sweated. It was an ugly mess, but we had been damned lucky. I had no complaints.

Colombine must still be out there though, and I didn't know what protection she had from the cold. I hopped across the closet where we stashed our outdoor gear, jerked it open and rifled through it impatiently.

My heart sank. Her sleeping bag was there. Useless to her. I stared dumbly at it.

"I've got to go out there. I've got to find her," I said.

Chelsea was huddled in front of our refurbished fire. "You can't walk, Xavier. You'll die out there. Or that guy will shoot you before you get a hundred yards."

Angrily, I hurled the sleeping bag across the room.

"We've got to get these windows boarded up," Chelsea. "He may be back. We've just got to hope she went down the trail and got back, or found an extra-warm hole for the night."

I stared at her bitterly. There was nothing to say in reply, no sensible way to search for her. Our own survival here depended on our good sense, making the right decisions. So we boarded the window. We made coffee and cleared some of the biker's rubble. Such irony. To kill them and then have it clean up after them. I successfully battled remorse.

I wished I could pray for Colombine, a natural inclination when you're helpless to act. But I had lost favor with the one true God. And Pan. Well, that old natural wonder was still as impartial as ever. We fought and survived tonight, but it was going to be a freezing night out there either way, and the wilderness will be just as powerfully impassive as it always had been. Maybe Pan was only a play God, the radiant and ever-changing face of nature, or all there is for us to behold in this world except for man's burdening contraptions. And so Pandom was officially evidence of the only true God, an empathetic master creation from that God for us to relate to, a face offered in lieu of the face of God, which we aren't worthy to see. And holding many lessons for us.

First of all was the powerful truth that God is impassive too, grand and wonderful like nature, in all places at all times, of course, but once beyond providing us the greatest gift of all –life – ready to let us all fend for ourselves, together. It's all up to us. Fight one another; nurture one another. Live our own lives.

And, in most cases, we'll make a mess of it.

I slept fitfully. With the first break of daylight, I was ready to search for Colombine. If I found the biker first, so be it. All the while, I wondered when we could expect the police. And I wondered why we had heard no more from the missing biker.

I expected that he might have sneaked back during the night to take one of the motorcycles, but there were still six. I tried to block out the pain in my leg by my busy, if stumbling, efforts to make ready. I dragged the bodies around back and covered them with the tarp that had shielded my weapons. I gathered together the remaining grenades and the tear gas canisters and buried them in the snow. Cops would be here soon, I guessed, and I didn't want to answer any more questions than necessary. And I damn sure didn't want them confiscating what was left.

I strapped on the only serviceable Uzi and Chelsea took one of the biker's rifles. Hurting no less than me, she nevertheless insisted on searching too, knowing she was a more expert rider and determining, with a few rounds on the chopper, that she could handle it with her shoulder wound.

We embarked in our own directions. We had decided that Chelsea would go uphill, searching for tracks. If necessary or deemed wise, she would climb up the rocky outcroppings to the cliff shelter that Colombine knew. I would be unable to make the climb with my damaged leg. If Colombine was in the shelter, Chelsea would fire once; if not, twice.

In the meantime, I would make a wide arc on the flatter, more tree-studded terrain, looking for tracks and following them. My fire would provide the same message to Chelsea, and if either of us were attacked by the biker, our multiple fires would signal that situation and be an automatic call for help. We planned to cover a complete circumference around the cabin, leaving near six o'clock.

Morning clouds blew over quickly and allowed the sun to command an incredibly blue sky. I had much difficulty maneuvering the motorcycle, bogging in the drifts, falling painfully more than once, but persevering. I found tracks with a half-hour, up a tree-marked hillside picked with occasional outthrusts of rock. They might be perceived as affording shelter on a night such as last, and I was no more than a quarter-mile from the cabin. I could almost see it through the trees.

But I was soon confused. Tracks were torn this way and that in the shiny snow. I came to believe I was following the trails of animals. Soon enough, I realized that I was.

A hundred yards ahead, I saw three figures leaping away through the snow, large animals, furry, gray. They were wolves, I realized soon enough, and two of them stopped far up the side of the hill to eye me. Let them. No danger to me. But they could be a danger to Colombine, something I hadn't considered.

Ahead, I saw a dark figure lying in the snow. My heart beat faster. It was in an area mangled and mused-over from some major activity. I realized it was a body.

I pulled the motorcycle around between the dark form and the wolves, left the engine churning to dissuade them, and painfully lifted my splinted leg over the bike. I strapped on the Uzi, eyeing the wolves, and used my makeshift crutch to stumble to the body.

I soon realized it was a man, a large one, lying face down in the snow and revealing a bloody, fang-torn hand. The other biker – and very much dead. And without the fur coat. The wolves had apparently set upon the body as carnage but I had interrupted them. It could have been grislier had I arrived later.

Nearby, I found a shaded underside of a huge boulder. It was free of snow underneath, and spacious enough for several bodies. The dry dirt was soaked in blood, and it appeared that the wolves had dragged the body from under

there. Scattered limbs of pines and firs, torn from nearby trees, had helped protect him from the cold. But it was my guess that he had died during the night from his wounds, bleeding to death as opposed to the wolves doing the deed.

How could he survive the night anyway without the fur coat? We hadn't found it at the cabin and it was nowhere in the vicinity of the shelter or the body.

Tucked inside the shelter was the long-barreled shotgun that had ripped my leg. I threw it down angrily in the snow, having no use for it. I would have to come back soon enough for the detailed re-tracing and recounting that the police circus would demand. They could have the damned thing.

I still had to deal with the corpse, the distasteful task of somehow protecting it from the wolves for a while. I made my way over there again and nudged it over with my crutch. Underneath was Colombine's blood-soaked parka.

I arrived back at the cabin a little over an hour after leaving, shortly after seven o'clock, exhausted and cold, legs and feet wet and chilled, my face still tear-streaked from my anguish. I had searched the area thoroughly, finding no sign of Colombine, barely making it back with a near-empty gas tank. My greatest dread was telling Chelsea.

She had already returned and had no coffee waiting. I blurted out the story to her while I peeled off my wet boots and bloody bandages, hard to remember the words I chose I was so lost in grief. The world had ended. There could be no loss greater than Colombine, no one less deserving of a violent fate. If she is dead. If. If. I kept torturing myself with the word, knowing I had little reason to hope. Never wanting to see proof that she was gone.

Chelsea was shattered too, of course. She left me to recover from my physical ordeal and went outside in the sun. I applied clean bandages to my leg, which was now swollen, and the pain continued unabated. I wrapped it again and hopped to the door, stumbled outside.

She was out in the aspen grove. Sunlight sparkled over their snowy white trunks and bare limbs. I wanted to talk to her before the police arrived.

I was winded again when I reached her. She turned her red and teary face to me for only an instant before turning away again, but it revealed to me her pain, her remorse, her disenchantment, her disdain for me and all the horror and suffering I had caused them. I settled myself awkwardly on a rock.

"There's still a chance, Chelsea. We've got to pick up and keep going." I felt dumb, inadequate.

"I'm splittin', Thorn," she said. "I've got my shit on one of the bikes. I... just can't go through all this crap again."

"I'll meet you somewhere – later."

"No," she said quickly. "I don't think so." She turned to me. "I can't deal with this kind of life, Thorn. They're never gonna let you go. I don't even know if you can let them go."

"I didn't want any of this to happen, Chelsea. We just got caught up in it. I realize it's a lot my fault but we can go somewhere else. We can get away. You've got to believe that."

"You can't get away from yourself. That's the problem," she said.

"What do you mean?"

“I don’t know,” she said impatiently. “I don’t know that I mean. It’s too damn hard to think about right now. I’ve got to take off. I’ve got to get on the road again. That’s where I belong. I can’t ever look at this place in the same way again. And...it’s damned hard just lookin’ at you.”

Her words cut me. I had lost her.

“Chelsea, please, we need each other right now. More than ever. We can make out a lot better if we’re together. Let me meet you...anywhere you say, in a week. Get away and let me handle the hassle here, and we’ll look everywhere, I swear to God, to try to find Colombine. Give me another chance. Please.”

“We had our chance here and we blew it,” she said defiantly. “We let it all turn to shit on us. And now we’ve had our fill of adventure...action, as naïve as we were, and I’m sick to death of it. I got no satisfaction out of this. We killed these damn people and we lost our souls doin’ it. That’s what I feel right now. We’re as hard as your precious mountain rocks, and we’re as cold-hearted as the north winds. I feel poisoned, really, and it’s a burden I’m gonna have to live with the rest of my life...while I’m remembering how Colombine would be alive if it weren’t for us.”

She got up. “I can’t stay here. I got to go.”

“I can’t believe you’re gonna ditch me now,” I argued. “We made the plan together. We did it together, now we’ve got to put the tragedy behind us and work through it. I love you and I just want to take care of you – form no on.”

“Yeah,” she said, “you’ve done a damn good job of it so far.”

We heard a whirring noise in the sky, the steady, unmistakable flapping of helicopter blades. I looked upward, but didn’t see it. Chelsea got up and made her way quickly toward the cabin.

“Chelsea! Wait!”

Then I saw the helicopter, marked with police insignia, appearing on the southern horizon. Chelsea was already trying to kick-start one of the bikes. I made my way toward her, painfully.

“Chelsea, please give me a chance.”

The cycle kicked into a loud roar. She revved it briefly and rolled it around. Her gear was all tied neatly on the back. I continued to limp toward her, as fast as I could, knowing my helpless protests were in vain. But before I could reach her, she burst away, spinning a snowy rut. I watched helplessly as she tore a rapid trail down the hill, and finally out of sight.

The events I have recounted happened principally in 1983. It would be more than a year before I saw either of them again.

Chapter 23; FAME IS FLEETING

The rest of that winter seems almost a blur in my memory. I suppose I spent much of it in a fog, a self-induced delirium, to keep from really coming to grips with what I had done.

A few scenes in the next year come to mind.

State trooper, bundled in blue, dark sunshades, in front of me, pulling off gloves.

“Are you saying you killed all these people yourself?”

I nodded.

“And who was that on the motorcycle – the one that lit out of here?”

“A friend. She didn’t have anything to do with it, so she didn’t want to get involved.”

I would lie about several other things, but essentially I told the truth.

“Damn, fella. We didn’t think you’d try to take on the whole bunch of ‘em by yourself. We figured you’d wait until we could get up here. We’ve got some more men right behind us, just down the trail.”

Maybe if the helicopter had been able to get here last night. But it was up near Steamboat Springs, looking for some lost hikers.

Deputies. More troopers. I had hidden the only serviceable machine gun, and the grenades and tear gas canisters. A paramedic treated my leg. I carried them to the other dead biker, to Colombine’s bloody parka, both stuffed again into the rock shelter and covered with limbs.

We never found Colombine.

Staring in shock at the Denver paper...

MICHIGAN STUDENTS PICK UP MAFIA PIE CHALLENGE

ANN ARBOR, Mich. (AP) – a group of University of Michigan fraternity members pelted a reputed underworld figure and two bodyguards with pies Tuesday evening outside a suburban restaurant in Detroit.

SOUTH ALABAMA STUDENTS PUBLISH DIRECTORY TO REPUTED ‘DIXIE MAFIA’

MOBILE, Ala. (AP) – The student newspaper at the University of South Alabama published a list of persons reputed to be members of the so-called “Dixie Mafia” this week and called for other student papers throughout the country to print localized lists of known crime syndicate members.

Executive Editor Todd Gatling called for students to break out of a pattern of “trivialism,” and support the campaign of vigilante mountain man Xavier Thorn.

Meanwhile, Thorn, 40, has disappeared into the Rocky Mountains following last Thursday night’s pitched gun battle at and near his mountain cabin that left nine members of a Denver motorcycle gang dead. He was released without being charged.

MIAMI STUDENTS REPELLED BY VALACHIA BODYGUARDS

MIAMI BEACH, Fla. (AP) – Bodyguards of reputed Cosa Nostra boss Nick Valachia staved off the pie-wielding attack of a group of University of Miami students Saturday night, allowing the Miami businessman to escape out the back door of a Miami Beach restaurant.

It was the ninth such attack in the past week as momentum seemed to be gaining among college students nationwide to make their mark in the vigilante “Mafia Pie Project.”

Meanwhile, there is still no word as to the whereabouts of Xavier Thorn, the 40-year old Colorado mountain man who exploded onto the national scene in October with a successful pie attack on a New Orleans crime syndicate figure.

Thorn has not been seen since being released in the night by Denver police, questioned but cleared of all charges in the shooting deaths of nine members of a Denver motorcycle gang.

Lt. Winfield: “You can be notorious if you want to. You can be famous. But I personally feel like you’re a marked man. They won’t rest until they get you. It’d be better if you could just drop off the face of the earth.”

“Yeah,” I said. “that’s what I want to do. The image is a lot stronger than the man.”

SENATE COMMITTEE OPENS HEARING ON MOB TIES

Chairman Hughes Promises Full Investigation of Cosa Nostra.

Dear Robert Edd and Missy,

Mountains are beautiful around here. Tropical birds and foliage. Met a wonderful Mexican family. They fed me iguana for dinner. Ugh! But okay. Plan to stay longer, go further south. Hope you're still saving the clippings. The politicians will probably just talk it to death. Still feel bad for hurting you. God bless you.

It was a cold and wet March night in New Orleans. Chilling rain, turning to ice, fell all around me.

My head was no longer the next thing to bald. My close-cropped stubble and grown into a long, gray-streaked ponytail, tied back with a bandana. My beard had become a bushy black mustache and sideburns.

The Garden District mansion had white columns and finely-manicured ground, heavy with azaleas and huge, spreading magnolia trees. I was surrounded, too, by the high brick and wrought iron fence, and heavy iron gate which opened and closed electronically.

Carle Marcel's long gray luxury car rolled up to the gate. He was alone, except for the driver, the gate began pulling apart. Marcel casually glanced to his left, outside in the darkness, and saw me peek around a huge oak tree next to the sidewalk. I winked at him.

He looked briefly confused. A grenade rolled under the waiting auto and came to rest under the gas tank.

NEW ORLEANS CRIME FIGURE DIES IN CAR BOMB BLAST

New Orleans, LA. (AP) – Carlo Marcel, New Orleans businessman and reputed Cosa Nostra Don died, along with his driver, Friday night when a shrapnel-type explosive destroyed his car as he waited for the gate to open in front of his home.

Marcel, whose name became known nationwide last year as the first victim of the notorious Mafia Pie Project, was killed instantly when the explosive device, apparently planted on the street, ignited the gas tank of his luxury automobile and exploded it into flames.

I listened to the barmaids from my dark corner. The bar was almost empty.

“They ain't never gonna find who done it. Hell, it coulda' been some of his own people.”

“Well, I'll tell you. As worked up as people has gotten about this pie throwin' it coulda' been anybody. Every crazy in the country's got cranked up.”

“Binger than streakin' ever was.”

“Hell, I think it's funny. It's about time somebody done sumpin' about them fat cats.”

“Well, like the Bible says, you live by the sword, you die by the sword.”

OMNIBUS CRIME BILL GETS HOUSE APPROVAL

A rainy night down in the Louisiana marsh country, south of Houma. It was more shack than restaurant. I knew they would have a good pot of gumbo. It was smoky and the beer flowed. I liked to listen to the people.

I decided to stay in the motel next door. I ran over there in the rain, leaping over puddles.

The room smelled musty and bed creaked. A green chameleon climbed down the wall and looked at me.

I looked back. I was on the phone.

“Robert Edd...yeah, it’s me. No word about Colombine yet?...Chelsea?...No...Fine...Everything’s...fine. Just wanted to check in...Ya’ll doin’ all right?”

And when I hung up and looked back, the chameleon was gone. So what?

XAVIER THORN HERMIT IN CANADIAN WILDS

Residents see busy-bearded recluse pilfering garbage

(Special to American After Midnight).

I read it and sipped a pina colada.

“Senor? Beg your pardon, senor.”

“Yeah. What is it?”

“The car is here, Senor...to carry you to Boys Town.”

“Gracious. Tell him I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Robert Edd...Yeah...It’s a bad connection...Yeah...I’m calling from Mexico...Mexico! No news, I guess.”

In the spring of 1985, I came up out of the south, imagining the glorious profusions of flowers and waterflow in the Rocky Mountains. It felt like going home.

“Missy. Look who’s here.”

“Well, well, Lord have mercy, stranger...”

Tears came to my eyes when I took her in my arms. They welled up from deep inside me. “Missy, you’re an angel.”

“We’re glad you’re back, Xavier,” said Robert Edd.

I walked alone up the old roadbed to the cabin. Mountain flowers trembled in the cool breeze. The stream ran clear and clean, tiny flowers on its back encased in little sheaths of ice beside the chilling flow. I saw a chipmunk and birds, and the backside of the sky raccoon.

The ruts still scarred the trail. I stopped by the large boulder and recounted our violent encounter in my mind, disappearing in my head for long minutes, hearing her speak to me. I saw her tangled black curls and the spirited gleam in her bark eyes.

“Xavier, for God’s sake, there’s love enough for all of us. Don’t destroy what we have.”

And for the first time, the tears did not well in my eyes. Maybe I had finally shed them all. Something may have finished dying inside. Maybe a new person could emerge.

The cabin was padlocked and the windows still boarded. Robert Edd used the money I gave him to fix the roof. A pole of splintered wood lay where the outhouse had been. The bullet-torn woodshed seemed a stubborn testament to what had happened here. Inside, I found remnants of our happy days, cooking and cleaning utensils and a small box of Colombine’s books, the broken rocking chair where Colombine used to sit by the fire, a yellowed and wrinkled drawing by Maxfield Parrish, of two beautiful nymphs at leisure by a waterfall. I plundered through the remains, impervious at last to the anguish that had so often pushed up from my gut and misted my eyes.

It was my ambivalence, probably, that would eventually make me completely crazy. How could I so love the challenge of action and danger and victory over evil forces that plagued us, feeling the smug satisfaction of my triumph over the gang, over Marcel? It was on the dark side of me. And how, at the same time, could I hate the pain and carnage associated with it, the burning guilt of what my actions had done to others. I should have remained alone, unattached, unencumbered, uncommitted, with no one to hurt but myself. But my ambivalent confusion remained strong. I was passionate and caring on my light side, truly yearning for someone to love. I wondered if I would still be poison to them.

I found Chelsea’s writing. It was there inside the box with Colombine’s neatly-packed books, on the address label. Silver Creek City Library %The Colombine Collection, 101 Crestview Drive, Silver Creek, NM 73508.

This is where they sent the books periodically, the address which I once wished to know but gradually had forgotten, the books that they had wrapped and bound and had gotten Robert Edd to carry to the post office now and then, more infrequently from the cabin than before, and in smaller parcels since they had to be carried down in a backpack. There was often a backlog and this was one of them, a collection of twelve that was left behind. Atop the stacks, the covers read: “The Second Coming” and “A Lifetime Burning.”

Though I didn’t fully understand why, I knew at that moment that I had to go there. I would deliver these books in person.

Chapter 24; A COSMIC DAY

Silver Creek, New Mexico sits in a narrow valley, surrounded by the green mountains of the Carson National Forest. Its name comes from the silvery waters of the creek that slices through the town, affording excellent sites for motels, guest lodges and RV campgrounds.

Besides the tourist trade, the town has had a growing appeal to artists and craftsmen, more than one painter of western scenes, a number of potters and string musicians. More than half of its citizens are Mexican American, and their culture pervades, partly to engage the tourists. Guacamole flows in the restaurants.

The Silver Creek-Rafferty Memorial Library sits two blocks from the downtown square, and elongated building of large mountain rock molded together with cement. It dates to 1935, built by a depression-era workfare crew that also carved hiking trails out of the national forest.

I walked inside to a modern, well-lighted facility. There were old people reading, a young woman sorting through a promotional display of children's books, a gray-haired woman at the counter checking out a book for a dumpy brown-skinned woman with a dreamy kid in hand. I waited my turn.

"May I help you sir?" The kindly-speaking lady was pleasantly wrinkled and round-faced, wearing wire-rimmed bifocals and a matronly blue dress with tiny red flowers. Her hair was mostly gray, streaked delicately with darker strands and all done up in a small town beauty shop sculpture of waves and curls. Her delicate smile seemed sincere.

"I have a contribution here, for the Colombine Collection." I hoisted a box onto the counter.

"Oh, that's very kind, sir," she said, peaking over into it to see "Moby Dick" and "The Snow Leopard." "We really do appreciate your thinking of us. I'd like to get your name, sir. Is this the first time you've contributed to us?"

"Yes, it is."

"Then, please sit, give us your name and address on this card." She offered it to me along with a ballpoint pen. "The library board like to write a 'thank you' note to all of our donors. And we'll send you an itemized list of the books. You can take it off on your taxes, you know."

"Yes ma'am. Is the collection getting very large?"

"Oh, yes. We probably have over seven hundred volumes in it now."

"Well, that's good. How did it get started anyway? Is it named for someone?"

"Oh, well, you know the colombine is a mountain flower. It's a beautiful flower. It blooms in purple clusters and has the most wonderful fragrance. That's where the name comes from."

"Yes, I was aware of that. But who established the collection?"

"Oh, well, there's quiet a little story there. It's really called the Colombine Literary Novel Collection. It was started some years ago by a lady who lived in Oklahoma, a friend of mine. There were these books that belonged to her sister, about three hundred of them. She taught literature in college and wrote some unpublished fiction, I understand.

And when she died – this is an awful story – she was murdered by her husband. They put him away in an institution and he later hanged himself. Terrible. Well, this lady, a Mrs. Maude Burson, knew me and knew I'd moved here and was trying to build up the library. So she sent me the books that belonged to her sister, poor thing. It was really a nice thing to do. She asked that we make a separate collection of them, of course, we were glad to do it. Well, it's been growing ever since."

"That's very interesting. And who contributes most to it?"

"Well, you see, there's really more to the story. You see her poor dead sister had a child when she died, a little girl. Well, Mrs. Burson agonized over whether she could take the child and she just didn't think she could. So the little girl was adopted by a family somewhere else in Oklahoma. Of course, the little girl grew up, and for a long time she sent books for the collection. I don't know what she did but she must have had a traveling job because she'd mail books to us from here and there, mostly Florida and Colorado, I believe. And then we've had some regular donors here, you know, in our Friends of the Library organization. Are you a member by any chance?"

"No ma'am," I said. "I just heard you accepted contributions. I'm from up at Crested Butte. So you...still get books from the young lady?"

"Well, no, not any more," she said. "I guess the last box we received was well over a year ago. They just quit coming. I guess the young lady just lost interest in us, or had a change of situation, I don't know, but we haven't heard from her in quite a while. But the collection is still growing. It's all fiction, and it's really a suburb collection of classical and contemporary literature."

"I guess she has good taste."

"Oh, yes, apparently so. Like her mother."

"And you wouldn't have any idea where she is now?"

"Oh, no. I'm afraid not. Would you like to see the collection?"

"Yes, please, is it wouldn't be too much trouble?"

"No. Not at all," she said, toddling around the counter and mumbling something about how the library was never busy this time of day.

The collection was a rectangular enclosure which served as a small reading area, where patrons were virtually surrounded by shelves of neatly rowed books. A shiny brass plate on the end of the bookshelf flanking the entrance to the alcove gave the name of the collection and "In Memory Of My Loving Sister, Clarissa."

"Very nice," I said. "Do you know here I might contact Mrs. Burson?"

"Oh, I'm sorry to say she passed away, about five years ago."

"Her family...do you think they would know hoe to get in touch with her niece?"

"Oh, I don't know. I really lost touch with the family," she said. "Do...you think you might know the young lady?"

"I was just interested in the collection." I lied.

“I see, yes,” said the lady, seeming suspicious, “and may I ask who told you about the collection? We don’t actually advertise for contributions, you know, and we don’t get that many.” She left the sentence hanging.

“I did know the girl you speak about,” I admitted, “but not her family. At the time I knew her she mailed you a great many books.”

“I see,” she said, “and what do you know of her?”

“She’s a very charming. But I’ve lost touch with her. I don’t even know if she’s alive.”

“Oh, my,” she said. “I hope so. She must be so young...” She wanted me to say more.

“Well, at any rate,” I said, “would you please call me if you hear from her? You have my name and phone number. You could call collect.”

“Yes,” the lady said absently. “Now, come to think of it you’re not the only person who has asked about her. It seems to me...” She mulled it over.

“No?” I prompted her.

“Yes. About a year ago, I think, we had a young lady in here asking about her...yes...in fact, I believe that’s who was asking for her by ‘Colombine.’ She was a little confused because she thought that was the name of the niece and well, I don’t know, it may have been.”

“And who was this lady? Maybe I knew her too.”

“Oh, I don’t recall. But I have seen her in here since. She was a dark-haired girl with her hair all kinky, you know, like these girls sometimes do.”

“And when did you last see her?”

“Oh...I don’t know. I guess it’s been a long time. Maybe...six months or more.”

“Do you think she lives here?”

“I’m sorry. I really don’t know. Do you think you may know her too?”

“I think so. Do you know hoe to get in touch with her?”

“No, No, I’m sorry. I don’t know her. And I’m sure she doesn’t even have a library card.”

Though I dawdled in the library for a while longer, it seemed there was nothing more I could do there. It was nearly one o’clock. I decided to get some lunch. I had thanked the lady again and walked out the front door when I heard her call me back.

“Sir, excuse me. If it’s important, you may want to ask Miss Brook about the dark-haired girl, when she gets back from lunch. I think she may know her.” The lady was standing in the front door. I walked back up the steps.

“Who is this, ma’am?”

“Susan Brook. I’m sure she’s been here to see Susan before. You could ask her when she gets back from lunch.”

“Miss Brook is on your staff?”

“She’s my right-hand girl. Lovely young lady, and very smart too. Maybe you could come back in about a half-hour. She had to take some extra time on her lunch break, but she should be back about one-thirty.”

I glanced at my watch. “I’ll be back,” I said. “Thank you. I wouldn’t miss it.”

And for the next half-hour, I fidgeted and ate hurriedly, and watched the time. I wanted to hope. I didn’t want to suffer the pangs of dashed hopes.

I saw her slender little body from the outside window, her long blond hair sweeping down over her shoulders, her blue eyes hidden as she took a tiny rubber stamp and blotted an inside cover. My eyes were riveted upon her as I somehow made my way on, through the glass door. I seemed to be floating forward in an aura of ecstasy. Alive! Alive! Her tiny hands worked expertly with the cards and books, sacking the neatly and pushing them gently to a person I couldn’t see, directly in front of me.

She lifted her face and spoke.

“I hope you enjoy these, Mrs. Boggess. And you give those kitties a big hug for me.” Her smile was radiant, stunning, her voice confident and sure.

As her customer turned away, she looked at me, first in surprise, changing quickly into a joyous recognition.

“Xavier,” she said softly. “I’m so glad to see you. This is a very cosmic day.”

She turned quickly and walked around the counter, to reach and embrace me. I closed my eyes in joy to feel her lithesome body in my arms again, almost losing my composure to tears, my face buried in her long, entangling tresses.

She pulled away quickly and watched as I dabbed away a tear.

“You’ve changed,” she said. “You’re still handsome, though, and I’m glad to see you. I read about you in the papers for such a long time.”

“Well,” I stammered. “I’ve kind of dropped out for awhile you know. It was too dangerous being the other guy.”

She looked at me with a crossed smile – part joy that I was there, partly revealing an immense curiosity. If she only knew all the questions I had for her.

“Don’t go away,” she said. “I’ll take some time off and we’ll go sit in the park. I’ll just need to tell Mrs. Street.”

“Take your time,” I said. “It’ll give me time to regain my composure.”

“Xavier,” she said, “I see that you got that fence knocked down. That’s great.”

“Yeah,” I said. “And how about you?”

“Amazing, isn’t it?” she said. “I just did it when I had to. I’ll be back in a minute.” She turned quickly, swishing her aqua blue sundress as she walked away. Then she swished around again. “I’m so glad you’re here,” she said radiantly, and twirled away again.

I was stunned.

Chapter 25; A NEW VOICE

Only the words mattered. We walked to the park and drank lemonade, but I hardly noticed. She wore an overflowing straw hat with a broad, rainbow-colored band. Only the words mattered.

“I thought you were dead. The last I saw you was your bloody jacket.”

“I just ran. I had to,” she said. “That man said you were dead, all my friends, he said. I just couldn’t go back there and see you dead.”

“This is the happiest day of my life, Colombine, finding you here. All of those horrible things that happened were my fault. If you had been dead, it was my doing for being a fool and putting you in danger.”

“No need to punish yourself for that, Xavier. I know you were trying to do something worthwhile when you and Chelsea cooked up that scheme. Both of you had a lot of frustration you were trying to purge out of your systems. You seem to be a lot more...in tune with everything now than you used to be.”

I laughed nervously. I didn't want to talk about myself. “I'm the same guy. I 'm just undercover. I'm Chris Jarrett in most places.”

“And I can sense you don't have that bitter cynicism, that burning desire to do something heroic—brave, courageous and bold.”

I laughed. “Sometimes I do.”

She laughed with me. “Well, I hope you don't launch another national crusade. The last one was exciting, but I guess the Mafia is still out there somewhere.”

“Business as usual,” I said. “But at least we had some fun with them.” I grinned to make her wonder if I was serious.

“It's nice to see you relaxed, being a little light with me. You used to have trouble doing that, and sometimes it was a little forced.”

“I was tight as a tick,” I said, “not loose as a goose.”

“Well, tell me what you've been doing, traveling?”

“Yeah. Here and there. Mexico. There's a lot of adventure to be had down there. I've just been treading water since you and Chelsea left me. Do you know where she is?”

“She was here but she's not any more,” said Colombine. “She went up to Oklahoma to see Aunt Marlana.”

“I can't believe she's living there though.”

“No. Chelsea was going to get things straight with her. I'm sure she won't stay but she wasn't clear when she'd be back here.”

“How did you get her, Colombine? Tell me what happened when those bikers showed up. I've got to know what happened to you, how you got down from up there.”

“I guess I have to tell you,” she said softly. “I don't like to think about it, but I owe you an explanation. I would have contacted you, you know, if I had know how, after I read about you.”

“I thought about that many times. I stayed in touch with Robert Edd and Missy.”

“I ran from their house, Xavier, like a scared puppy. I shouldn't have run from there up to the cabin. I should've tried to run down the highway, get some help when those dirty men came. If they had been killed, it was all my fault because I didn't get help. I'm still ashamed to talk to them.”

“So you ran to the cabin. Of course you were afraid.”

“I was scared to death. And I was just too fragile then to begin to cope with situation like that. By the time I realized where I was running, it was too late. I just couldn’t stop.”

I rested my hand on her shoulder.

“But...I finally did stop and...started back down when I came to my senses. But then I heard them coming up the trail and I ran again. They saw me but they couldn’t catch me. I ran through the trees and climbed up in the rocks to get away. I was afraid. I didn’t know what to do.

“And then it got dark before I could get to the cabin, and I heard all those guns and an explosion, and I thought the police may have come and shot them or arrested them or ran them away. It was cold, and I tried to make my way back toward the cabin, close enough to see.

“Then I almost ran into this big, terrible man in along fur coat. He caught me and threatened to kill me if I didn’t do what he said. He described you both and said you were dead and he would kill me too if I tried to escape. He had this big gun.

“I could tell he was hurt. He said he had to rest and wait on daylight. He made me get into this shelter of limbs he pulled together down under this big rock. He wrapped me up with him in that big coat and got me in his strong grip. He pulled off my parka and used it to try to stop the bleeding. I knew he was badly hurt but I was so scared I couldn’t think of anything to do but try to stay warm and get through the night.

“Well, he died sometime in the night and I got out of there before daylight. I was bloody all over too. I took his coat and his money, about three hundred dollars, and determined to walk down and never go back up there again. I thought you both must be dead like he said. I shouldn’t have believed him, I guess. But I just couldn’t bear to go to the cabin. I really couldn’t. And I couldn’t bear to face the Carpenters. I wrapped up in that fur coat and walked down. I saw some police coming up the trail but I hid from them. I hitchhiked a ride in a pickup truck. I bought some clean clothes at Carbondale and bought a bus ticket to here.”

‘Why here?’

“Because this is where Chelsea and I always said we might want to live. And Mrs. Street here, this is the lady who knew my aunt, where she gave my mother’s books. You remember we used to send books here from time to time. My aunt told me to remember Mrs. Street and know that she would be a friend if I ever needed one.”

“Then she really knows who you are.”

“Yes. She just wanted to find out who you were,” said Colombine. “And since you knew Chelsea, she assumed you were the infamous Xavier Thorn. I told her about you. I was proud of you, Xavier.” She laughed. “In a strange kind of way. Imagine, you and Chelsea took that cabin away from that whole gang of cutthroats.”

“As terrible as it all was,” I said, “I’m still proud of it. It’s just that my grief overwhelmed any good feeling for such a long time. I lost both of you.”

“I just couldn’t handle it, Xavier. I’m sorry, but I couldn’t face it, and I didn’t want my life to be anything like Chelsea and you wanted. “I’m happy here in Silver Creek, happier than I’ve ever been except maybe a short time in the cabin. It’s not exciting usually, but it’s at peace with itself.”

“I’m very happy for you. I just wished we could be together. Believe me, I’ve been trying to avoid any more patched gun battles.’

She smiled at me. “Well, we had some good times. You were a great help to me, Xavier. You helped put me on a path of progress.”

“I’m glad to know that. I thought you had died because of me. Now you’re telling me I helped you out?”

“You helped me become a woman. You helped me conquer my fear of men. You were a constant example of strength and determination. You were brave enough to face anything. And you were filled with kindness inside.”

“Yeah, but you got hurt. And Chelsea got hurt. She never wants to see me again.”

“I can tell you about Chelsea too, Xavier, but I want you to know about me. Don’t you want to know what changed me?”

“I’m dying to know.”

“I had to take hold. When I had nobody to depend on, and when I had to speak in order to cope with anything, because I was on my own, than I just had to do it. It was uncomfortable at first, but it was better than lying under a stinking biker, bleeding to death in my arms, worrying about being killed or freezing, and thinking that, because I ran, and because I was so uninvolved and irresponsible, it had probably led to your deaths and the Carpenters. When I took that biker’s coat and money I was ready to survive, and take charge of my life, like you had in New Orleans. I read the papers. It was exciting! I admired you so much. I determined that I was going to make my life into something that I wanted and quit drifting wherever Chelsea wanted to go. I really figured out that it was her guilt, that awful thing she was carrying around with her that had been part of what was stifling me. It seemed like the past still had hold of me, and was smothering me. Maybe I never would have taken hold with Chelsea there doing everything for me like she was doing penance.

“I found out that you weren’t dead pretty quick, that you had even killed all the bikers somehow. I hate violence, but I was proud of you for that too because I knew you were coming after me. You were my hero, I guess. But I knew I could never be part of your life then. I knew Chelsea and you belonged together. You were alike. You loved danger and adventure. I just wanted to be at peace. It would be better for you and for me, if I stayed in Silver Creek and made my own life.”

“Chelsea found you?”

“I called her to come. I talked to Aunt Marlena who had heard from her. She had another motorcycle. She was down in Florida, seeing some old friends.”

“She was surprised you were alive, of course.”

“Shocked. Well, Chelsea’s fatalist about a lot of things. She’s afraid to think things might turn out right because she hates to be disappointed. She wouldn’t dare hope I’d be found alive. And I think she ran away before she could find out I was dead. She didn’t want to know that either.”

“I want to see Chelsea. Where can I find her?”

“I really don’t know, Xavier. I guess she won’t stay in Oklahoma long, but who knows what will happen after she talks to Marlena.”

“What kind of reaction would she get?”

“Tears. Shock. I wanted to go with her but she wouldn’t even consider it. She said it was something she had to face up to herself. She thought if I went it would be like hiding behind me. But I did talk her into carrying her a note from me.”

“You think she’ll forgive her?”

“I believe so. She had some intuition about what was happening before. A couple of things happened that made her suspicious. She’s not dumb. And she’s got that feminine intuitiveness about personal things. She just didn’t want to believe her suspicious. Do you know what I mean?”

“I guess. I hope they can reach some kind of understanding. Maybe it’ll help Chelsea get a fresh start in her life.”

“Well, I hope so, Xavier. She had some problems here. She worked at one of the restaurants for a few weeks. She was drinking too much and got mixed up with one of the guys in the band there. I really don’t think he was much good. They fought. And she was argumentative. She provoked him, and she provoked other people, like she had so much anger inside she just had to let it out. She lost her job, finally, then she broke up with the guy. I tried to talk to her, but she wouldn’t listen to me. I think she had taken care of me for so long it was just too weird me trying to help her get straight. When she left for Marlana’s she said she was going to clean up her head, the way she put it, and she had to do it on her own. She wouldn’t even tell me if she’s coming back.”

“Do you think she will?”

“I think so. But I don’t know when. It’ll be after she gets her head straight, and can come back with some pride for herself, and show me she’s made a positive change.”

“I wish we could be together again. Maybe it would be good for all of us.”

“I’m sure it would,” she said kindly, reaching across the part bench to take my hand. “If you could talk to Chelsea, I think it would be wonderful. I think the two of you definitely belong together.”

“Then why hasn’t she made any effort to find me? If either of you had just talked to Robert Edd, he knew where I was most of the time, and I called him once or twice a week all the time I was moving around.”

“Chelsea thinks you’re obsessed with the mob. She thinks you want to fight with them, from now on. She thinks you may have killed Marcel. And she thinks they still may come after you. She can’t bear to commit herself to you and then watch you die. She’s really pretty confused about the whole thing. But I know she cares about you a lot, and that’s really the bottom line.”

“Well, I don’t know for sure but Xavier Thorn may be gone for good. He may have struck his blow for justice and disappeared into legend. There’s a fame and infamy attached to him that wasn’t too good for the head.”

“What do you want now?”

I looked into her perceptive eyes, still awed by the incredible transformation, the penetrating insights to which she now gave voice in a kind but self-assuring manner.

“Since I can’t roll back time,” I said, “I want to be close to you...and Chelsea. I want to pick up my photography again, work in the mountains.”

“I think that’s wonderful,” she said. “You could live here.”

“Maybe,” I said. “We were very close once, Colombine, you and I. Do you think...possibly that...”

“Well, hello,” said a man’s voice. “I didn’t expect to see you again so soon.”

Colombine returned the greeting. I looked up to see a muscular young man in jeans and boots, clean-shaven and square-jawed, and with a pleasant smile.

“Pete,” she was saying, “this is a very good friend of mine, from Colorado – Chris, uh, Jarrett.”

Our handshake was firm. She hugged him and they kissed.

“Pete and I are engaged,” she said, her arm around his waist. “In fact, that’s why I was late coming back from lunch. We got our marriage license today. You know I said this was a cosmic day...well, really! We’re getting married next week, and please...please...please...you’ve just got to be here.”

Chapter 26; THE OTHER SIDE

Those days in Silver Creek were like an initiation back into society for me. I met Colombine’s friends, and came to know Pete as a personable, well-meaning and ambitious young man, with not nearly the wear and tear as I had in my old bones. I believed they would be good for each other, and I swallowed down all the old longing and loneliness that filled up my throat. In selfish moments, I wished we had never made love.

I provided the wedding pictures.

She was a radiant bride.

I stopped in Denver and made a confidential call on Lt. Wingate. We met for dinner in a restaurant up near Golden.

“I’m glad you called me,” he said across the table. “I’ve been wondering whatever happened to you. You doin’ all right for yourself?”

“Can’t complain. I’ve been seeing some of the country, and some of Mexico.”

“They really wanted to talk to you after Marcel got bumped off. You heard about that...”

“Sure. I was hoping that might take some of the heat off me. What do you think?”

“Well, maybe, as far as Marcel goes. But every outlaw motorcycle gang in the country had your name. They can’t forget that you did in nine of their brothers. There’s any number of them would like to rub you out too, just for the glory.”

“Glory?” I mused. “There’s not any glory in killing somebody.”

“Reputation maybe. Anyway, you know these people.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t know them. But I’m moving back to the cabin. I’m tired of traveling. If they find my up there...they’ll just have to take their chances.”

“Well,” said Wingate, “if you keep a low profile maybe they won’t even figure out you went back. It is kind of isolated up there and you sure don’t look the same. Those pictures they made in New Orleans went all over the country.”

“Well, I am different. I couldn’t help but me. I’ll take my chances anyway. I’m ready to put down some roots.”

“You’ll probably be okay. Everything kind of fades out of the spotlight eventually. It was really something for a while though. You know, I counted up; there were twenty-seven different pie-throwing incidents over the country. WE had those thugs turn up dead in New Orleans. And then Marcel. And then that stirred ‘em up down there and there were four more killings before it was over. You really had everything shook up for awhile.”

“The Mafia’s still in business,” I said without emotion.

“They are,” Wingate admitted, “but that crime bill they passed has been a help. It’s been a lot easier carrying on an investigation and getting’ somewhere with it since they passed it.”

“Really,” I said. “I figured that was just a bunch of paper they generated to quiet things down, like letting’ the steam off, you know.”

“Maybe so. But I’d say it’s done some good overall. The officers I talk to, from other places like Chicago and New York, say it’s definitely been a help in tracking back money and looking hard at some of the investments these people have.”

“Yeah, and the civil liberties people went crazy.”

“Well, they did,” said Wingate, “and they got it watered down a little. Hell, the media tried to alarm people about it too. Isn’t that ironic. But it’s still a pretty good law, and they’ll play hell getting’ it repealed. It’s doin’ too much good in some places.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it,” I said. “And I’m especially glad none of them college kids got hurt seriously. But I thought the media actually helped get that crime bill through. Did you see that series about the mob in the New York Times, or the pieces in Time and Newsweek?”

“Yeah, they had the info all right. The police was glad to talk to ‘em, and some people in the FBI. I don’t know how much good they did though. They’ve been exposed and publicized before but people don’t put much stock

in the media any more. There's too much stuff to absorb in there, and it's too impersonal. The Mafia Pie Project, though, that captured the imagination."

I couldn't help grinning as I shook my head. "I never thought it would be that successful," I said honestly. I could have added "— and I can't believe I would wind up so sad."

I chopped wood for winter and built a new outhouse. I cleaned my cameras and began developing a new portfolio. We built a photo darkroom in the back of Robert Edd's store and I tried to whet my interest in photography again so that I could supplement my dwindling resources. On occasion, I called Colombine — and Pete — but there was no work from Chelsea. I shot a deer, then another, and Robert Edd and I put up venison for the winter.

One cold and windy October day, I took my pipe and a thermos of coffee and walked into the aspen grove. Their white trunks rose up majestically all around me, flooding the sunny sky with profusions of yellow leaves. The breeze continued to break them free, one by one, and they fluttered, like gold deals, to take their winter place on the ground beside me. My radio predicted that the first snows would be blowing in, either tonight or tomorrow. It cast me in a quiet melancholy.

I saw a lone figure, bundled in coat and hood, coming slowly up the trail. I took my revolver from its holster, removed the safety and slipped it back, leaving the holster untapped. Closer. And Closer. I eyed the figure.

Finally, the person was close at hand, walking past the cabin and toward me. I sat motionless, eyes keyed on the face. Closer. I looked hard into the face. The face out of the parka cam clear as the delicate features of a woman.

She came up to me: "Hey, dude. I was just passim' through and thought you might warm me up with a cup of coffee."

I dashed out the cold dregs from my cup and handed it to her, with the thermos. "You lost or something? We're gonna get snow up here tonight."

She poured a steaming cup. "I don't give a shit," she said. "Easy come, easy go. I was on my motorcycle but it puked out down the hill. Once more, I should say."

I studied her expression. She kept the parka tied tight around her wind-reddened face.

"Maybe you better stay here tonight, and we'll see about fixing it in the morning."

"I know what's wrong with it," she said. "I can fix it."

"Good for you," I said.

"This is the place all them bikers got killed, right?"

"This is it. We're thinking' about putting' up an historical marker over by the shithouse."

She laughed. "Maybe you could sell tickets. Anybody ever come up here?"

"No. People forget. They don't remember things like that. There's always something new for them to deal with."

“Ain’t that the truth,” she agreed, sipping the smoking coffee. “I understand you had a nice visit with – what’s her name – Susan Brook?”

“Very nice,” I said. “I was jealous as hell about young Pete, but I just smiled and kept on trucking’. She’s happy, and she’s gonna be okay. I was just glad to find her alive. It took a load of guilt off my shoulders.”

“Yeah,” she said, “that really feels good, don’t it? I hear you’re a new man.”

“A little more mellow, maybe. I’m not worried about all the shit in the world. I’m just lookin’ at the other side of it. I finally got around the dark side and found the other one.”

“Well, I heard you were still limping’. Your leg never did get all right?”

“It’s all right. I just limp. I don’t talk about it and I don’t think about it.”

“It slows you down, huh?”

“Takes me another hour just to drag my ass up the trail,” I said, “but I get here. I’ve had to kind of . . . cut down on the territory I can cover. I can’t pee on every bush up here any more. You know, life’s a compromise sometimes in spite of anything you can do.”

“Yeah, you got to take the bad with the good, don’t you? You just got to make sure you get your share of the good before you go out.”

“It takes some adventure,” I said, “and it takes some peace, don’t you think? What have you been up to?”

“On the road. Here and there. Tryin’ to stay away from the dirt ball biker gangs,” she said bitterly.

“Well, you don’t have to run from ’em, you know.”

She looked at me with a touch of bemusement. “Yeah,” she said. “I know.”

“I mean, it’s not like we would ever take any crap off anybody,” I said. “Would we?”

“Can’t afford to,” she said coldly. “That would tear you down day by day, little by little, piece by piece.”

“It’s really hard for a harass to compromise, huh?” I said.

Her eyes turned hard, daring. “You lonely?” she asked.

“Yeah. I’m self-reliant. That has to be first. But there’s no real pleasure in it sometimes, especially late at night when there’s no one to share with.”

“Well,” she said, “if you ever get really bored, I guess we could cook up another little public service project.”

I looked in her eyes. There was a twinkle there, and the start of a devious smile. She put down the cup and pulled the string to untie the parka hood. She pulled it off to reveal a smooth, bald head, reflecting the sunlight of the autumn day.

So began an adventure.