

# **The Return of No. 44**

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## **Part I**

### **Chapter One**

Wanda ached with it still, the shameful memory of her husband's wake; the night Portland trembled and his casket sank in the burning river. She fled to the sagebrush desert where no one asked questions, and nothing ever happened, until now.

Wanda's cigarette glowed faintly in the afternoon sun. Twenty years of cooking for cowboys, drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes. She looked through the blue smoke, the dusty rippled glass of the diner window, past gas pumps and empty road, to a vast shimmering dry lake and distant mountains. She adjusted her apron strap, leaned her elbows on the counter and sucked on her Marlboro. The refrigerator hummed. The coffee maker sighed. She exhaled and focused on the window glass:

A jade meadow sloped to the sea. Bits of foam skittered across a beach. People sat on blankets in the sun, holding plates of food. Champagne glasses sparkled. Voices raised in laughter. Two kites hung in a cobalt sky. Her wedding day. She and Buster stood before the minister, an arc of friends squinted into the sun, smiling, crying. The cool sand between her toes, his hand covering hers...

The coffeemaker sighed again. White-hot emptiness scattered shreds of memory across the sagebrush flats.

Mornings in the Roadkill Cafe weren't so bad. Cowboys would roll up in pickups and stamp dusty boots off on her clean linoleum. They called her Slim and bummed cigarettes. She teased them. Around noon the ranchers came in. She fixed them white-bread-roast-beef sandwiches, instant mashed potatoes and gravy, canned green beans and Jell-O salad, then told one of her stories that made them laugh. Still, some days, the loneliness, the emptiness of the place and her life in it, suffocated her with what might have been, what was; days like this.

She wiped the fading red linoleum counter with a bleach-soaked cloth, tossed it in the sink, glanced to check the grill and coffee pot, leaned on the counter and turned back to the window.

Far across the dry lake a vehicle dragged a slow rolling plume of dust through shimmering heat waves. She walked to the screen door, pushed it open and shaded her eyes. Strangers. Too slow for a local. Strangers always stopped at Fields, Oregon. Afraid they'll run out of gas. Afraid they were lost. Usually would have. Usually were.

A long white limousine, dust-yellowed and past its prime, slowed well before the general store next door and eased up to the gas pump. Bet that thing gobbles the gas. She closed the screen door and adjusted her apron.

The young clerk came out to the car, said something to the driver, nodded and began pumping gas. Two men got out of the back; one so muscular his arms stood out from his sides, a bald head, thick neck and soft face. The other, old and bent, shuffled with a cane. He smiled at the morning. Behind him came a Dalmatian. She pranced and wagged, sniffed the dust, snorted. From the opposite side emerged a short man wearing a too-big suit and a scowl. The driver stretched her arms to the sky and yawned; a large woman, not fat, but substantial. Her red hair glowed in the sun and her skin was alabaster. Wanda looked down at the cigarette stains and wrinkles on her own hand. The woman

was tall, large breasts and compact hips. The little man turned from her, folded his arms and spat into the dust. She said something to his back, and laughed. The muscle man glared at the little man. The old man laughed as the dog jumped on him, licked at his face. Circus come to town. The large woman strode toward the cafe, and the men followed. Better get to my station.

The screen door slammed. The men sat in a booth, and the woman threw a leg over a counter stool.

"Welcome to the Roadkill Cafe, I'm Wanda, and I'll be your waitress today. Make yourself comfortable and I'll be right over with your menus."

"Damn!" said the woman. "Sure is funny talk for a place called the Roadkill Cafe."

Wanda's raspy laugh sent her into a coughing fit. Her face turned red and she shook so hard she dropped her Marlboro on the counter. "The widow Fields, she owns the place, well, she's got this funny sense of humor." She picked up the Marlboro butt and brushed ashes off the counter. "My fancy restaurant hostess talk comes from working over in Portland. They make you say all that kind a stuff."

"I bet they do," said the woman as she picked up the menu Wanda offered.

Wanda walked to the booth with menus for the men. "My husband died over there, and that's when I decided it was time to get myself back to the desert. Mrs. Fields, she give me a job and a place to sleep in back. I'm just happy as a clam, cooking up the grub and laying it out."

"Well, hon, while you're telling me the rest of your life story, why don't you just cook up a batch of bacon, eggs and home fries, toast on the side. How's that sound to you, boys?" Two of the men grunted. The old man smiled and nodded his head vigorously. She smiled at him. "Old man's appetite isn't

slackin' any. He can't remember his name, but he always remembers he likes to eat."

While Wanda talked and the woman listened, the small man sat sullenly watching the clerk finish gassing up the limousine. The Dalmatian lay in a patch of sunshine and the muscle man absent-mindedly scratched her ear. She moaned. The old man found a deck of cards under the Joe Camel ashtray. He shuffled the cards with his arthritic hands and laid out a game of solitaire. The blue neon clock ticked.

Wanda chewed gum while she cooked. "Any-old-way, I met my husband when I was a hostess at this place called The Broadway Restaurant. Real fancy place. Course, the hostess gets to dress up real nice, but don't get paid shit. Anyway, one night this good-looking heavy-set man comes in, and he had a nice smile, so I gives him a window seat. Well, he orders the best, most expensive thing on the menu, then he orders one of them chocolate mousses, like from France you know, and he eats it, and then he gets another one and so on. He comes back regular like, and he always orders the best. Pretty soon, I get to watching him eat and I can't take my eyes off of him. Any-old-way, you ain't going to believe this," she lowered her voice. "I got to imagining what it would be like for him to nibble on me like what he was nibbling on them little butter covered cauliflowers, and licking on me like he licked his spoon when he was working on a chocolate mousse."

The woman leaned closer.

"Let me tell you, I was in a state. I had to do something. One Tuesday he comes in and he says hello to me and reads my nametag and calls me by my first name and all. So, I figures this was the time." She poured the woman another cup of coffee, stole a look at the men, leaned closer, "I swear to God honey, my panties was damp." Wanda stepped back from the counter and put a hand on

her hip. "My God! I can't believe I'm a telling this stuff to a complete damn stranger!" They both laughed. "Hope I'm not a grossing you out – what's-your-name?"

"No worry about that hon, I've seen it all, so you can tell it just like you were on one of those tevee shows where people bare their damn souls to the whole country. Call me Bette." She extended her hand.

Wanda wiped her hand on her apron and reached to shake Bette's hand.

"Cut loose, Wanda, I love a good story."

"Well, Bette, I was getting hot, I mean real hot over this, how to put it, mature man – he must of been close to fifty and I was just nineteen – and so when he'd finished his main course I went over to take his plate away. So, I said, 'Mister Parks', that was his name Buster Parks, I read it off of his American Express Card, 'do you ever eat any place else but here?' Well, he said, yes, that he had a corner table at Jakes, where he went for seafood and especially the raw oysters."

"Well, my God, the thought of those lips of his playing over a slippery soft oyster and then it slithering over the tip of his tongue and him a savoring the musty smell and taste of it, well, my knees about buckled at the thought of them lips and that tongue slipping and sliding over the musty parts of me."

Bette's eyes widened and she began to laugh. "Well," Wanda continued, "I just couldn't take anymore, so I blurted it out, 'Could you take me there with you sometime?' I had to put down his plate and steady myself on a chair, because my knees was turning to jelly."

Bette shook with laughter, "No way Wanda!" The muscle man smiled and said something to the little man, who didn't answer.

"Swear to God." Wanda turned the bacon and broke eggs onto the grill. "Well, he didn't say nothing for awhile, just sat there looking me up and down

like I was a new kind of sherbet in a long skinny glass. Pretty soon, he took that big nice cloth napkin and wiped them lips of his and then folded it up real nice and laid it on the table. Now, all a this took damn near forever, but finally he pulled a business card out of his pocket and handed it to me.” Wanda stood straight, pulled in her chin, and lowered her voice. “I would be honored, Wanda. Please call me at this number tomorrow and we’ll finalize arrangements.” “He always talked fancy like that, and well, any-old-way, I was about the happiest girl you ever did see.”

The old man turned over the completed game of solitaire and began another. The small man turned his back on the others.

“Any-old-way, let me tell you, our date was everything I could of wanted. Right off he opens up this great big checkered napkin and stuffs it in his shirt top so as to make a bib thing; I knew we was in for some serious eating.”

Wanda clattered plates out on the edge of the grill to warm, turned the home fries again and pounded them down with the edge of her spatula.

“We started off with clam chowder and sat there slurping at each other across the table. He was a looking at my eyes and I was a looking at his lips, and each of us was seeing what we was looking for. To make a real long story short so’s I don’t burn your breakfast, we worked our way up through the shrimp cocktail and the oysters on the half-shell, to the steamed crab, and the poached salmon. For good measure he ordered up another plate of raw oysters. By the time he finished, I was beside myself. I took him by the sleeve and looked him square in the eye and said, ‘It’s time we headed home for dessert.’ We was married not long after. I’ll have to tell you about that sometime – some wedding!”

Bette shook her head and grinned, “Believe me, I wouldn’t miss it.”

Wanda piled the blue crockery plates high and shoved them across the counter to Bette, who laid them out for the men. The aroma of smoked pork grease and toasted white bread filled the cafe.

The clerk, Billy, leaned through the cafe door. "Wanda, there's twenty-four bucks on the gas." Then something turned him quickly toward the road. There had been no vehicle, but there stood a man with wild hair and mustache, his white suit blinding in the sun. He nodded and touched the brim of his equally white hat.

Billy nodded and turned back to Wanda; they looked at each other and shrugged. "And, Mrs. Fields said she'd be over to spell you in a bit." He looked at his watch, "I'll go see if that fella wants to put up in the bunkhouse."

"Okay, Billy," said Wanda, lighting another Marlboro with her yellow Bic. "Appreciate you running the gas for these folks." The words came out through stained teeth, muffled with blue smoke, half of which streamed back into her thin nostrils.

"Lord, I haven't seen anybody do that for ages," said Bette. "I didn't think anybody could do that anymore."

"Ain't it just disgusting," said Wanda, doing it again. "Now as I'm official in the middle aged department, I just do the most disgusting things you ever seen. I been known to fart too."

"I hear you!" said Bette, as she finished a mouthful of bacon and eggs. "That's the best thing about getting past the big four-zero. Don't have to act like somebody you're not anymore, just to impress some man. No offense meant to Charlie or the old man," she nodded toward their booth, "but there are some in this room," her voice rose, "who are a whole lot too much on the asshole side. I'm not naming any names, am I Ben?" She looked over her shoulder at the small man sitting by himself.

"Whore," he said to the window.

"What'd you say, Ben?" said Bette.

"Said I have to get out for some fresh air. Something smells in here." He slammed the screen door on the way out.

"Who put the knot in his skivvies?" said Wanda.

"Me," said Bette. "Figures I'm stupid just cause I'm a woman. These two are okay though. The old man's lost his marbles and Charlie got his knocked loose in the boxing ring."

Wanda laughed, "Maybe that's what it takes to make a good man."

"Ben gives me any more crap, I just may give that a test," said Bette, as she turned toward the window.

The limo peeled out of the parking lot, throwing gravel against the gas pumps and turned on the paved road speeding south.

"Dammit," said Bette, as she jumped up and ran for the door. "That bastard!"

Wanda and Charlie followed her into the parking lot. The dog ran circles and barked. Billy scratched his head under his cowboy hat. The limo disappeared in a mirage. The man in the white suit pulled out his gold pocket watch, thumbed it open, and smiled with satisfaction.

"Damn," said Bette, "damn, damn, double damn. What am I gonna do now?"

"What happened?" said Wanda. "Why did he take your car? There ain't nowhere to go except Winnemucca or maybe over to Lakeview."

"That sonofabitch stole our car!"

"I'll call the sheriff," said Wanda, as she turned toward the cafe.

"No you won't!" Bette grabbed her arm.

"Why not?"



"It's a real long story Wanda, but believe me, we can't call the cops."

Wanda looked into Bette's pleading eyes.

*In that moment Wanda made the decision that would take her back; back to where she'd known great love, great pain, and where unfinished business awaited.*

"Okay, then we'll get him ourselves. Billy, you cover for me. Me and this woman going to catch us a skunk!"

"How?" said Bette.

"The red Trans Am. I'll get the keys," said Wanda, ripping off her apron as she jogged to the cafe.

"I'll go too," said Charlie, "I'll break his head this time."

"You stay here with the old man Charlie, it's my turn," said Bette.

The twin chrome tailpipes of the 1967 muscle car roared to life under the big hood scoop. Wanda slammed home first gear, popped the clutch, and laid twenty yards of serpentine rubber, hit second and laid another patch. The deep-throated engine wound tight as the Trans Am crested a small rise — there was a distant chirp when she found third.

## Chapter Two

Her sports car purring, Jaimiee Murray bore through the brooding ridges of the Cascade Range and over the pass. The late spring sky, turning to morning amber, drew her through the last of the timbered peaks and out into the high desert.

She enjoyed driving long distances. It gave her time to catch up. As the curves relaxed, she ruminated on her unlikely current assignment:

A security consultant, she had been called in by Hunnycut High Tech Investments to check out some strange ransom notes faxed to company headquarters in recent days. Dan Palm, her contract coordinator, had asked her to check the area near Mr. Hunnycut's summer home on the Marymere Peninsula west of Seattle. Mr. Hunnycut was fine. He had never been in danger as far as they could tell, but the company was concerned that the incident be cleared up before it got to the news media. Wall Street could be touchy about such things.

Jaimiee had gone to the Peninsula and talked to Mr. Hunnycut's summer home staff and a few locals. One of the things she discovered was that an old man, about the same age as Mr. Hunnycut, had been reported missing about the time the ransom notes began arriving. Curious, she went to the sheriff's office where she was told the man in question, Matthew McChonnache, suffered from dementia and often became lost. Search and rescue people had looked for three days. They were now convinced he had fallen off one of the high cliffs into the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

Jaimiee wasn't so sure. She called Dan, and they decided she should see what she could find out about Mr. McChonnache while she was in the area.

She turned the Miata north along the coast road. It rose in a series of switchbacks before leveling off onto the top of one-hundred-foot cliffs that plunged dramatically to rocks and surf. She stopped at a viewpoint to put the top down. Just below, a bald eagle slid past the cliff face so close she could hear the wind in its feathers. The crash of waves on rock was ponderous. The beach almost nonexistent, and she understood why the sheriff thought the old man might never be found.

Near the tip of the peninsula, she came to the end of the road, several Keep Out signs, and the McChonnache mailbox.

Jaimiee turned down the long green tunnel of fir and salal. After a few hundred yards, it spilled into a huge meadow scattered with copper-barked madronas, sloping away to high cliffs. The city of Victoria was shining in the distance, and the white sails and bright spinnakers of racing sailboats brightened the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

She was taking in the beauty of the scene when she noticed three surveyors working in the meadow. She wondered if someone was planning on developing this paradise. She asked the man working the transit about Matthew McChonnache.

"See that grove of pines out on the point? That's the McChonnache place. You won't find the old guy though. He disappeared a few days ago and we all figure he's dead," said the surveyor, shaking his head. "Poor old guy. I'm on the search and rescue squad and we been all over this place looking for him. We gave it up last night. Figure he fell off one of these cliffs and got washed away. Current's bad just off here — probably halfway to Japan by now."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Jaimiee. "It looks as if his heirs aren't wasting any time turning his land into cash."

"Yeah. Sort of burns me up how fast they're going. They've got us out here running property lines so they can subdivide. Everybody knew that Matthew never wanted his place to be broke up. Some say that's the reason he lived so long, so he could keep his nephew, Wooster, from selling it off."

She followed the driveway out to the tip of the peninsula. There she found a small clapboard house, nestled in the trees, with an expansive view of water, islands and mountains. No wonder the old man wanted to hold on to it.

Two children ran around the corner of the house and glared at her. "Hey, can't you read! There's signs up there all over the place says to keep out," said the girl. "Yeah," said the boy. "This is our place now and we don't want nobody on it."

"Billy! Barbara! Get in here this minute," said the heavy woman who slammed her way out through the screen door. "I'll take care of this!"

"Aw Mom!"

"Git!"

"I'm sorry," said Jaimiee. "I didn't mean to upset things. I came concerning Mr. McChonnache's disappearance."

"What would somebody like *you* know about that?" she said, glaring, hands on hips. "What business *you* got that has got to do with him?"

Jaimiee made the quick decision to abandon any idea of telling the true reason for her visit. "I'm from Seattle, and our company got word that this property might be open for development soon. I represent a firm that wants to be the first in line for consideration for this fantastic opportunity."

"Wooster, you better come out here!" she yelled.

"Who we got here, Rosanne?" said Wooster, pushing out the screen door, clutching a bag of potato chips to his belly.

“Woman says she’s a developer!” She glared at Jaimiee. “I doubt that myself.”

“Well, you come at the right time miss,” said Wooster, “we’re going to be in the market for somebody to sell this property to, or to partner up with to develop it.” He put his chips under his armpit, wiped his hand on his shirt and offered it to Jaimiee. “What was your company thinkin’?”

“Well,” said Jaimiee, wracking her brain for real estate jargon, “The way we see the vitality of the current real property market, the turn-key package deserves consideration, as well as the more traditional development. In either case we believe the upscale market, million-and-up properties, would be best. Either way, you provide the land, my company provides the capital and marketing expertise, and we share in the profits.”

“Sounds good to me, Rosanne.”

“Just hold on, Wooster. We don’t know nothin’ about this woman. People like her,” she looked askance at Euro-Jamacian Jaimiee, “ain’t usually connected with big developers.”

Jaimiee ignored the veiled reference to her mixed race. “Oh yes, there is certainly no hurry, your choice of a partner for this project could make a difference of millions. You are very wise to take your time and consider all options. This is the opportunity of a lifetime.”

“You said it!” said Wooster.

“We sure had to wait long enough for it,” said Rosanne.

“Oh hush, Rosanne.”

“When I married you, you told me we was going to have this property in no time. Well that was fifteen years ago, and I’d damn near give up waiting when the old man wandered off and died.”

“You’re referring to Mr. McChonnache?” said Jaimiee.

“Yeah, he was my uncle. Lived here all his life. We figured to put him in a nice nursing home, but he never would go. Loved it here. Said he planned to die here.”

“Quit being sentimental, Wooster, the old fart’s still causing us grief. Went off and died were nobody can find him. Now it’s gonna take a bunch of lawyers to get him declared dead before we can do anything with this place.”

Jaimiee, sensing an escape opportunity said, “Well then, that will be your first course of action, to obtain clear title, and then we can begin discussions.”

“Well we sure as hell want to be ready to roll quick. I’m damn sick and tired of bein’ poor,” said Rosanne.

“I’ll be going now,” said Jaimiee. “I’ve got a ferry to catch. We’ll be in touch.” She drove slowly through the meadow, thinking about Mr. McChonnache and wondering if he was with the kidnappers. A marsh hawk patrolled low over the tall grasses, and a meadowlark sang from an old fence post.

## Chapter Three

Jaimiee watched in her rear-view-mirror as the Cascade peaks caught the first rays of sun. Back in Seattle, she and Dan had decided that she should follow the trail of faxes the kidnappers had left. He agreed it was probable that Mr. McChonnache had been kidnapped by mistake. They could only hope she would find the kidnappers before the whole thing hit the news media; even a failed kidnapping attempt against Mr. Hunnycut could be unsettling to their investors.

Just before the truckstop in Ellensburg, Jaimiee passed a man dressed in a white suit. At his feet sat a leather-strapped valise with a hand lettered sign attached, Eseldorf, it read. He looked at his pocket watch, nodded and smiled under his bushy mustache.

I don't know where Eseldorf is, chuckled Jaimiee, but I don't think I'm going there.

At the truckstop she gassed up under an island of green lights slowly losing the battle with the sunrise. Irritated by the smell of feed lots, gasoline and diesel fumes, she hoped this stop wouldn't take long. Inside, she asked the cashier where she could find the fax machine.

"Over to your right, honey, past that row of cigarette machines and down that hall," said the cashier, as she tugged at her bra. "There's an attendant in the drivers' lounge."

Jaimiee nodded wearily and sighed. Her high heels clicked on the painted concrete floor of the hallway. The lounge decor could have been gold and blue, but she couldn't tell for the blue cigarette smoke. The dim room was dominated by a large screen television, tuned to three scantily clad women doing aerobics. When Jaimiee entered, all eyes turned to the real thing.

"Well, well, well, I do declare that we got us here some pulchritude of the feminine persuasion," said a large man, as he lumbered into Jaimiee's path and brushed a long cigarette ash from the belly of his Confederate flag T-shirt. "The dark feminine persuasion." He raised his eyebrows.

Jaimiee glared at the smug grin, and felt a familiar sick feeling in her chest.

"Leave the lady alone, Billy Bob," said the woman who stepped between them. "You just don't get it, do you, cracker?"

Billy Bob backed away mumbling. He lowered his bulk to the brown Naugahyde chair and returned to the television.

"Sorry miss, I hooked up with Billy Bob here when I had a chanst at a long haul out here from Spartanburg. I didn't have no choice but to hire the first warm body that come along."

"What's your name?" asked Jamiee.

"Annabelle."

Jaimiee extended her hand. "Hello, Annabelle, my name is Jaimiee, and thanks for coming to my rescue."

"I got a feelin' you can handle yourself."

"Could be," smiled Jaimiee. "I'm a security consultant, and I've handled worse than Billy Bob."

"What the damn hell is a security consultant?"

"Fancy new name for a private detective," said Jaimiee.

"Now if'n I wanted to be nosy, what would you tell me you was a lookin' for in a damn truck stop?"

"I'm trying find out anything I can about some people who sent a fax from here a couple of days ago."



"Well, shoot, I bet Jenny over here'll know. She keeps this place up, the tevee workin', the stolen phone books replaced, and helps drivers figure out how to run the fax thing."

"Could you introduce me to her?"

The woman led the way to a small, brightly lit office just off the drivers' lounge.

"Jenny, I wonder if'n you could help my friend out. She's lookin' fer some people what sent a fax from here a couple a days ago."

"I don't know if I can help you or not; even truck drivers don't want strangers reading their faxes," said Jenny.

"I understand, but I have a very good reason," Jaimiee sat down and laid the first ransom note in front of Jenny. "This is the fax that was sent to my client. You can see that it's a ransom note."

Jenny looked at the fax, then at Jaimiee, picked it up and read it.

"Well, I can see from the tag line that it was sent from this machine Monday at 8:40 p.m. For some reason the phone number is missing."

"Looks like they might have tried to reprogram it and only got the job half done. Can you help me with this Jenny?"

"Let me look at the log," Jenny said, as she flipped through a loose-leaf notebook.

"Doris was on duty," she said, as she ran her finger down the list for Monday. "Quiet shift; only one outgoing. Had to reprogram the fax next day. Happens all the time, guys just bang away at the buttons right and left... Well, here it is, a Ben, something or other, can't read it, looks like Marker, Marconi, that's it, Marconi."

Jenny handed the list to Jaimiee who wrote the name in her PDA. "Could I maybe talk to Doris, is she around today?"

"She's at home, and will be sleeping for awhile yet. Come back around eight and I'll call her for you," said Jenny.

Jaimiee and Annabelle walked down the hall to the restaurant. Jaimiee had a fruit plate and oatmeal. Annabelle had the Feedlot Special: a half-pound of steak and home fries with three fried eggs on top. She told Jaimiee all about the truck-driving business; she'd been in it for over twenty-five years, most of it with her husband, but she'd lost him to a heart attack a few years back.

"I was driving at the time. I saw it a comin' and drove like a bat outta hell for the hospital, but was too late," said Annabelle, quietly. "He was a good man. I miss him like the dickens. We both loved the open road. It ain't the same no more."

"It sounds like you had a wonderful life together. I'm sorry." Jaimiee folded her napkin. "I'm stuffed, couldn't eat another bite." She pushed her chair back to stretch her sore calves, she was discovering that marathon driving and high heels don't mix. "No, I'll pass," said Jaimiee to the coffee pot the waitress offered.

Jenny came into the restaurant talking on a portable telephone.

"It's Doris," she said, handing the phone to Jaimiee. "She called in early to check her shifts for next week. She says she remembers the people who sent the fax."

"Hi Doris." Jaimiee introduced herself and began asking questions.

"They were quite a crew, I tell you. They parked this big, long limousine outside, and the whole bunch came in, even the dog."

"Dog?"

"Yeah, they had a Dalmatian with them, cute thing, just full of wiggles you know. Well, the woman and the short guy came up to the office to send the fax."

"Did you get a good look at them?"

"The woman had the most beautiful red hair. She was in her forties I'd guess. Her face was real pretty and she had a nice smile."

"How about the man?" Jaimiee took notes rapidly.

"Funny looking. He had this greased back hair and thin lamb chop sideburns, and he was short. He had this odd face, kind of like a mole or something, and he wore this suit that looked twenty years old. He seemed really nervous, always looking over his shoulder. I didn't like his looks."

"What about the others?"

"Well, there were two other men. The one holding the dog was real quiet and he just sat there watching the television and every now and then he would talk to the old man. He was wearing slacks and a Hawaiian shirt. He was bald as a billiard ball, had a thick neck and his nose looked like it'd been broken a dozen times. I caught his eye once and he smiled back at me, but he looked a little nervous too."

"How old do you think the other one was, Doris?"

"Well, the old guy was really old, I mean ancient old, he must of been ninety at least. All gray and wrinkled, but he could get around pretty good on his own with a cane. He had this cute little tweed cap. Happiest looking man I ever saw. He'd just smile at anybody or anything that his eyes fell on, and he had the cutest smile."

"Did you hear their names?"

"They all seemed to call the old guy just 'the old guy' and I believe they called the bald one Charlie. Sorry I didn't get the woman's name."

"Don't be sorry Doris, this is really going to help us."

"Do you think it was the old man who they kidnapped?" said Doris.

“I’m afraid so, but it doesn’t seem as if they’re mistreating him,” said Jaimiee. “Still, I’ve got a funny feeling about this bunch. They’re not very professional, and that could be trouble.”

“Now I’m really worried about the old man,” said Doris.

“I’ll give you a call when I get it all sorted out.”

## Chapter Four

Charlie shook his bald head and went inside to sit with the old man, who didn't seem to have noticed the limo roar off, or the women give chase. Charlie watched the solitaire game, petted the dog. The whole thing had gone bad.

"Find the picture, Charlie!" said Ben. "I think that's him, coming up the road. Slow down Bette!"

"What picture, Ben?" Charlie rummaged through an old leather briefcase.

"The old man, you idiot! The mark. The billionaire. Gimme that!"

"Well, do I stop or not Ben?" said Bette.

"No. Yes! Everybody look normal."

Ben found the picture. "Take away the funny little hat and cane and that's our man, old money bags, James P. Hunnycut. Keep a lookout for bodyguards."

"Nobody here, Ben," said Bette. "Road runs right down to the bluff."

"Okay, pull up beside him and we'll grab him."

"Here we go, guys. No going back now," said Bette as she eased the aging limo down the narrow road toward the old man.

Bette was forty-something, a buxom redhead looking back on a life of bad luck. The times she'd seen had toughened everything but her heart.

Charlie was long on muscle and short on smarts. A thick-necked natural skinhead and one-time pro boxer who'd taken a few too many punches. He would risk his life for any underdog, including the yearling Dalmatian, Spot. He saved her from some kids feeding her amphetamines for entertainment. She still tended to be a little wired.

Ben was the brains of the outfit, or so he thought. He was middle-aged and laid-off from Boeing; he was going to get back at corporate America, and get rich.

Bette had named the old limo they bought for the job, Taj Majal, Taj for short, for its gold trim, huge size and hint of riches – and maybe love – to come.

Bette had eased up beside the old man, and lowered the window. “Hello,” she said to his big smile, “can you show me how to get to Eagle Way?”

“Well,” he said, cupping his ear toward her, “we dunna hae no beagles 'round heah, but e ya wan to ge ta the Eagle Way, ye've onlee ta gae dun a ways,” he pointed his shillelagh over his shoulder, “tern ta yer lef and ther ya be!” His Celtic smile would melt the heart of a banshee, let alone an aging prostitute.

Charlie and Ben threw open the twin rear doors of the Taj and leaped out, grabbed the old man roughly and shoved him in the back.

“Oh, my,” he said. “Oh my, are we gan ta hae a ride.”

“You guys don't have to be so rough!” snapped Bette.

“Move this thing!” said Ben. “We got to get off this point before somebody misses the old fart.”

“Oh my, oh my, I do love a goode ride,” he said as he began to pet Spot, who was sniffing his crotch and armpits. “Oh. A doggie. I do love a doggie, they won le me hae one.”

“They won't let you have a dog? You're the seventh-richest man in the world, and they won't let you have a dog?” said Charlie.

“Wha's a doggie's name?”

“I don't get it. Can't have a dog,” said Charlie.

“Shut up!” said Ben. “Faster, Bette.”

"His name is Spot," said Bette, looking in the mirror. Spot was licking the old man's face and wagging her tail in Ben's.

The old man was giggling. "Oh please, oh please, I'm a gan ta pee my pants e ya dunna stop, doggie."

The limo sped across the narrow floating bridge that led to the outside world. At the east end of the bridge, they passed a distinguished looking white-haired man in a white suit. He saluted them with an expansive wave of his five-cent cigar.

They turned south to skirt greater Seattle, stopped for gas, Twinkies, and a pee at a quick mart on I-5. Then they turned due east over remote White Pass, and into the Intermountain West, a long white and gold streak between snow banks. They planned to begin faxing their ransom notes from truckstops throughout the empty sagebrush country.

The old man sat with his nose fogging up the window, taking in the world in great gasps, sighs and guffaws, stamping his shillelagh with glee. Spot barked and licked his face. He even took pleasure counting telephone poles out loud.

"Charlie, take that stick away from him and get him to shut up," said Ben.

"Aw Ben he's havin' fun."

"Yeah, lay off Ben, the old man's okay, batty maybe but okay," said Bette.

"We ya lookit thet," said the old man, as they passed a blacktail deer fawn and its mother. "A wee one we spots on im still, an it bein Oktober!"

"Mr. Hunnycut!" said Charlie "It's April, not October."

"Well bless me..." he said. "Wa ya callin me Hunnycut? Iz at me nam now? A kenna remember."

"You can't remember your name?" said Charlie, "Uh-oh — Ben! What if we got the wrong guy!"

"I don't make mistakes," said Ben. "This is the man. He's our ticket out of the poor house."

The old man turned to Ben. "Tha be wha ma nephew's wife say."

"That business magazine article didn't say nothin' about him bein' batty," said Bette. "They made him out to be some kind of smart ass, writing books and stuff. This sweet old guy can't remember his name!"

"Hey," said Ben, "you think they're going to let the press print that he's a cabbagehead? Wall Street would probably go tits up, what with all the big companies he owns."

"Hope you're right Ben," said Bette.

"Don't worry. They'll keep the lid on all that stuff," said Ben.

"How's the old guy?" asked Bette.

"Takin' a nap with Spot in his lap," said Charlie. "He sure ain't acting like he' bein' kidnapped."

"Yeah, well, we'll take good care of the old guy," said Bette. "We just want a little of his money; I'm getting way too old too turn tricks. About time to send that fax, Ben?"

"I got the first one all made up," said Ben.

"That glue stinks," said Charlie. "Couldn't you find a better way than cuttin' up words outa magazines?"

"You dope. This is the way you're supposed to do ransom notes," said Ben.

"Where we goin' to send it from?" asked Charlie.

"Truckstop in Ellensburg," said Ben. "All the truckstops have faxes now. I know how to reprogram the things so nobody can tell where it came from."

"You're pretty smart with all that stuff, Ben," said Charlie.

"That's why I'm the boss."



Charlie looked across the table and watched the old man win another game of solitaire. Things started going bad soon after they'd sent the fax. They wandered around three states and failed to get a reply. Ben sent a more threatening fax and they hadn't heard from that either. Now Ben had stole their limo and Bette was gone.

## Chapter Five

Bette was sure Wanda was going to blow the Trans Am before they got out of sight of Fields. The car wound to almost four thousand on the tach before Wanda jerked back on the big chrome Hurst shifter and popped the clutch. The rear of the car squatted to the hot blacktop like a bitch-in-heat, as they wound through forth with the speedometer passing a hundred.

"For God's sake Wanda, slow down," said Bette. "That old heap of a limo isn't good for more than seventy, we'll catch up to Ben before long."

"Maybe so," said Wanda, "but I hardly never get an excuse to turn this baby loose. I hate to waste it."

"Yeah," yelled Bette, over the engine noise and general vibration. "And I'm not ready to die yet."

"Okay. But we don't want to let that weasel get away," said Wanda, as she dropped to eighty where the vibration eased.

"How far is it to the next junction?"

"Just past Denio, right across in Nevada, there's a junction," said Wanda. "A right turn there would take him over to Lakeview, back in Oregon, and from there he could get real lost in three or four directions. He could go to K-Falls or Bend, or back to Burns or drop over into California..."

"How far's that junction?"

"Thirty miles," said Wanda.

"Better crank this buggy up again," said Bette. "Can't let 'im get there first."

"You got it!" said Wanda. She wound back up to a hundred. The steering wheel shook her hands so hard she kept losing her cigarette ash.

There was no use trying to talk, so Bette decided to put her trust in Wanda. She watched the sagebrush hurtle past, and the road seemed to be a

flowing stream beneath them. She thought about the old man. She was glad Charlie was with him.

Too bad she'd trusted Ben. She should have known better.

"Where the hell are we, Bette?" Ben had asked.

"Nowhere," Bette answered. "Glad I filled up back in that town, it looks like it's a hundred miles to Fields."

Taj cruised for an hour on the gravel ranch road between the snow-capped escarpment of Steens Mountain and the smooth roundness of the Sheephead range.

"Hey, look up ahead, there's steam in the desert!" said Bette, pointing to a place where steam billowed from water bubbling out of a dry lakebed. "I got to get out from behind this damn wheel anyway." She pulled the Taj to a stop near a makeshift shelter and two pools. "It's a hot springs!"

She bolted toward the first pool, paused to shed her clothes and jumped in. Spot was not far behind, and the two frolicked in the steaming water, Spot barked and Bette laughed with delight.

"Oh my," said the old man, who had been awakened by the commotion. "Oh my, a nekkid lassie, Oh my!" His eyes sparkled.

Ben and Charlie looked in wide-eyed disbelief, and then made their way across the rough planks to the pool. Charlie stripped to his boxers and tumbled over the edge.

The old man found his shillelagh and shuffled as fast as he could toward the fun.

"Come on old guy, room for you too," said Bette.

When he got there, Bette helped him get undressed, “Oh my, Oh my,” and into the pool, where she playfully splashed him, and Spot tried to climb up on his back.

“We could use some soap, guys. Who wants to volunteer to get it?” said Bette.

Charlie and Ben looked at each other. “Him!” they pointed.

“Men! I’ll get it myself,” said Bette, as she threw a thigh over the edge of the pool. Ben and Charlie looked on furtively. The old man smiled and stared with unabashed pleasure at her nakedness. “Oh my. Oh my.”

She returned carrying soap and some towels. She didn’t attempt to cover herself, and the men stared.

“Okay, guys, wash your eyes out with this,” said Bette, as she passed out the soaps. She dunked to get wet again and proceeded to wash herself fully.

“Get to work guys, Taj is startin’ to stink. And stop your looking. You never seen a naked woman before?”

Charlie and Ben shyly soaped up and scrubbed in the hot water. The sulfur made it feel slick on their skin, and the scent, at first harsh, soothed their road-ravaged nerves. Their faces relaxed, Charlie began to nap, his head leaning back against the edge of the pool. Ben stared into the distance.

The old man stood in the waist-deep water, alternately playing with Spot, looking at Bette, or looking far across the mirages of the dry Alvord Lake to the blue-hazed mountains beyond – trying to remember something.

When Bette had finished with her long red hair she stood behind him and scrubbed his scalp vigorously like a mother lovingly washing a dirty child. Her breasts swung against his back as she worked. After rinsing his hair she washed his back and arms, working lower over his chest and stomach, cleansing his wrinkled drying skin with care.

"Oh my, oh my," he said. "I canna remember, I dunna remember har nam, but thar was a lassie..." He raised his head to the desert sky and placed a gnarled hand over his eyes. "Was wi' me long an love me. Was wi' me long..."

Bette stopped. "You two beat it. We still got some beers in the cooler."

Charlie and Ben looked at each other.

"Beat it."

She remembered how it felt carrying him around in the hot spring and singing to him, how his thin, dry, wrinkled skin felt against her breasts.

The speeding car swerved and brought Bette back. She looked over at Wanda, cigarette hanging from her lip, hunched over the wheel, concentrating on the road while singing the fifties hit, *Hot-Rod-Lincoln*.

She smiled. Why was Wanda helping her? She doesn't even know why I need her help. How will I ever thank this woman? She turned back to the window and her immediate problem.

After they had left the hot springs was when the whole thing came to a head:

"Looks like the old fart's sleeping again," said Ben. "He's either sleeping or fogging up the window, or making us stop so he can pee."

"When your bladder's that old you'll want to pee every twenty minutes too," said Bette.

"Sometimes he talks in his sleep real quiet like," said Charlie. "About someplace, sounds like Glass Cow or something. Then he mumbles this little song about taking the high road, and somebody else taking the low road and him gettin' to Scotland before the other, and never seeing his girl anymore..."

"Uh oh," said Ben. "Oh no."

"What's wrong?" asked Bette.

"What kind of a name is Hunnycut?" whined Ben. "Tell me it's Scottish. Please, tell me it's Scottish."

"No, I think it's Polish or, hell I don't know, not Scottish though," said Bette. Then, "Uh oh."

"What's a matter!" asked Charlie.

"This old guy came from Scotland. That's why he talks funny. So we got the wrong guy, meathead," said Ben.

"You the one said he looked like the picture. You the one said nab him!" said Charlie. "Don't call me a meathead!"

"Now what?" said Bette.

"I guess we dump the old guy and beat it," said Ben.

"What?" said Bette. "Dump him! How long you think this old guy would last out here?"

"Okay, we keep him with us until the heat's on, then we dump him and the cops'll get him home."

"Okay, you two, shut up," said Bette. "I gotta think."

"Yeah, shut up Charlie, we have to think."

"Not we, Ben – me," said Bette, fixing him in the rearview mirror with hard eyes. "I'm taking over this gig. You screwed it up, and now I'm going to fix it up."

"Forget it, you old whore!" said Ben.

Charlie picked Ben up by the seat of his pants and shirt collar and slammed him against the glass divider, pressing his face into the glass.

"Apologize to the lady, Ben. Apologize to the lady."

"Okay!" said Ben. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Charlie dropped Ben to the floor where he lay, watching Charlie warily. The old man held a wildly barking Spot to his chest.

Bette was aware again of the desert speeding by her window. She shook her head. Damn Ben. He would have just set that old man out there to die in the desert. Just left him.

Bette had lost track of her own father when her mother ran off with a carnie and took her along. The carnie was a whiz at hitting Coke bottles with a three-inch ring from twenty feet away. He would stand out in the midway and toss ringer after ringer with a deft flick of his tattooed arm until he had a crowd, and he'd make a hundred bucks off the suckers. Her mother figured that was the sexiest thing she'd ever seen, and begged him to take them with him.

Her dad came to the carnival to look for them and her mother hid her and told her the carnie would kill them if she made a sound. She last saw him through the cracks in the wall of a carnival truck. He was standing in the rain, his overalls soaked and his Sunday hat dripping. A cotton candy dissolved in his hand and dripped pink into the mud. The neon flashed green and red into his desperate, confused face.

Bette wondered why the old man had been wandering all alone on that road where they found him.

Bang! Thunk, thunk. The car lurched and Bette grabbed for the dashboard.

"Oh no!" Wanda screamed, as she fought to control the fishtailing Trans Am. After what seemed like a long time, and two close encounters with the ditch, she got it stopped.

"What the hell you doing woman?" cried Bette, as she pried her fingernails from the dashboard.

"Jackrabbit, we hit a Jackrabbit! He must've messed something up underneath. Car won't steer right."

"Great!" said Bette. "Let's take a look."

What they found was a bent tie rod.

"Now what?" said Wanda, looking bewildered.

"You got a tire iron and jack?"

"Don't hurt my baby," said Wanda as she opened the trunk.

"Don't worry," said Bette as she quickly jacked the front of the car as high as possible. Then she pulled herself under and started swinging away at the offending part. "I'm going to fix your baby."

After several minutes and not a little cursing, Bette emerged sweating, but grinning.

"That should help, let's hit it Wanda."

They jumped in the car, scattering candy wrappers, tissues and empty Marlboro packs. Wanda had regained her nerve and managed to get up to seventy before the front end began wandering dangerously. They passed through Denio and went on to the junction three miles beyond, where they found a gas station, a mom and pop store, restaurant and motel. They tried the station first.

Wanda pulled up to the open bay door where a man, who appeared to be made of automobile grease, was changing a tire.

"Help you ladies?" he asked through a nearly toothless grin, as he wiped his face with a grimy hand and sat on the tire. "Warm today."

"Sure is," said Wanda. "Spring I reckon."

"Hurry up," hissed Bette. "We don't have all day."



"I'm in no hurry for July," said Wanda.

"Yeah, I can't get no work done when it's that hot." he said, then, "So, what can I do you for?"

"You didn't happen to see a big old white car go by here, did you?" said Wanda.

"Now that you mention it; went by here just a lickety-split."

"Did you happen to catch which way he turned?" asked Wanda.

"Oh, he was headed for Winnemucca for sure. He'd a never made the turn to Lakeview. Went like a bat-outta-hell, black smoke just pourin' outta the tailpipe. Either the choke's hung up or he's lost a plug. Won't make it to Winnemucca."

The two women looked at each other, let out a whoop and peeled out.

It was less than forty minutes later that they saw Ben, hands in pockets, shirt unbuttoned, head down, sweating and shuffling toward them on the white, sagebrush-scattered playa.

"Here, put this on," Bette shoved a Burns Bros. Truck Stop cap on Wanda's head. "Offer him a ride."

Bette climbed over the seat and hid in the back. Wanda put on dark sunglasses and slid down in the seat as she slowed and stopped beside Ben.

"Looks like you could use yourself a ride mister," said Wanda in an unnaturally deep voice. She gunned the engine. "I'm headed for Winnemucca, would that do you?"

"It sure would," said Ben. "That was where I was going when my car broke down."

"Hop in."

Ben opened the passenger door and jumped in. He saw Bette, just as she closed both arms around his neck. He screamed, bit her arm, wriggled free and jumped out of the car. He ran across the desert, tripping on sagebrush with Bette and Wanda in hot pursuit. Wanda lasted about twenty yards before she stopped, gasping and coughing. Bette kept close behind him until he tired and collapsed, defeated, on the cutbank of a shallow wash.

"Okay, okay," whined Ben. "I didn't do anything. You can't hurt me. If you turn me in to the cops I'll tell on you!"

"I'm half a mind to strangle you right here and leave you for the coyotes."

"Please Bette. Just take me to Winnemucca. I won't bother you any more. I promise. I promise."

"We'll see. We got us a limo to fix. We'll get back to the cafe and talk it over," said Bette. "Get up," she kicked sand at him. "I'm not going to carry you back."

Ben trudged back, stewing in humiliation.

"So, Ben, you run out of gas or what?" said Bette.

"I don't know, and I wouldn't tell you if I did."

Bette got in the driver's side of Taj and turned the key to accessory. Out of gas. She decided to put in the can they'd picked up at the gas station and see if it would run without changing the plugs. It ran so rough she figured they wouldn't make it back to the station on two gallons. Wanda helped her raise the long hood, she had to hold it up while Bette worked on removing the plugs to dry and clean them. They didn't notice Ben ease himself back to Wanda's car.

A magpie flew through the shimmering heat waves, laughing into the Black Rock Desert noon.

Wanda screamed when she looked up to see Ben swing the big tire iron down on the back of Bette's head. She heard a hollow crunch. Blood and hair,

pieces of flesh spattered her face. Bette went limp and slid to the ground. Wanda dropped the hood and screamed again. Ben stood looking back and forth between Bette at his feet, and the mess on the end of the tire iron, then walked slowly back to the Trans Am. He bent to clean the tire iron in the sand, dropped it through the window and drove away.

Bette lay on her back, her eyes moving rapidly and independently. Sometimes her left hand jerked in the bloody sand. The rest of her was limp, flaccid.

Wanda stayed beside her, cried and held her hand, touched her face and talked to her. Then Bette's hand stopped moving, and her eyes closed against the white sky.

## Chapter Six

The sound of the approaching motor seeped into Wanda's tortured consciousness. She jumped to her feet and leaped in front of the truck, waving her arms. The semi billowed blue smoke from eighteen tires, and she scrambled back.

"Help me! Help me!" She grabbed the man who jumped out of the cab looking angry. "She's been beat with a tire iron and I don't know what's wrong with her. She won't talk to me."

His angry look changed to fear. He ran to Bette, steadied her head, checked her pulse and put his ear to her mouth. He recoiled from the blood on his hand, and looked wide-eyed at Wanda. He ran to the truck where his partner was just rousting out of the sleeper.

"Get on the CB, Pete, channel nine, put out a mayday. Get an ambulance damn quick. And cops too."

"What the hell, Barry, what's goin' on? Where are we?"

"We got a woman with a busted head. We're about, what, maybe forty miles north of Winnemucca on 140, just west of the junction with 95. Hurry up, she's either dead or real close."

"No she ain't dead! Don't you talk like that!" screamed Wanda. She grabbed a fistful of his shirt and yanked on him, "Don't you say that!" Wanda ran to Bette and threw herself on her knees in the gravel. "Bette, wake up, wake up," she pleaded, "help me, wake up, don't do like this!" She looked up at the stricken man standing above them, her face streamed tears, her eyes bulged with fear and pleading. "Honest to god, mister, she'll be fine. They'll take her to the hospital and fix her up and everything will be just like it was before. She just

needs a little rest now. I dragged her into the shade." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Blood stained her cheek. "That's why she's sleeping so good, see, 'cause it's so cool in the shade, ain't it so? She'll wake up pretty soon now." Wanda looked back at Bette's pale face. "And then she'll be fine, just fine, won't she?"

"Yes ma'am," he touched the bill of his Reddaway cap and looked away from her eyes. "I'm sure everything will be fine in a little while. Maybe you'd like to lay down in the truck. We got air conditioning."

"No! I'll just stay here. She might wake up and want to tell me something. She's just resting her eyes now." The driver shook his head and went back to the truck.

"There's help a coming Bette, so you just rest all you want to," said Wanda, and she patted Bette's hand and looked at her face. Then Wanda's face lit up, and she clapped her hands and laughed. "Bette, you know what I'm going to do? I'm going tell you that story about my wedding day. Remember how I promised you?" Wanda ran long hard fingers through her matted hair, sniffed and took a deep breath. "See, I was a going to make you wait for that story, but I think now would be just a real good time for it." She held Bette's hand with both her own. Her tears eased, and she sighed.

"Any-old-way, me and Buster was real hot for each other. You remember that? So we just couldn't wait to get married. Back then people didn't just live together forever, like they do nowadays. Buster's family wasn't a bit happy about it, let me tell you. They was rich people, and they had a long history going way back to the pioneer days in Portland. Family name was Parks. They all had big old houses up in the West Hills a looking out over the city and across to Mount Hood. The women in that family all dressed real fancy like and I could tell they didn't like my Woolworth specials, or the way I talked.

"But we was lucky, because his mother, Rose, bless her soul, just loved that boy of hers so much that anything he wanted was what she wanted for him. She was that kind of mother, and she stood by us, until she died, not too long before Buster.

"Buster was sort of an odd duck for a family like that. I suppose every family has got one. Well, except for his talking and his dressing, he dressed real nice, always had the best suits; he was different. Where they all belonged to the right golf clubs and garden clubs and such, all of Buster's friends was, what you might call, from the wrong side of the tracks.

"The best man at the wedding was the shoe shine boy down at the train station. He wasn't no boy though, he was getting on in years some, sixty I'd say, probably gone on by now. Black as licorice and just as sweet I used to tell him." Wanda smiled at the memory. "He'd laugh and slap his leg when I said that.

"Any-old-way, Buster got his shoes shined every day and spent the morning sitting in one of Churchill's chairs, that was his name, Churchill, and reading the paper and talking politics and such. It was like he was holding court, so many was hanging around listening to him. The paperboy, he wasn't no boy neither, Cactus was his name, brought Buster his paper there and stayed to talk. Cactus was all bent up like a pretzel, he was, how he ever got up and down the street hauling that load of papers I'll never know.

Wanda ran her shaking hand down Bette's forearm. She turned to the truck, back to Bette's face and then off to the west and the vastness of the Black Rock Desert.

"Buster knew all about that stock market stuff and he would always tell the boys what they should buy and what they should sell. Well, of course the boys didn't have no money to speak of, but they would give Buster twenty five dollars or something every now and then, most of their tips, and he would

invest it for them in whatever stock they thought sounded good to them at the time, usually them penny stocks, them cheap risky ones. Well, they always made money, every time you see, because Buster would tell them they did even if the company went bust, and he would give them back twice or three times their money. Told me they needed to feel important, everybody needs to feel like they are smart and they are important. He figured that way they could feel equal to the blue suits who bought the papers and had their shoes shined and never hardly ever talked to them. Buster knew all about good investments.

"Back to the wedding. His sisters, there was three of them, was beside themselves at the thought of having to go to the same wedding with some of these people that was Buster's friends. But, his mother made some not so subtle threats having to do with inheritance, and they all was going to come.

"So, it was summer and all, and Buster thought his friends downtown could use some sunshine and a day at the coast. So that's where we planned to have the wedding, out at the beach. It was at a real pretty place that you see on half the color picture calendars in the world, with all the big rocks and the surf and green mountains and all.

"Real early the morning of the wedding, it was a Saturday, we had us two big old busses rented, driver and all, and we drove all over downtown looking for Buster's friends. Well, first we stopped under the Burnside Bridge. I tell you what, they came out from under the bushes rolling up their bedrolls, all waving and congratulating us and all, since word had got out the week before that their friend Buster was getting hitched."

"Before we left there we had us one bus full, and we sent it over to the YMCA. Buster told everybody they had to have them a shower and dress in clean clothes—we'd bought out the Goodwill store—if they was to go to the wedding and have all the good food and drink. They was also to promise that

there wouldn't be any drinking until after the service was over and everybody had eaten some, then they was to have all the bubbly that they could pour down their gullets."

"Then we took the other bus through the shopping district and filled it up with store clerks and street vendors that had took the day off of work, and lots of hippies he knew from hanging out on the street. We whooped it up all the way, singing Bob Dylan songs and blowing bubbles, and telling stories. I got to meet all the people that loved Buster. I was in heaven working my way up and down the aisle of first one bus, and then after a pee stop, the other bus."

"Three Cadillacs full of Buster's family passed us about half way out, but they didn't look like they was having much fun. Only Rose waved."

Wanda stopped, looked at Bette's flaccid face, rocked back and forth on her knees and cried. After a minute, she steeled herself, sighed, and continued.

"Well, any-old-way, when we pulled into the park I couldn't believe what I was seeing. There was this big meadow overlooking the beach and the surf and all, and in that big meadow was five or six big striped tents with their sides rolled up. There was red and white ones, and blue and green ones, and there was flagpoles with long waving yellow flags on them, and there was people flying great big rainbow kites. Inside the tents there was people all dressed in white running around and filling up big tables with enough food to feed an army. I tell you it was something; all this for a girl from Fields, Oregon just because she was marrying Buster Parks.

"Excuse me ma'am," said the driver, "but we're going to move the truck over here to give you some better shade, so don't be worried. And, I thought you might want to put this over your friend," as he handed her a well-used blanket. "We just heard on the CB that there was an ambulance on the way from Winnemucca. It shouldn't be more than a half-hour now."



Wanda nodded and spread the blanket over Bette and tucked it under her chin. Her hands trembled. "I never thought you might be cold, you feeling poorly and all, I don't want you to start shivering on me now. You let me know if that's too warm for you." She smoothed the blanket over Bette.

"Anyway, we all piled out of the busses and people was running all over the meadow just so happy they was about to bust. There was hippies throwing their Frisbees to dogs, and bums just rolling in the long grass that didn't have hardly no dog poop like the grass in the city. Other people was just sitting on rocks and looking at the surf, and some of them was taking their shoes off and rolling up their pant legs and getting wet."

"Pretty soon we all walked down to the beach and stood on the hard cool sand in our bare feet. I can still remember what it was like to dig my toes into that sand. The preacher stood with her back to the ocean and got everybody's attention. She was the preacher at the African church where Churchill went, and she was wearing this beautiful tie dyed African wrap dress, and she was real beautiful. Me and Buster stood up facing her with everybody behind us. Churchill stood beside Buster and Buster's mother, her name was Rose — did I say that — sweet woman, she stood up for me because my mama was poorly and I didn't have any women friends to speak of. Pretty soon the preacher was pronouncing us husband and wife, and then we had one of our famous oyster kisses. Everybody cheered real big and whooped it up and threw their hats and Frisbees in the air. Then somebody got the idea to throw us in the surf and they did, but we took a bunch with us, and we was all laughing and splashing.

The truck driver came and knelt beside Wanda and put his hand gently on her shoulder. "Are you sure you don't want to come and lay down in the truck ma'am?"

“No,” Wanda looked him in the eye. “Bette needs to hear me finish telling my story. She needs to hear this story I’m a telling her.” Her fists were clenched and the corner of her mouth twitched. “She wants to know how it comes out. And I am a going to finish it.” She glared at the man. He looked over at his partner, who shook his head and wiped his hand over his face. The driver took his hand from Wanda’s shoulder and watched the sky turn black in the north.

Wanda put her palm on Bette’s forehead. It was cold. “I sure am glad they brought this blanket for you, Bette. It feels good to you don’t it?” She was quiet for a moment. She looked at the men’s backs, past them at the darkening sky. She sighed and turned back to Bette.

“Well, any-old-way, after we got good and wet, we went up on the bluff where the tents was and began the eating. Buster’s sisters was all dressed up fancy, and still dry since they had ran the other way when the fun started, and they was holding their plates real proper, and even had their pinkies stuck out from their Champagne glasses. Buster’s baby sister, Magnolia, was still single at about fifty-something, and I’d always thought she was the most stuck-up acting of the bunch. Well, I noticed that, Billy —everybody from under the Burnside Bridge called him, ‘Coyote’ —Moon, was a watching her eat and talk so proper and everything. He was just fascinated for some reason, and stared at her with his black eyes and had this little curl to his lip.

“Well, I went back to eating, and watching Buster eat, and lost track of Coyote and Magnolia for awhile. By now everybody was getting pretty much lubricated with the bubbly. That’s when I saw Coyote out of the corner of my eye coming toward Magnolia holding an armful of water balloons. Churchill and Cactus were over at a hose bib filling balloons and handing them out as fast as they could go. Magnolia was making a big speech to some people about how the country was a going to hell in a hand-basket. She was so stuck on talking big

that she never saw the bright yellow balloon until right before it hit her square in her bony chest. Well, it exploded in her face, knocked the Champagne glass right out of her hand, and run down her front, turning her white dress just as see-through as could be.

"Everybody got real quiet, except for Buster, and he was laughing fit to bust a gut. Well, Magnolia stood there with a mortified look on her face, and people was saying, 'Oh my God,' and 'Never should have invited those people,' and stuff like that."

"Then Churchill walked up to her real respectful like, bowed and handed her a bright red balloon just about to bust. Well, you could a heard a pin drop in that grass. She looked at Churchill, and she looked at the balloon, and she looked back at Churchill who was standing by with more balloons like he was her helper at a duel or something. Then you could see a little smile start to building at the corner of her mouth, and she looked at Coyote. And then she kicked off her fancy shoes, and she ran at him hard, screaming 'Geronimo', which Coyote thought was pretty funny later, seeing as how he is mostly Crow, not Apache. So, instead of throwing the balloon, she just held it and jumped on his back as he ran and the balloon busted just as they hit the ground. Well, Churchill was right there with another balloon for her and she just about drowned Coyote before she let him up.

"Of course by this time everybody was into it, and they was using left over Jell-O salad and shaking up Champagne bottles, and rubbing gobs of wedding cake into each others hair." Wanda started to laugh, then choked off a sob and gazed across the desert. Through quivering lips, she said, "Sight to see, it was..."

She looked at Bette, bent and moved a few strands of red hair and sighed. "After about an hour of that we was all so tired and drunk, that we started

taking naps in the grass, and some went down to the beach to wash off and wade in the waves. We was a real mellow group, let me tell you. Magnolia sat with Churchill and Coyote and listened to the stories they had to tell. She probably wouldn't have said boo to them down on Burnside the week before."

"Me and Buster sat with his mother and laughed at how the wedding had gone from bad to worse and how much fun everybody had. One of Buster's sisters came up to us said she'd never been so embarrassed in her life and she would never, ever, come to anything we organized again.

"I wish you could have been there Bette. I never have had a real good woman friend." She ran her palm down Bette's forearm again, feeling the soft red hairs and the cold of her skin. "You got to make it, Bette."

The siren was small and far away for a long time, and then it suddenly stopped. Three medics piled out of the aid truck and moved Wanda aside. They carefully put Bette on a stretcher, wrapped her in blankets and immobilized her with straps. One of the medics administered a shot; they packed her head in cold packs and put her on a respirator.

Wanda grabbed the white jacket of one medic. "She's alive? You wouldn't go to all this trouble if she wasn't. She's alive!"

"Yes ma'am. She is still alive. But, it's a hard trip back to Winnemucca. If you're praying, keep it up."

Red flashers on the side of the aid truck moved like a curtain, revealing the stark Bilk Creek Mountains and towering blue-black clouds rent with lightning. Wanda listened to the siren fading, the distant thunder, and wondered about the praying.

## Chapter Seven

Before she left the truckstop, Jaimiee changed into jeans, her Seattle Marathon t-shirt and running shoes. She got back on the interstate for a few miles and then turned south toward Yakima Ridge, the Rattlesnake Hills and crossed the Columbia River at McNary Dam.

In Pendleton, Oregon, she found the turn off to state route 395. The tag line of the second fax read, "Granny's, Pilot Rock, OR"

Granny's was not hard to find. It was a small white clapboard building with a large Conestoga wagon perched over the front door. Jaimiee pulled to a stop at the unleaded pump, picked up the nozzle, flipped the lever and began filling her tank. She'd check on the fax after she finished.

"Get your hand off that nozzle," said the small fire-plug shaped woman limping toward her with a cane. "This here is Oregon and you can't pump your own gas – don't you know nothing, child?" She grabbed the nozzle from Jaimiee, turned it off, then slammed it into the car and began filling again. "Onliest civilized state left in the union. Rest of 'em make you get out and pump your own. Ha! How much gas you say you want?"

With a loud snap, the safety shutoff activated.

"Say you wanted a fill-up?"

"Uh, yes, fill it up." Jaimiee smiled.

"What good is a gas station if you got to do all the work yourself? Well, speak up child."

"Uh, Yes ma'am. You're right."

"Now you're talking. You just humor old Miriam and we'll get along fine." She hung up the nozzle with a clatter and began hobbling back to the building. "You can bring your money in here, eight-sixty-three on the gas – old Miriam don't like to make two trips, legs too old, they don't have the right

change then they got to follow me inside – you didn’t need your oil checked did you, how about that windshield? Do it yourself, you’re young.”

“Everything’s okay ma’am.”

“Miriam.”

“Yes, ma’am – Miriam I mean.”

“Here’s your change,” said Miriam, slamming the register drawer and taking a deep breath. “Trips out to the pumps take it out of me mor’n it used to – turned eighty last year and it just seemed to suck the life right outta me.”

“Eighty!” exclaimed Jaimiee. “You don’t look a day over seventy.”

“Well now, I do believe you are smarter than I first took you for,” said Miriam, wiping sweat from her forehead and neck with a bandanna. “So, what is it you’re selling?”

“I’m not selling anything,” laughed Jaimiee, “but I could use your help in finding some people that stopped here to send a fax a few days ago.”

“Oh, that old thing,” Miriam brushed an imaginary crumb from her bodice. “My silly grandson convinced me Pilot Rock needed one, and I could make some money with it. Well, I can’t figure out how to use the damn thing, so anybody comes in here to use it has to know how to run it themselves.”

Jaimiee showed her the ransom note. “The people who sent this would have been in a white limousine. Do you remember them?”

“Do I!” Miriam laughed. “We don’t get too may of those around here. Last time one of them was in here was when the widow Winthrop hired one to take her to the cemetery when Henry died, but it was black. Anyway, I never *seen* such a bunch as piled out of that thing. I got them gassed up, they came in and bought a whole display box of Twinkies, said it was for the old man. Funny old thing he was, hardly said a thing, just smiled, but when he did talk, he sounded just like my grandpa who come over from Scotland.” Miriam put on

her reading glasses and held the ransom note up to the light. "You say they used my machine thing to send it? Am I going to get in trouble?"

"No ma'am," said Jaimiee. "No reason for you to worry, but you could help me out if you remembered anything about them."

"Well, there was this little guy, and he was funny looking let me tell you, and he was having trouble getting that paper to feed through the machine. He didn't have no trouble with pushing the right buttons, he was doing plenty of that, just couldn't get that paper to feed right. Well, he was cussing a blue streak, and pretty soon the red-headed woman, she came over and figured it right out, pretty as you please. Well, the little guy didn't like that and he started to cussing her, called her Bette I think, but this spotted dog they had with them run right over and got between him and her, and barked at the little man and he run in the toilet. Well, I tell you, that woman like to bust a gut laughing and so did the bald-headed man that was with them. The old man just smiled bigger and stamped his walking stick on the floor. Thought that little man would never come out, and when he did, his face was still red."

"Did they say anything that would give me a hint of where they were headed?"

"Well, come to think of it, I believe they were arguing about that too. I think the woman wanted to keep going south on the state route, and the little guy, he wanted to turn around and go over to Boise."

"Do you remember what they decided?" said Jaimiee.

"Well, no, I'd done drunk too much of the Java that morning and my old bladder ain't what it used to be so I went in the back; time I got back out here, they was gone."

"Do you suppose someone else in town could have seen them leave?"

"I doubt it child," said Miriam. "There's no work here no more, so everyone is off somewhere else to work all day. I'm pretty much here by myself, except for a few shut-ins, and they mostly watch the tevee."

"Looks like I hit a dead-end," sighed Jaimiee.

"Tell you what," said Miriam. "You hang around for awhile and I'll call around town. Maybe somebody was looking out the picture window at the right time."

Jaimiee walked around the general store while Miriam made her calls. She could smell the freshly oiled wood floors and the agricultural chemicals. The dark wood shelves along the walls were so high that the top four had to be reached by climbing a ladder that ran on rails along the ceiling. She wondered how Miriam managed that. Some of the cans of Spam and sardines had ten years of dust on them.

Miriam had no luck on the telephone. "I bet that bunch was here and gone while All My Children was on the tevee," said Miriam, but she had another idea. "There'll be a bunch of men coming back this evening that might have seen that thing on the road. They're cowboys and subcontractors that spends a lot of time on the road."

"That sounds good Miriam, but I need to go back to Pendleton before too late to get a motel for the night."

"I got that all worked out girl, you can eat at Miriam's restaurant and then stay at Miriam's hotel, and the price is right, just your company for the evening. What'd you say?"

"Thank you Miriam, I hate to put you out..."

"It would sure be fun for me if you would," said Miriam, laying her hand on Jaimiee's forearm.



“OK, since you put it that way, I’d love to spend the night as your guest,” said Jaimiee, as she did her best curtsy for Miriam — the curtsy her British father had taught her in Jamaica.

“Tell you what, Miriam, you let me do the gas pumping the rest of the day, you save those legs for standing at the cook stove.”

“You got a deal honey.”

For the rest of the afternoon and early evening, Jaimiee pumped twenty-two tanks of gas, washed twenty-two windshields, checked oil levels six times and changed a set of wiper blades. Miriam figured that cowboy didn’t really need new wiper blades; he just wanted to watch Jaimiee lean over his hood.

While Jaimiee and Miriam were washing the dinner dishes, they compared notes. Four people had seen the limo heading south out of town on the state route, and one said he’d seen it heading the other direction.

When Jaimiee described him, Miriam laughed, “That’s Elmer Beale, I do believe he’s the most contrary man east of the Cascades. Always says exactly the opposite to what he knows is true. Won’t nobody around here talk to him anymore. He seems to like it that way.”

“You mean he purposely makes it difficult for people to like him?” said Jaimiee. “Seems like this place is lonely enough.”

“More lonesome than I like it,” sighed Miriam. “There’s no telling what eats at people. There was a fellow over around John Day that climbed up on his tin roof during a thunderstorm, jumped up and down and screamed at the sky. Lightning got him, right there on the peak of the roof. One of the volunteer firemen said you could have broke him up in chunks and cooked your porterhouse.”

Miriam shook out her dishtowel, and hung it to dry. She poured them a cup of coffee, sat wearily at the kitchen table, and sighed. "People think only city folks get crazy, but I don't know, I seen enough of them go crazy out here.

"It sounds sad, Miriam."

"It can be child, it can be." Miriam pulled off her apron, folded it on the table, and smoothed it carefully with her palms, looked down. "It was thirty years ago back in March when our hired hand found my Richard in the hayloft. Hung himself off the winch. He was sixty-four that year."

"Oh, Miriam," said Jaimiee, reaching across the table to cover her hand. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

"Was married to him for thirty-five years and he up and did that. To this day I don't know why. He didn't leave a note, just went out and hung himself. Our children was already grown and gone and the ranch was doing well. But something was eating at him I guess. One time he said, 'Miriam, the children are gone, what is it we're supposed to do now?' I sold the ranch and come into town and bought this place. It's not so lonely here, and I feel like people need to have me here for gas and a few groceries. But it's not the way I wanted to spend my last days. I don't know what I'm supposed to do anymore than Richard did, but I feel like I'm to keep at it until I can't anymore."

They stayed up late talking. Jaimiee hoped to get on the road early, but the breakfast, including the fresh baked apple muffins Miriam offered, was too tempting.

Eighty miles of smooth pavement snaked Jaimiee over five passes through the Blue Mountains. The country was high and open: spring green meadows of white and yellow wildflowers, amber trunks of ponderosa pines and an indigo sky.

## Chapter Eight

The car was hot, smelled like cigarette smoke and dirty oil. Ben had trouble reaching the pedals, and his neck hurt from straining to see over the steering wheel. Just outside of Winnemucca an ambulance sped past him. They know. He got on the interstate eastbound, but after an hour of driving in a mental haze, he realized that being there was stupid, unless he wanted to be caught. It was inevitable of course, getting caught, going to jail, maybe dying if she was dead. But Ben was beyond fear of losing life. Nothing to lose.

A state patrol car sped by westbound, siren howling at him, flashing lights, a spotlight aimed at him. He wadded up his suit coat and sat on it, gripped the steering wheel and accelerated until the car began vibrating. An exit came into view, West Carlin. He decided to take it – wherever it led.

At an intersection, a wide dirt road cut north. The sign read, “Carlin Trend Haul Road – Caution, Ore Haulers.” Big trucks. Some kind of mines. Maybe he could hide, and think.

Soon he began to see man-made mountains of rock beside the road. Some had sprinklers on top. There were moats around the piles and a sign, “Caution – Cyanide.”

Another sign, “The Carlin Trend – Future of Gold Mining in America – Prosperity for Northern Nevada.” It listed several mining companies: New Hope Gold Company, Bullion-Heaven, Alpha Gold Company, Strikeitrich, and Rainbow Pot.

Huge ore haulers threw dust and rocks at him as they rumbled past. Now he knew why the road was so wide. They roared and shot black diesel smoke into the sky, popped their stack covers in tune to the engine. They unloaded at the ore piles, their back-up sirens wailing.

Ben drove on, trying to get past the monsters and into the mountains. Everywhere, the desert was pocked with huge holes, a thousand feet deep.

He drove north, following the main road higher into the Tuscarora Mountains. Miles of pits, piles and metallic lakes spread out below him. He took a spur road leading higher, and the ore haulers were gone. The car began bottoming out on rocks and ledges. He drove the Trans Am hard until it high-centered on a rock, and sat spinning, burning rubber on rock, throwing gravel.

Sunset neared, the air cooled and long shadows raked the desolation below. He took his jacket and began walking up the steep track. He was looking for something, following something into the dry mountains.

After the stars came out, he sat on a ridge and scanned the mine directly below. Huge portable lights created peach-colored islands in the darkness. Ore carriers' headlights snaked into the pit. A thousand feet down, a huge shovel filled the carriers with ore. The sounds of dry steel squeaking, ore booming into the truck beds, and the smell of diesel rose to him.

He curled into a ball beside a warm boulder and shivered in his light jacket. So this was gold mining. He had always dreamed a rich uncle would die and leave him a gold mine. He would walk into a shallow cave and chip off a sparkling chunk of gold. That was his dream, but this, spread out below him, was the truth. It had always been so with Ben. He thought things were going to be one way, but it was never what he imagined. Cold steel crushing Bette's skull, blood in his face. In that moment, his anger and sense of justice failed him. Looking down on her crumpled form, that other woman screaming, blood staining the sand, there had been no satisfaction in it.

He awoke shivering and looked at the green glow of his watch, it was three o'clock and the mining had stopped. The monsters idled quietly in the

peach light. As he awakened more, the full weight of it all came upon him. He felt the need to carry it somewhere, but there was nowhere to go. The ridge steepened and fell off sharply on all sides above him. Loose rock covered everything that way. No good. Down. Down a ridge, and then a thousand feet into the pit. The bottom of the thing, place of otherworldly light, monsters and... He started toward it in the darkness.

When he fell the first time, he was stopped by a rare juniper. He lay under it and smelled the sharp scent of its berries. It reminded him of gin and tonic and made him think of his thirst. Breathing hurt his throat and his tongue was thick in his mouth. He ate one of the hazy blue berries, and the bitterness was good at first, but turned astringent, and he regretted it.

He moved steadily downward, his dress shoes' slick leather soles betrayed him repeatedly on the stones and sandy soil. He fell again and again, slid painfully over embedded rocks and old sagebrush roots that grabbed at his clothing and clawed his skin bloody. He reached the edge of the pit exhausted, breathing hard and sweating in the cold pre-dawn.

The pit fell away more steeply in a series of benches cut into the earth, the headwall often nearly vertical. The shovel was strangely quiet, unlike the idling diesels that got louder as he descended, and all the more frightening for it. A cable the diameter of a man's thigh snaked to the edge of the pit.

Ben didn't know what was drawing him into the pit. There was no thinking, no planning or plotting anymore, no reason. He was descending. That was all.

Downward he crawled and slid and rolled and fell. It was becoming light in the east and he was driven. His clothes were caked with dust and blood. He fell again and felt an awful pain in his side. He wrapped his jacket around his ribs and pulled it tight against the pain and moved on, downward again.

Nearly down, about two hundred yards from the monster, and just higher than the top of the boom, he found a sign pounded in the ground. It was a blasting warning. There was a blast scheduled for that morning. Soon. Ben looked at his watch. Far below, he saw wires running over the rock and to a small shed near the middle of the pit. He followed the wires back, descended to the drill hole, lay down beside it, and lowered his head to a rock. It was cool. Some relief.

He looked at the hole and the wires and came to a decision. He moved painfully, well below the drill hole, nearly to the floor of the pit, and found a covert amongst the boulders. He looked back up to where he had been, and tried to imagine it. The moment. He looked at his watch, and tried to get comfortable. He noticed that his feet hurt.

Men and women began arriving for their shift; diesels belched black smoke. Hidden less than a hundred yards from the time clock, Ben could hear laughter and easy talk. He never had that; a lifetime, and he never had it easy with people; never knew a day like these people had with each other every day. He strained to hear their lighthearted banter and hugged his ribs:

“Ben, get in here and try and make yourself useful for once!” said his mother.

Ben dragged his feet across the linoleum of the kitchen to stand behind her, just out of reach.

“It’s bad enough you’re a runt like your pop, but why do you have to be lazy and stupid to boot?”

His mother was a large woman of Polish stock. She had gotten herself pregnant with Ben when the last of the troops came home from Europe, and had never forgiven him for it.

It was the patriotic thing to do, take in a hero from Utah Beach or the Battle of the Bulge, and make up for his years of fear and suffering for his country. It wasn't supposed to lead to a life of disappointment and shame for a girl.

She met Ben's father at a Duke Ellington Orchestra dance over in Jersey City. She was drinking and feeling good. It seemed a lark, when the short, brash soldier swaggered up and asked her to dance to the Two O'clock Jump. He was a great dancer, and didn't mind being teased by her friends about being five-foot-two, to her six-foot-two.

Before the dance was over, he was sitting in her lap, feeding her cake and one-hundred-thirty-proof rum. She followed him to a cheap hotel and did her patriotic duty. She was back on her job welding the last destroyer to be built for twenty years on Monday morning. She didn't notice she was pregnant until Ben's father was home somewhere in Texas. He didn't leave a forwarding address, not that she would have married him. She hated the man for stealing her youth and her chance at marriage, and she hated the small version of himself he left her with.

"Here," snapped his mother, "take these milk bottles and set them out for the milk man. And don't break any. The dairy charges five cents for broken ones and I can't afford it."

Ben brought the heavy wire, four-quart milk bottle carrier from the pantry. He put the bottles into it, and lugged them, clattering, through the screen door to the front porch. The 1949 Ford white panel truck, with the big Holstein on the side, was just rounding the corner. Ben took the bottles down the steep brick steps to the curb. The gravel by the curb hurt his bare feet.

"Helpin' yer mom out today, eh, Squirt?" said the milkman. "Watch it with these bottles, that be a load for a little pitcher like you."

Ben was determined to prove to the milkman and his mother that he could do anything any boy could do. He picked up the carrier and the four heavy bottles and began trudging up the walk. The carrier banged against his knees and it hurt. He was almost up the five brick steps, when the neighbor's dog leaped on him and licked his face. Ben hit the bottle carrier against the top step and lost his grip. Everything bounced down the steps, and all except one bottle broke, spilling milk to the curb, shattering glass over the sidewalk and lawn. He ran to retrieve the unbroken bottle, took a step and staggered from the dull hard pain from a jagged bottle bottom. He sat down in the milk and held his gushing heel. He knew better than to cry.

His mother heard the commotion and ran to the door. She screamed and charged at him, cursing and swinging. The morning warmth smothered him and sucked his vision into a tunnel. A June bug crawled over his ankle, digging its sharp claws into his tender whiteness. Her huge arms blocked the sun, powered her hard hands. He tasted milk and blood. A neighbor tried to calm his mother. Finally, she sat heavily on the stoop crying. Ben hobbled inside, wrapped his foot in a dishrag and hid in the closet.

After that she beat him until people came and took him away. Growing up in the mean city, he often dreamed his mother would forgive him, and come to him, and gather him in her arms and squeeze the hurt out. She never did.

A man with a bullhorn directed the trucks to drive to a ledge high in the pit until after the blast. Ben looked at his watch again. He turned toward the drill hole above him, and waited.



## Chapter Nine

Jaimiee drove down the timbered canyon of the sparkling Silvies River and out into the hot tumbleweed flats of Malheur Lake. In Burns she checked each gas station for a sign of the white limo. They had either seen it, or knew someone who had seen it, and directed her eastward.

At the gas station astride the intersection of state routes 205 and 78 the man said the white limo had gassed up around noon the previous day. "Took thirty-two gallons of regular. Never seen such a car; twenty feet long if it was an inch. Funny bunch of people in it too – and a dog, white with black spots, looked real good with the white car."

"Did you happen to notice which direction they went when they left?" asked Jaimiee, hopeful of more useful information.

He lifted his Ford cap and ran a bandanna over his sweaty balding head as he looked down state route 78. "I'm sure they went that way," he nodded. "For the life of me I can't figure them going that way though. Maybe they were going to Winnemucca to gamble or something. Strange bunch of people for this country." He looked at Jaimiee and raised his eyebrows.

"Where's the next turn-off?" said Jaimiee.

"Well, there's a shortcut from Crane up to Buchanan if they were going to Boise, but nobody takes that way. Then there's the Alvord Ranch Road that runs south to Fields. That's a gravel road all the way, must be sixty, seventy miles of dust, doubt they'd take that way. Next branch is at Burns Junction."

Jaimiee topped off her gas tank, and the man helped her put the top down. He waved his hat at her as she drove away. Strange people twice this week, thought Jaimiee. Lucky man.

As she pulled onto the road, she saw the man in the white suit she'd seen before the truckstop. He was working the cars with great flourishes of his thumb and showed a wry smile under his massive mustache. His eyes danced under bushy eyebrows. Something she remembered from school flashed behind her eyes, twice, then stuck. No. Gone over a century. Hal Holbrook? He tipped his white hat as she passed. This is a very strange desert.

About an hour later, just past the Mountain Time Zone sign, she slowed to look at the Alvord Ranch Road. It snaked south between two mountain ranges, and was very inviting, but she was sure they would have stayed on the main road.

At the only Burns Junction gas station, Jaimiee asked the cashier, Vernon if he said on his tunic, if he'd seen the white limo the day before, and got a strong negative. "I never miss anything out on that road. Nothing else to do around here. I get so lonesome that I try to will the cars to stop just so I'll have somebody to talk to." He called around to several people he knew to be always watching the road and none of them had seen a limo either.

"Lot of people out here just watch the road. We'd all go crazy if it wasn't for the cars and trucks. The Boise television is mostly snow out here, so we just watch cars."

Jaimiee went to her car and sat thinking. As unlikely as it seemed, all the evidence pointed to the Alvord Ranch Road, so she went west.

She turned south on the gravel road and immediately thought maybe she should put the top up, the car was churning up a huge dust plume. After awhile she found that it stayed safely behind her if she kept her speed around fifty miles-per-hour. That speed wasn't hard to maintain, the road was rolling but straight, although the sensation of driving on ball bearings was disconcerting at first, and she cringed at the ping of gravel hitting her new car's red paint. A few

miles down the road she crossed into the Pacific Time Zone again and was relieved to get the hour she'd just lost back. She thought it was funny to be gaining and losing hours where time didn't appear to matter much anyway.

The road crested a shoulder of the rounded Sheepshead Mountains to the east, and twenty miles of open range fell away before her, running along the escarpment of Steens Mountain to the west. Jaimiee caught her breath. This was the West of dreams, of fantasy, the archetype of the free life – the background for countless Marlboro advertisements. She chuckled. The West, now so burdened with the baggage of pop culture, as to be nearly invisible. Maybe the white limo is the dream, moving upon the face of the West, hauling the lost tribe, wandering in the wilderness. She chuckled at herself; something about a road trip.

Jaimiee spent the next hour lost in the unfolding of the landscape. Every turn in the road brought huge new vistas, new hope for the continued feast. The country looked very much to her like the Mara River country of the northern Serengeti, home to her mother's Masai people, and spectacular thunderstorms like the one she noticed building over Steens Mountain.

She decided to find a place to stop and put the top up.

Just ahead, on her left and still in the sunshine, she saw a small neat shed and two steaming pools on the edge of a huge playa lake.

Jaimiee parked by the pools, closed the convertible top and walked around to stretch her legs. It had been days since she'd been able to get any exercise and she was beginning to feel the effects. She looked at her watch, she could afford the time for a run before dark – if it rained, so much the better, the hot springs would warm her up.

She grabbed a bag from the back and strode the plank path to the springs. While she was changing into running shorts, she read the graffiti on the three

walls of the corrugated shed, which was open to the dry lake and mountains beyond: "Spent six hours here with my dog Ginger. It snowed four inches on us, stayed toasty in the water. Thank you to whoever built this – Harry H., November 1987," "Four of us flew ultralights from Boise, Joe, Kevin, Steve and Babs. Kevin carved the sign for the new deck. Flew over a huge herd of mustangs in the Sheepsheads – Sept. '93," "Camped nearby, had a morning soak, wonderful. Next stop Moab, Utah – Bob and Claire, May '93."

Jaimie scanned the other graffiti; not an expletive in need of deleting anywhere. This was not the kind of graffiti she was accustomed to seeing in Seattle. The springs were obviously community maintained, but the community seemed to include everyone who ever came there. There was a five-gallon bucket with a few candy wrappers and tissues and a few bars of half-used soap; other than that it was spotless – even the graffiti was all neatly written.

She went out on the deck, which had the warm glow of new wood, and saw the carved sign, "Deck donated by Boise Ultralight Flying Club, May, 1993 – enjoy!" She imagined them flying in formation, long shadows out of the morning sun, landing on the dry lake, meeting the truck with the lumber and building the deck, then camping out under the desert stars, soaking in the pools, satisfied with their work.

A flash of lightning, followed in seconds by a distant crash of thunder, shook her from the friendly image and sent her running south and east across the dry soda flats of Alvord Lake toward the distant Trout Creek Mountains. Soon her breathing became labored – she dreaded this part, the beginning of the run – her left arch hurt, and her right knee signaled its displeasure at being crammed into the cockpit of a sports car for too long. After a time, the small pains faded. Her breathing became deep and even, and that sense of well-being she knew so well came, and she was the thing, the running.

The sky ahead was broken and blue, with hints of gold gracing massive white clouds towering on a base of black. She looked over her shoulder at the inky mass overtaking her, backlit with pink flashes. She picked up the pace. Small puffs of white rose from her footfalls on the salt flats. The clouds, the sky, the white expanse of flatness and the brooding violence behind her spurred her on, and excited her. She was still in full sun and had the feeling that she was outrunning the storm. She felt power and sureness in her thighs and in the rhythm of her stride. Her feet stirred the salt and it blew before her now with the first gust of wind from the storm. Wildness grew, and she ran like a savannah cheetah.

Everything went white. Crrracckk! Hair and skin recoiled, suddenly dry and crawling; adrenaline enveloped, overwhelmed. She sprang before the danger, flew before the wind, knew the beauty and the fear, and then it was over and she was slowing, gasping, holding on.

Intellect returned, immediate danger passed, but fear remained. She had miscalculated the storm. She could lie flat and hope for the best or she could turn and run into the storm, and again feel the magic. She made a long arc to the west and into the wind. Lightning struck around her on the dry lake, throwing up clouds of blackened salt. She felt the shock waves, and the air came to her acrid and rich. Just as she regained her stride, huge raindrops came and stung her goose-pimpled skin. Each drop kicked up a small eruption of salt, pebbling the playa, turning the white to a graying mist beneath the black sky and mountains. She could just make out the shelter, and turned toward it.

The wildness and the joy was tinged with fear again, her excitement grew as she pursued the thing. Wet now, she sprinted, long legs reaching out and pulling the earth beneath her, spinning it out behind. A goal, an end in sight; earth and sky, power and beauty ran on.

She reached the springs and stood, hands on knees, gasping and feeling the rain pound her back. She stripped and stood naked to the sky, arms outstretched for a moment, and then jumped into the hot slickness of the sulfur water. Warm wetness found the contours of her cold skin, while the storm pounded the desert and rattled the tin of the changing shed. Every sense was filled and wanting more.

She found a bar of soap, stood, and began to wash, hair, arms, legs, breasts; slowly, with attention. She focused, caressed the slickness, abandoned self to urge, like the sheets of rain raking the steaming pool, into the faded light, into the night.

## Chapter Ten

Flip. Tap. Matthew completed the solitaire game. Tap. Tap. Another game.

He looked around the room. A cafe. Small. Seemed familiar. He'd been there for a while, remembered it. An older woman worked at a grill and talked to a big man at the counter. The man had a spotted dog sitting at his feet. The dog saw Matthew. She's coming toward me and wagging her tail. Nice doggie. She wants me to scratch her ears. Nice doggie.

"I wish I knew more to tell you Mrs. Fields," said Charlie. "All's I know is Ben stole our limo, and Wanda and Bette took after them in Wanda's car."

The dog knows me. That man looks familiar. Across the road, a northern harrier swooped around a grove of trees. A flock of small birds exploded in flight. The hawk flew away with the unlucky one.

"That Wanda. Always gets herself in the middle of everything, even in this middle-of-nowhere place," said Mrs. Fields.

Through the window, images appeared and fled in the heat waves of the dry lakebed. A feeling came over the old man, like the harrier, flashing somewhere behind his eyes, right to left, fast. Grab for it. Miss. It was something he knew. So close. A fata morgana, a mirage, like the ones on the Strait of Juan de Fuca in the heat of summer. There they were ships, mirror-imaged on their own smoke stacks, and in his early days, mast upon mast and sail upon sail. Cows, are those cows? Oh, yes, the desert.

"Wanda sure tells a good story," said Charlie.

"There's not a day what goes by what she don't make me laugh fit to bust a gut." Mrs. Fields turned, threw two frozen burger patties on the grill and tore

open a package of buns. "I don't know what I'd do without her around here. I hope they don't go gettin' into trouble. She drives that car like a crazy woman."

He listened. Wanda was here. I remember Wanda. She's gone.

"They were laying rubber when they left here, and that car sounded like it was about to blow." Charlie reached down for Spot and saw that she had gone to Matthew.

Another woman. The one who's good to me. She's gone.

"I know, I was over at the store pricing a shipment of fence building supplies, and I could hear it all the way out back."

"Did you go and win another one of those solitaire games old man?"

Charlie turned to him.

Matthew smiled, and nodded.

"I see Spot came to visit you."

So, the dog is Spot. My name is Matthew. I do remember now, Matthew McChonnache. Now I remember. But who are these people?

Over the next hour, a background of cafe sounds, quiet talk, the memories slowly came; his home, Wooster and Rosanne and those awful children, the forgetting and getting lost, the big white car and the people who took him away from his home, and the ones who were nice to him.

"Where's Bette?" Matthew asked suddenly. "Bette's not here. Is she coming back?"

Something in Matthew's voice made Charlie look at the old man for a moment before he answered.

"She's chasing after our car. Ben stole it and now you and me and Spot is stuck here until she can get it back."

Ben. He's the mean one. Charlie and Bette are good to me. Bette, how she held him at the hot springs — he sighed and ran it over in his mind again.



Matthew turned to Charlie, concerned. "Is Bette okay?"

"She's okay."

"If Wanda don't kill her with her drivin'," said Mrs. Fields.

He remembered the feeling. It was always when he'd been playing cards or counting things, doing things over and over again, that he slowly slid back into the present. It was like he'd been gone for a long time and come back, and for awhile he would have trouble remembering things, then it would all slowly clear and he would inhabit the present, for awhile.

"Hey old man," said Charlie, as he turned to look questioningly at him.

"How come you all of a sudden quit with the Scotland talk?"

Matthew sucked air, "Oh, it comes and it goes." Then he smiled. "I come over from Scotland as a young man and sometimes I slip back into the brogue for awhile, and then it goes away again."

Charlie nodded, accepting the explanation.

Mrs. Field brewed more coffee and made dinner rolls while she and Charlie talked away the afternoon. Matthew was lost in the mirages out the window, and the remembering.

The sky darkened and the mirages disappeared as a storm built to the north. Thunder moved in waves of rumble across the desert, shook the window glass and caused Charlie to look up. Lightning silhouetted steers moving to shelter. Mrs. Fields turned on the lights in the diner when the dark waves of hard rain began to pound the dust of Fields and thrum the roof of the cafe. Cowboys ambled in for coffee and pie, smacking their cowboy hats on the doorjamb before they hung them, still dripping, on the hat rack by the cigarette machine; red-faced, rawboned men, redolent of newly wet dust and cooling road tar, sweat and leather. No more fence building: coffee, quiet talk out of respect for the storm, cigarettes mashed out in pie plates. Somewhere up by the

hot springs a big storm rolled off of Steens Mountain and cut the power. The lights went out, and the cowboys left when the coffee pot began to cool.

“Well, I do believe those girls won’t be making it back tonight. How about I put you two up in the bunkhouse. Not but one feller out there now and there’s twenty bunks. I got some cold cuts. Make you up a couple of sandwiches to tide you over.”

“Thank you ma’am,” said Charlie. “We’d want to make sure you get some pay for this.”

“Oh, you don’t worry about that now, we’ll figure something out. Right now what we all need is for them girls to get back here so we can all quit our worrying.”

“Come on old man. Time to unfold yourself from under that booth table and we’ll go out and get some sleep,” said Charlie. “We’ve had a hard day.”

Matthew started to turn sideways to slide out of the booth. Nothing happened. He looked down at his old brogans and frowned. He tried again and felt a stab of pain in his lower back. He looked down at his brogans again.

Damn. Need some help, do you?

He reached under his knee with both hands and picked up his left leg and swung it out of the booth, sat it down, then the other. He rested his elbow on the table before attempting to rise, and took a deep breath.

“Where’s my shillelagh?”

“Here you go,” said Charlie, handed it to him. “Want some help?”

“No, I’ve just been sitting for too long. I’ll get loose here in a minute.”

I hope. Tell these legs to move and they don’t. My back hurts and my butt too. I used to have some meat down there. Now I’m sitting on bones. I don’t remember being old. He leaned forward on his shillelagh, pushed against the table and managed to get upright. “You lead the way.”

Mrs. Fields rested her hands across her apron, tilted her blue-haired head to smile at Matthew. "Just follow the path to the building that looks like it might have been a chicken coop — 'cause it was once — go on in and make yourself to home."

They walked out the brick path toward the long low building nestled in a grove of cottonwoods. The western sky was peach. A bright planet twinkled on the edge of the inky blue sky.

Charlie held the screen door and Matthew stepped in. He paused to let his eyes adjust to the gloom. A figure dressed in a white suit coat and bowtie lay on a metal bunk. His hat was pulled over his face, arms behind his head, wild white hair escaping.

"Gentlemen," said the hat. "Welcome to the castle Rosenfeld."

Matthew and Charlie looked at each other, and then back at the figure.

"Hello," said Charlie and Matthew, in unison.

And after a short silence, "Nice suit," said Charlie.

"It's my Doangiveadam suit," was the reply.

Charlie shrugged.

"Call me Little Sam, or perhaps No. 44," said the hat. "We could converse. However, '...one cannot pour the starred and shoreless expanses of the universe into a jug.'" Not-so-soft sleeping noises soon followed.

Morning comes early, bright and warm in the high desert as the solstice nears. Matthew's eyes opened slowly. He listened for the foghorn at the lighthouse, at the tip of the Marymere Peninsula, where fog ushers in most mornings in spring, afternoons in summer. No fog here, or foghorns or surging sea. A peacock ripped a jagged hole in the quiet, calling for another day of heat

and dust and, finally, a thunderstorm somewhere, with luck, close enough to cool Fields.

Sam was not in his bunk.

Jaimiee sat at the Roadkill counter. She yawned, stretched her arms and arched her lower back. She'd slept on the hard bench at the hot springs, after the storm moved on.

"Just out traveling the country? Well, I declare, you young people are sure something these days. Young woman, traveling alone, never would of seen such a thing in my day," said Mrs. Fields. "Times change."

Jaimiee smiled over her coffee cup, about to respond, when she saw Matthew and Charlie working their way through the kitchen, followed by a Dalmatian. She tried to hide her double-take.

"Yes, well, I suppose it was different when you were younger." Jaimiee returned her eyes to Mrs. Fields and pretended to listen while straining to hear Charlie.

"Hope Mrs. Fields heard something. I didn't get much sleep for worrying."

"Oh, my," said Mrs. Fields. "A girl out on her own in them days was just for sure a loose woman, unless she was a schoolteacher. Good girls stood at home and helped until the right man come a calling and her daddy give his permission."

Jaimiee heard the men settle into the booth by the window. What am I supposed to do now? The thick crockery cup caressed her lips, she tested a chip with her tongue; the coffee-can-coffee bit her palate and oily vaporousness assaulted her sinuses.

"Mornin' boys. Can I fix you two somethin'?"

She'd become lost in the chase and neglected to plan for the inevitability of catching up to them. She lowered the cup to the Linoleum counter and picked up a long heavy knife and began to butter the soft white bread toast. Think. Think.

"Thank you, Mrs. Fields. We'll have whatever you're fixing. Heard from Wanda or Bette yet?"

Bette! The butter knife paused mid-spread. Miriam said the woman kidnapper was named Bette.

"Nothing yet, and I'm just about to let go and get myself real worried," said Mrs. Fields. "Wanda is sometimes a little forgetful of telling when she'll be late, but she ain't never been near this bad."

Wanda?

"Is there someplace along the way they went that we could call to see if anybody's seen them?" said Charlie.

"I could call down to the gas station at Denio Junction. More coffee miss? And ask if they maybe stopped for gas or something," said Mrs. Fields.

"No ma'am." Jaimiee covered her cup with long fingers.

"We'll give 'em an hour, then by God we'll get out the posse if we have to."

The phone rang. Everybody looked at it.

Mrs. Fields sat the pot back on the warmer, rinsed her hands, wiped her hands on her apron, picked up the receiver, "Roadkill Cafe." She listened.

"Wanda, where the hell you been. We're about worried to death here all night, wondering..."

She settled the phone in the crook of her neck, began to smooth her apron and shook her head.

“Oh Lord, Wanda, what are you going to do?” She switched the receiver to the other side and glanced up at Charlie, his brow dark, questioning.

The fat cup of oily black paused halfway to Jaimiee’s lips. She turned to see Charlie stiffen and Matthew turn from the window. What have I walked in on?

Mrs. Fields listened. The neon clock over her head paused between the marking of the seconds, slowed with each mark, slowing. They watched her listen, they listened, together they listened. The big refrigeration unit kicked in and filled the cafe with white noise and dread.

Charlie saw Jaimiee looking at him, looked away, back again, and somehow knew what he had no way of knowing.

Sam stuck his head through the screen door. “Good day to you all. I’ve an appointment with a Mysterious Stranger, a Mr. Traum.” He tipped his hat, bathed the scene in a flash of morning sun, and vanished.

## Chapter Eleven

The emergency room lobby of Humboldt General glared at her; freshly buffed floors, stainless steel doors, vinyl seats, black and slick and cold.

She was reminded of her and Buster's honeymoon. Going to Africa, and they had a layover at O'Hare: as scary a place as she'd ever seen; white and chrome and shiny and huge. Floors echoed footsteps thinly. Voices turned cold and hard, trailed off, lost, into high steel rafters.

She slid into a cold seat, ran her fingers through her matted hair, looked at them for signs of grease, wiped them on her legs, slowly, twice. She reached for a new pack of Marlboros, tore off the cellophane outer wrapper, crumpled it in her palm, opened her hand and watched it unfold, releasing in fits and starts, warping the quiet with tiny crackles, mixing with far away sounds of nurses' shoes, bedpans, nameless suffering. She looked at the crumpled thing for a time, dropped it slowly on the magazine covered coffee table. Carefully, with brown stained and ribbed fingernails, she opened the inner foil, paused to draw in the fresh tobacco scent of comfort.

A throat was cleared, loudly.

Wanda tapped a cigarette out of the pack, three taps, always three taps for the first out of the pack, and the next takes two taps and the rest only a tap, to release itself for her need, her solace. She reached for the yellow Bic, hefted it, sighed, touched the serrated wheel. She stayed her thumb. For twenty years she has not been able to grasp the notion of life without this. For each flick of her Bic, each flash of combustion, each blue tendril rising lazily up, the ritual, the drug, the comfort, is for that moment only. The even spread of it in waves of release

over her skin, caressing, through her tired aging muscles, her begging, surcease seeking brain; for such catharsis, she will pay the price, whatever it be.

"Excuse me," intoned the voice of the obese, yellow-curled intrusion at the night admissions desk. She leaned forward. Large breasts smothered her magazine. "Haven't you seen our many, and well-placed, no smoking signs? This is a hospital, and we have rules."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Wanda. "I, yes, I guess I did see them, I just forgot. My friend is in there and I'm not thinking too good right now."

"If you must smoke," her voice muted by the huge fresh soft maple bar she had just forced between her lips, "you can step out on the verandah there." She wiped her mouth with a pink heart-infested handkerchief and pointed with it, smiled weakly, adjusted her flesh with a small hop on her chair, and settled into reading about celebrities. Without looking up, she said, "Please use the ashtray provided for your convenience."

Wanda sighed, pulled herself upright, she was tired, sick and tired, leaden legs, aching shoulders; she struggled to push open the heavy door to the verandah.

She stepped into the Black Rock Desert night, felt the chill and dispelled it with her thumb, flaming warmth, small orb of yellow against this night and all others. Inhale. Pull hard and deep. Exhale, long satisfied exhale of blue, into the black still desert chill. She turned the cigarette up to examine the cooling ash, smoke, returned it to her lips. She made the glow come again. Exhaled, dropped her arm, thumb flick. She sucked cold dry air into her raw throat.

So, Wanda, what are you gonna do? Maybe she's gonna die. No, she can't die on me. I wish I knew what's going on. What'd she do to that man? Couldn't tell the cop nothing about none of them. Stole my damn car.



Another drag, inhale exhale, cough, sigh, cough. She looked out over the city glow to the mountains silhouetted against fading skylight, a planet flickered in the northwest, anchored the sky in place, waiting for stars. Her neck hurt. She stretched, rose on her toes, searching for some little ache in her back, searching to divine its location, switched hands, kneaded her back with the heel of her hand, gave up.

She looked into the waiting room. Under the green light, bright light, pouty lips parted to receive another lovingly proffered morsel, masticate, masticate, sigh. She looked and saw Wanda, mid-drag on her cigarette, Wanda saluted with it. The other smiled, wiped her mouth with hankie-hearts, and went back to her magazine.

Seeing the woman alone in the white cold room took Wanda back; to the airport in Chicago, another in Frankfurt, then south, the purple Mediterranean floating Greek islands washed with sunset, and a final landing in Nairobi in darkness, small black soldiers, children with big guns, welcoming her and Buster to their country.

That crazy man. I would of been happy to just go see Crater Lake for our honeymoon, but no, Buster had to go and take us half way around the damn world. Like to scared me to death.

Wanda sat on the cold concrete bench beside the lone institutional ashtray, hugged her knobby knees and rocked back and forth. She lit another cigarette. Memory rushed over her, through her, in waves like the nicotine, memory of Buster and that wonderful crazy time before her life ended, before she became alone and then old, when she still had something more than telling stories and making people laugh, smoking cigarettes...

"Excuse me," said the receptionist, leaning through the glass door, voice softer now, solicitous. "I hate to bother you, but the doctor would like to talk to you, Doctor Mills, he's the doctor working with your friend."

Wanda hurriedly snubbed the butt, jumped up. "Where?"

"I'll take you," she said, pushing the door for Wanda to catch, then moving slowly past her station and down the long hallway, heavy thighs noisily trying to avoid each other under her tentdress, arms bowed, splayed over her roundness. She turned to speak, neck rolls got in the way and it came out muffled, but Wanda saw a genuine smile and bright eyes.

She stopped before the opening of a cubicle with barely enough room for the small desk and two chairs it held.

"My name is Linda," she said, offering a plump hand with delicate fingers, soft and damp. "You come and find me up at my station when you're done here. I'd just as soon talk than read that dumb old magazine."

"Thanks."

Linda lumped away down the too bright, too quiet hall. She left Wanda alone in the cubicle. On the doctor's desk, a picture frame with a smiling family of five, including the doctor: tall, thinning sandy hair, fine features and an indifferent expression. She wondered if his mind was on work when the picture was taken, or if he was just afraid of cameras. Wanda had always been afraid of cameras, and doctors: thought both of them could steal your soul.

Doctors swarmed around Buster, unsheathed the paddles, pressed them into his fat white chest, yelled, squeezed Wanda out and away from him. The bed lurched, banged, squeaked, as his body absorbed and discharged volts in violent spasms. More nurses arrived, pushed her back until she couldn't see her Buster anymore. Someone took her by the shoulders and guided her away, "You

don't need to see this. The doctors are doing all they can. Please wait here." Her shoulders cold shaking and helpless, hurt, pressure, pressure, bands of cold squeezed her breasts and back, constricted her diaphragm, she couldn't breathe, suck it in, suck it in, don't faint... Don't take Buster, oh God don't take Buster.

Tears tested the corners of her eyes, trickled then flowed, at the memory of the love and the loss. The short years of joy; then the loss, the final, sudden, irrevocable loss of the marrow of her life.

Doctor Mills cleared his throat, sat in the squeaking chair, pushed a large box of tissues at her.

Wanda blew her nose. It echoed in the night hall. She looked around for a place to deposit the soggy tissue. The doctor fiddled beside his chair and offered her a small wastebasket.

"Thanks."

The doctor nodded his head, leaned forward on his desk, clasped his hands together over an open file folder. His stethoscope banged the desk. He took it off and began to worry with it on top of the folder.

"This is a very difficult time..." he opened his hands, looked at the folder, "...Ms. Parks. It could go either way for..." he looked at the folder again. "...Bette. Right now all we can do is work to keep the swelling from damaging something vital. Without getting too technical, the main injury is toward the back of her brain and the swelling threatens the seat of the autonomic nervous system."

Wanda frowned.

"That's the part of the brain that tells the heart to beat, the lungs to breathe, and almost every other organ how to do its work. If it quits working, she'll die."

"Is it working okay now?"

"The paramedics put her on limited life-support at the scene, and we have continued that here. Should the swelling begin affecting her more, we might have to make a decision about full life-support."

"What do you mean, doc?"

"Her family, perhaps you, in lieu of blood relatives, will have to tell us whether or not to keep her alive if her brain won't do it anymore."

Wanda looked at her hands.

"Do you know any of her blood relatives?"

"Doc, I don't even know her last name."

"We don't know the extent of the damage yet, there's too much swelling." He leaned forward and ran his hands through his thin yellow hair, looked Wanda full in the eyes. "Her life, and the life of anyone who cares for her, could be a very difficult one."

There was a long silence. Wanda could see he was watching her.

She looked away, through the cubicle door and out the window. Moths in a whorl around a spotlight, a bat flew repeatedly through them, random tragedy. If I'd a just had the chance to of taken care of Buster, I wouldn't of cared how much work it was. I would of done it in a minute, for as long as it took.

"How bad do you figure she'll be, Doc?"

"I can't say for sure. She probably won't be able to walk. She may have trouble swallowing, and her breathing could be affected. Incontinence will be a problem, at least at first..."

"Oh."

"She will also most likely have considerable non-specific brain damage. That's from the whole brain bouncing back and forth inside of the skull. Her vision may be affected. Her hearing will most certainly be affected. There will be loss of the ability to use language. It can be as severe as total inability to

conceptualize anything linguistic, or as mild as a temporary speech impediment."

"Memory loss. That one's up in the air, it could be fairly severe in Bette's case, but often it does come back. Oh, and another thing, almost all head injury survivors have significant personality changes. Bette will not be the person you knew."

"I didn't know her real good anyway. You got any good news, Doc?"

"Nothing I can promise."

"Sure."

"What do you think we should do about going to full life-support, if needed?"

Wanda looked at him, away, back. "Don't do no more Doc. She's a strong woman, and I'd guess she'd like to do this on her own. Either way I'll be around."

He stood, offered his hand, smiled, "I believe Bette has a friend, and that's more important than all I'll be able to do for her."

The weight of the commitment she was making washed over her. Something important. Something long missing.

"Thanks, Doc."

"I'll have one of the hospital counselors talk to you in a day or two. They'll help you find the services you're going to need."

"But, Doc, I don't think she's got any money, and I know I don't."

"Don't worry, Wanda, there are ways. I have a feeling you're a very resourceful woman." He smiled a weary smile. "Now, I've got to get home for some sleep, I'll keep you posted."

Wanda waved a hand at his back as he walked down the still, quiet hallway.

She made her way back to the waiting room and headed straight for the verandah. The sky was getting light in the northeast. It was colder than before, and she finished her cigarette to get back inside.

Linda called her over to look at something in her magazine. Another Elvis sighting; they laughed. No, Elvis bought the farm, just another part of their youth that slipped over to the other side. They talked and told stories until Linda's shift ended. Linda offered a spare room. Wanda said no she couldn't do that. Linda insisted. Wanda was tired. Well maybe...

Wanda remembered to call Mrs. Fields. She must have been worried to death, and Charlie too. She promised to call every day.

Wanda and Linda left Humboldt General as the Black Rock Desert began to turn white under the shimmering orb, rising from the east where Ben awaited his appointed hour.

## Chapter Twelve

Sam vanished and the screen door slammed. Jaimiee sat stunned by the flash of light, puzzled by the increasingly familiar apparition. How in hell did he get here? She and the others turned to Mrs. Fields.

"Well, boys, I don't hardly know where to start, 'cause I got some bad news." She told them about Ben hitting Bette and her being in the hospital.

"Not Bette!" Charlie said, unbelieving. "She hurt bad?"

Matthew turned to the window, confused, concerned. The cafe was quiet. He watched a dust devil on the salt flats, spinning itself out.

Mrs. Fields wiped her hands on her apron and looked down at the curling blue and yellow Linoleum squares under her feet. Wanda was going to lay new ones. She looked up.

"Wanda was calling from Winnemucca. They been working on Bette all night and don't know for sure," said Mrs. Fields. "She's going to stay with her for as long as it takes."

Jaimiee turned away. So, Ben is violent, a murderer, maybe. The bad blood between him and Bette was strong. She brought the cup to her lips, found it empty. Guess there is no reason to put this off any longer.

Jaimiee turned to find Charlie staring at her. She placed her cup carefully on the counter and walked over to them. She grabbed a chair and set it down with authority at the end of the booth.

"Good morning Matthew," she turned, "Good morning Charlie. I'm sorry to hear about your friend."

Charlie's lips recoiled and lost color, an inward rushing of air, eyes loosened and darted, seeking cover.

Matthew looked at her, looked at Charlie. How come this woman knows so much about everybody?

"Who are you?" said Charlie.

"My name is Jaimiee Murray," she handed him a business card. "I'm a security consultant working for Hunnycut High Tech International, Corp. Does that ring a bell, Charlie?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"You thought that Matthew here was the head man, Mr. Hunnycut, when you kidnapped him, didn't you, Charlie?"

Charlie slid back in the booth and looked wild-eyed at her. What's going to happen to Spot when I go to prison? He pulled her close, and she licked his face.

Charlie's only other dog was when he was a boy. One day, his dog barked and woke up his dad, who shot it and made Charlie dig the grave.

He hugged Spot's wiggly warmth to him and buried his face in her spots.

"Well, Charlie?"

Tears filled his eyes and he slumped in the booth. He went limp like he did when his father shook him. First Bette, and now this.

Jaimiee gripped her chair. Damn, now what?

"Dont let them hurt Spot. Promise somebody will find a good home for her when they send me away," said Charlie. "Mrs. Fields? Please Mrs. Fields, will you take her for me?"

Jaimiee looked hard at Charlie, puzzled. Don't hurt his dog?

Mrs. Field's jaw dropped and she moved closer, twisting her apron.



Matthew remembered the name Hunnycut, his rich summer neighbor. So they wanted to kidnap Hunnycut and got me instead. Explains the road trip. Bette's hurt. The bad one did it. This woman's here to arrest Charlie. Charlie's good to me. Don't want to go back to Rosanne and those children. Think. Need to help Charlie. Think.

"I don't want Spot back in the street, people hurt her." Spot was in Charlie's face again, licking, pawing, dancing.

"Oh, Lord, Lord. Now don't you worry Charlie, Spot's got a home at the Roadkill for as long as she needs it," said Mrs. Fields.

Matthew laid his hand on Jaimiee's arm. She jumped.

"Sorry, Miss, I didn't mean to scare you. But, I'm thinking that you've got some things wrong here," said Matthew. Jaimiee's eyes widened, her nostrils flared. "These people never took me away from my home. I came along because I wanted to. We're all just out for a little ride in the country," Matthew turned to Charlie. "That's right isn't it Charlie?"

"What!" said Jaimiee.

"Uh, sure, sure, we're just out to see some countryside, that's all, Miss." Charlie brightened, hugged Spot, who settled her face into his neck with a snort.

"Now wait a minute," Jaimiee stiffened. "Now wait just a minute! I've been chasing you across two states while you sent ransom notes to Hunnycut International, and now you're all trying to tell me that there was no kidnapping intended. I don't think so."

"Oh, that's the way it was, Miss," said Matthew, becoming animated, smiling at her. "Charlie and his friends came along one day and offered me an adventure, just when I was looking for one. Oh, we've been having a time, eh Charlie?" Matthew's eyes danced and began to work their magic on her.

Mrs. Fields chuckled, shook her head. "Never heard of such a thing."

"You bet," said Charlie. "Tell her about all the pretty places we saw."

"Oh my, just about everywhere we went was pretty as could be. The mountains, and that big river, Columbia, and the wheat fields just rolling off to the horizon..."

"And don't forget the desert, this last part..."

"Oh my, the hot springs, now that was something. Spot here got herself a good bath, we all got soaped up and had a good soak, and Bette..."

The two men looked at each other, Charlie began to rub his eyes with his big knuckles and Matthew turned to the window.

Jaimiee put her elbows on the table and followed Matthew's gaze. Not much I can do if Matthew denies he's been kidnapped. Getting a positive ID on those faxes would be hard, and circumstantial at best. Jesus. I'd better call Dan. She started to get up, remembered something and turned to Matthew.

"You may want to protect these people, your friends now it appears, and I'm trying to understand that. But you ought to know what's happened with your nephew Wooster and his wife Rosanne since you've been gone. They've had your land surveyed and are going to sell it just as soon as they can get you declared dead by the county coroner."

"What?" said Matthew. "Declared dead? How do you know about Wooster and them? I'm not dead."

"Oh dear," said Mrs. Fields as she slid in beside Charlie and petted Spot. "Now what?"

"I know you're not dead, and you know you're not dead, but everybody on the Marymere Peninsula thinks you've been washed out to sea. When you just disappeared like that and didn't come back, the search and rescue volunteers combed the area for days before they gave up."

"How long before I'm dead?"

"I don't know, but if I were you, I'd want to get back home quickly."

"I'd need a ride," said Matthew, smiling at Jaimiee.

She smiled back, "Okay Matthew, don't worry, I'll get you back home."

"First we got to get down to the hospital to see Bette, make sure she's all right," said Matthew.

"What about me?" said Charlie. "Am I still going to jail? And what about Bette too?" his face fell, "If she lives."

"I don't know Charlie, we'll see," she saw his stricken face. "I doubt it. Matthew won't prosecute, and my client just wants to keep a lid on all this. It looks like Ben is in the hot seat all by himself now."

Jaimiee called Dan and told him about Ben trying to kill Bette. Dan had researched Ben: "Low level systems analyst for Boeing Computer Services, laid off in the last big round of cuts a couple of years ago. Has a history of violence, bar fights, an investigation of computer fraud, and a couple of domestic calls when he lived with a woman on Capitol Hill. That's about as far as his public record goes."

"We'd best leave Ben to the authorities, considering we want to keep this quiet, but I do want to follow up on Bette when I get back to Seattle." Jaimiee told him about finding Matthew and Charlie, Matthew lying about being kidnapped, apparently protecting people who have become friends to him.

"Matthew wanted to come back as soon as I told him about the possible sale of his property, but he wants to go see Bette first. Actually I'd like to check this whole thing out for myself. I've been following these people long enough to want to get some closure on it."

Dan agreed that there was still some risk of bad publicity, and she should follow up. He said he would call the Marymere Peninsula and tell the county

coroner Matthew was alive and would be back home in a week or so. "I'm not sure how I'll explain it, but I'll think of something."

Jaimiee stayed in Wanda's room, and first thing the next morning, she, Matthew and Charlie started for Winnemucca. Her sports car only held two, so they took the ton and a half flatbed from Mrs. Field's store. They agreed to stop on the way back at the White Horse Ranch for a load of early alfalfa bales.

Along the way Charlie filled her in on the details of the failed kidnapping plan. He felt stupid for getting involved, and was relieved to be off the hook. He'd gotten involved because of Bette; he'd been a john of hers once, a rare thing for him, and they'd become friends. Ben had sucked them into the plan, made it sound easy, safe. "Oh, and her last name is Halberson. Maybe that'll help at the hospital."

## Chapter Thirteen

The last huge ore carriers rumbled on rolling dust clouds to the high reaches of the pit, and all was quiet. Still Ben waited. A hot sun climbed above the rim and punished him.

"All clear!" The bullhorn echoed off the pit walls.

Ben turned to the sun and in a moment of unseen fury his wait was ended.

A water truck moved in and began to spray the area to settle the dust. The foreman was about to radio the carriers back to the pit when he saw it.

Sonofabitch!

"Deke, get you're ass up here!" he yelled into the bullhorn.

A man in orange coveralls ran awkwardly, clutching his hard hat to his head, across the pit to him. "What's up Boss?"

"Another goddamn dud, Deke, that's what, look at that," he pointed, "another goddamn dud. Third one this week; number six didn't go."

"Shit."

"Shit you're right, you asshole. Do you know how much it costs to hold up this operation because of your damn screw-up?"

"Boss. I swear to God, I done it right. It's the caps. The caps is about half bad. The caps don't go, the sticks don't go."

"Yeah, yeah, I don't want to hear it, now get your ass up there and make another set." He poked his face in Deke's, looked him in the eyes hard and pounded a big index finger into his chest slowly, rhythmically. "You got thirty minutes to save your goddamn job."

Deke tore off to the blasting shed, loaded up with sticks and caps, three this time, and wire, which he trailed after him across the pit to where the wall still stood and the pile of rubble was smallest.

The foreman yelled into the bullhorn, "Take a break guys, thirty minute delay, radio silence." Ore haulers stacked up like rush-hour traffic. Drivers climbed down the ladders from high cabs, clustered in the shade to talk, smoke, spit and kick dirt.

Some of the women went off together for a pee break behind a lone juniper. The men laughed and pointed. They pissed on the big rubber tires, pissed their names in the dust, marking things like dogs, like boys.

Pronghorns moved deeper into the shimmering sagebrush, fearful of the unfamiliar idle of the machines, still belching and popping black diesel.

Deke worked his way across the pile of smaller rubble below the number six drill hole. Goddamn his black heart. That bastard's had it in for me from day one. Nothin' I do is right. He's goin' to find a way to fire me come hell or high water.

He slowed as the going got rough. Loose football-sized rocks from the number five and seven explosions. Maybe I can use this boulder here...

He saw something. Stopped. Something the color of rock, but not rock, something... Oh my God. It was moving. A face. Eyes opened in a dust-encrusted face, blood ran down a bone-colored cheek, building up tiny dams of dust, breaking through in thick crimson flood.

Orange, thought Ben. He blinked his unfocused eyes. Orange. God's orange robes. A foggy remembrance of orange robes begging in airports. Shit.

The foreman saw Deke running toward him, waving his orange hard hat, screaming incomprehensibly.

That dumb shit's flipped. Well, that's it. He's fired.

"Boss!"

"Deke, you're fired!"

"Boss, there's somethin', somebody out there, under the rocks, and it's bleedin'."

"What?"

"There's somethin'..."

"I heard you, and you're still fired!"

The foreman yelled into the office to get an ambulance as he ran toward the spot, yelling for his end loader operators. Within minutes two machines were working to clear a path to Ben. For the last few feet, workers threw rocks into the buckets by hand.

"You okay, good buddy?" said the foreman to Ben, thinking about his own job now.

"Where's your orange robes?"

"Huh?"

"The other one was orange."

"Oh, that's the dynamite guy. He's required to wear orange."

Ben closed his eyes. Not dead. Screwed up again. Tunnel of light receding, constricting, silence.

The foreman decided not to move him before the ambulance arrived. The safety monitor put a compress on his head wound, and somebody found a blue plastic tarp and draped it over the boulder for shade.

The foreman studied Ben. His left forearm was turning black, and the right shoulder bled heavily. His right leg was lying at an odd angle, badly broken, God knows what else. Ten thousand dollars an hour. How long's it going to be before we can blow this thing and get back to work. How the hell did you get in here anyway, dickhead?

He called over the security chief and told her to get a sheriff's detective on site as soon as possible so they could get back to work. And he wanted her to take notes and pictures. "Kathe, you're security. You let him get in here, so you'd better put your thinking cap on that pretty little head of yours honey, and figure a way to cover your sweet ass." He started to pat her backside, saw her eyes flash, thought better of it. "And my ass too while you're at it. The bean counters at HQ are going to shit a brick."

Asshole.

Kathe ran for her Blazer to call the sheriff's office and get her camera.

I wish I could nail that sonofabitch. He doesn't like my broad middle-aged ass anyway. Always goes after those skinny little blondes they get up here to drive truck, right out of high school. Don't know any better than to fall for his horseshit.

She got a negative on an investigator. They were booked for days. The dispatcher told her that if there was no crime involved, the department was too short handed to help. "Do it yourself. Take lots of photos, some interviews with involved parties..."

She headed back and began taking pictures and told the foreman they were on their own.

"Fine with me." Deke, get your ass up there and make that set, on the double! We'll do the shot soon as the ambulance clears out."

"I thought I was fired?"

"Oh, shut up. Get up there and do your damned job!"

You bastard. Kathe looked at the foreman and then down at Ben, battered and broken, maybe in shock. This man's not a sack of cement. She finished her pictures and some reference measurements, kneeled beside the safety monitor.

"How's he doing?"



“Hard to tell. Shock could get him if he’s not strong. Could go either way. Lots of broken stuff, cuts and bruises. I’m worried about internal bleeding, so I’m keeping the blood pressure cuff on him.”

Kathe looked at Ben’s face. Poor guy, you’ve got a tough time ahead. She decided to stay with him.

It was quiet in the pit. And then the siren grew, warbling in and out of bone dry draws, climbing nearer the pit rim. Suddenly it burst into sight. The siren wailed and resounded off the rock.

Kathe turned away as a wall of dust slammed them when the ambulance braked to a stop. The crew quickly checked Ben’s vital signs and strapped him to a board.

“He’ll live, but we’ll need someone to follow and brief ER,” said one of the medics. “We’ll call the Carlin clinic, but they’ll pass us off to Winnemucca. New hospital at Elko, but not many specialists yet.”

“You!” the foreman pointed to Kathe, thumbing her toward the Blazer, “Take care of this. Whatever it takes!” The ambulance circled in its own dust and roared away. “Sure, Boss,” she spit it out, jumped in the Blazer and sped after the ambulance.

The foreman watched the two lines of dust climb high in the pit. “Ready, Deke?”

“Ready, Boss!”

The foreman raised his bullhorn. “All clear!” He jogged back to the safety of the office. The ambulance and the Bronco neared the rim. He signaled Deke who closed the switch. Multiple muffled reports. Rock swelled, fractures fanned, dust erupted, and concussion echoes filled the pit.

## Chapter Fourteen

Wanda lay awake. Need a cigarette. Can't wake Linda. Around her, Linda's spare bedroom, pink and white lace, Cupid holds a lampshade, points his arrow at her breast and leers. Little hearts spatter the wallpaper. Pastel window shades, drawn against the morning, filter a soft blue light. An oval dresser mirror reflects blue hearts from the wall.

In her chest, a weight presses up, spreads to her jaw. She coughs, spits into a tissue, rolls over to find the covered lace-rimmed wastebasket, rolls back. Thinks of Bette, wonders about her life before this, thinks of her own life since Buster died. Her tired eyes find the blue hearts mirror and she slides into shadowy sleep.

Somewhere a magpie welcomed her to another Winnemucca desert afternoon. The shades had been raised, turning the blue hearts pink. She rose slowly on one elbow. Where am I? Oh. She fell back, unwilling to face it.

"I hear you in there!" came the cheery voice of Linda. "Time to eat. You slept late."

"Be right there." The weight of it pressed down. Struggled up, saw herself in the mirror and fell back again. God, what a wreck. Rolled out of bed, found her loafers, stood, turned to the mirror again. Wanda, you look like shit. I know it. What are we going to do about it. Nothing. She fluffed her hair, rubbed the sleep from her eyes and adjusted her clothes. Good, let's go have a cigarette for breakfast.

Afternoon breakfast on the screen porch was a bakery box of mixed donuts, coffee, lots of sugar and cream for Linda. Wanda forced down one glazed along with her black coffee and cigarette.

"Lord, Wanda, I don't mean to be nosy, but do you live on cigarettes and black coffee? You can't live on nothing."

"That's what people keep a telling me." Wanda took another drag, savored the relief that pulls her from bed in the morning. "I used to love eating. Me and Buster, he was my husband I told you about last night, we used to go out all the time to the fanciest places in Portland. And, he was just the best cook ever himself, used to cook real nice dinners for us all the time. I'd set up the candles and lay out the linen napkins and open the wine. We'd sit for hours just eating and looking at each other. I weighed thirty pounds more in them days." She looked at the donuts, then out on the small cool green lawn, ringed with flowers. Cupid again, this time holding up a birdbath, busy with small birds. "Well, any old way, when he passed away, I just lost all interest in food. Took up cigarettes instead."

"I wish something would make me lose interest in food like that," said Linda.

"No you don't!" snapped Wanda. "You don't know what you're saying."

Linda looked hurt. Wanda looked away, back.

"I'm sorry." She looked back to Cupid. "It's just that he... What we was, was my whole life, I thought forever, and I was so happy I could hardly stand it sometimes, and it just kept getting better and better the longer we was together. It was the only time I felt myself my entire life."

Linda shook her head, paused in the dismantling of the cinnamon roll with her tiny fat fingers, and looked at Wanda. "I'm sorry too. I didn't think." They smiled at each other. "You see all the hearts and stuff I've got around here?" Wanda nodded. "Well, I've never had, not even one love, ever. Not even a bad one, let alone one like you had. I can't really understand how wonderful it

must have been. I'm still waiting. I put up all these hearts and Cupids and stuff just to... well, it's sort of a way of keeping from giving up altogether."

"I guess I'm lucky to of had Buster, even if it wasn't but for a few years, it's a whole lot better than nothing ever."

Linda finished eating, Wanda smoking. They talked about Linda's work at the hospital and it reminded Wanda of Bette.

"I've got to call in to check on Bette."

"You just relax now. I've already done that," said Linda. "I knew you'd be wondering, so I called in first thing I woke up. She's doing better than anybody thought. Joe, he's a friend that's a nurse in ER, he said yesterday they figured she'd never make it, but she's responding to the Lasix, and the swelling is beginning to go down already. Says they'll probably be able to go to surgery tonight to fix up the skull damage."

Wanda jumped up. "Well, then I got to get right down there right now. They might want to see me or something."

"Sit down," said Linda. "I told them to pass the word that you were staying with me while Bette was in the hospital, and they could find you here. You can go in with me for my shift, and be around while she's in surgery."

"Linda, it's real nice of you to ask me to stay with you while I'm here with Bette, but I can't let you do that."

Linda sat back, wiped her lips carefully, closed the empty donut box and raised her palm to Wanda. "Hush! You're staying as long as Bette needs you to be here, and that's that."

"That's real nice now, but I just can't..."

"Don't sass me now," said Linda, leaning forward and brushing crumbs from her minimal lap. "I outweigh you by two hundred pounds." She pointed a pinkie finger at Wanda and jabbed out the words, "and don't you ever forget it."

They spent the afternoon shopping for spare clothes for Wanda, some underwear and stretch pants and a couple of pullovers. Wanda admired her new underpants. "You know, living way up in Fields, I don't get out to shop too much and underpants is one thing that's real easy to let slide. Most the ones I got stuck away in that old dresser drawer of mine are so full of holes they're hardly worth putting on."

"Speaking of holes," Linda grabbed them from Wanda. "These little leg holes are smaller than some of the holes I've got in the seat of mine." They laughed, and then wandered the downtown, talking, pointing, stopping to eat, and for a while Wanda forgot.

## Chapter Fifteen

A jolt. Sounds. Talking. Doors slammed and feet slapped. Light, bright desert sky, then rectangles of green light receding overhead and behind him, beyond him, headlong taken, Ben struggled against restraints, white flashing forms stood aside for his juggernaut. He faded again as his cart banged through the double swinging doors of the emergency room.

Kathe waited through the afternoon for news. There seemed little point in going back to the mine, and she wanted to be away from the foreman.

When she arrived with the ambulance, she had reported to the ER physician on the particulars of Ben's accident, as much as she knew anyway. She was asked for his identification. He had a small roll of fifties in his pocket and nothing else. His clothes were city clothes, unsuited for hiking, and they were torn from the blast, but showed signs of being threadbare before.

Sad. He could die here and nobody would know. Maybe there isn't anybody to know, or care. She noticed she was sliding down on the slick vinyl seat, pushed back, trying to find some comfort. I hate waiting. And I don't even know this man. Somebody should be here.

Across from her a young couple sat, he staring at the wall, she downcast. The woman was tall, dressed like a model in short black skirt, sweater and green tights. She sat slumped, knees together, showing a gap between her thin straight thighs. She gripped the young man's callused and greasy hand. He wore coveralls with an oval blue Ford patch. A child's empty car seat sat beside them. She imagined them, beautiful bodies sweating, wet skin and hair in the twisting gasping fullness of passion, making that baby. Guilt at her voyeurism, overactive

imagination wrought of loneliness, so inappropriate here in this place of fear and sorrow.

The doors banged behind an ER physician as he strode toward her, full of import and things yet to do, checking his clipboard.

"Ms. Bozeman, Kathe Bozeman," he said, looking over his glasses, past her, somewhere down the hall. "Are you here for," he looks again at his clipboard, "John Doe, I would suppose." He paused, looks at her this time. "Do you know this man?"

"I've never seen him before, Doctor. I'm security at the mine where the accident happened. I'm here because," she paused to think, "I guess I'm here because nobody else is here."

"Yes," said the doctor. "I see." He flipped a page of the clipboard and began reading. "Broken femur, clean, broken clavicle, again clean, both should heal readily, contusions of the head and body, concussion, not serious, two broken ribs, more are bruised." He flipped back a page, shook his head. "This guy was lucky."

"How do you mean doctor?"

"If whatever hit his femur had hit him in the abdomen, or his head, he'd be a dead man now. Lucky man."

"Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Maybe he didn't want to live."

"I see," said the doctor, looking down the hall again. "We'll continue as per standard procedure with indigent cases. In lieu of an advocate, we'll contact the appropriate agencies to take charge of his case when we discharge him in a couple of days."

"I'll be the advocate until then doctor. The foreman is concerned about liability. How soon will he be able to talk?"

"We've jacked him around quite a bit, setting bones and bandaging things; he's likely to be out of it until sometime this evening."

"Thank you, doctor."

He turned on his heel and strode across the white floor, glancing at the model's legs and the baby seat, before elbowing the swinging doors and disappearing into the inner place where he works his medical wonders.

Kathe walked down the hall and called the mine. She convinced the foreman that she needed to stay near the victim until he was released, to protect their interests.

"Just keep a lid on it, Toots. Dump him on the first Jesus freakin' mission house you can find. Maybe Jesus'll forgive him for costing me twenty grand in production time."

By early evening, John Doe, hadn't come out yet, but was due to be placed in a ward soon. Kathe waited, nursed her big Burger King coffee, watched people. The couple was gone. Home, she hoped, and with good news about the baby. A man sat to her right, middle-aged, blue cheeks, wheezing. He stared past Kathe to the woman who stood smoking on the verandah, thin, looking to the sunset. Behind the check-in desk an obese woman conferred with the small dark-haired beauty who'd helped Kathe. Shift change.

Voices attracted her attention down the hall. A grinning old man hobbled with a cane, flanked by a bald muscular man, distressed buttons on his shirt, and a fashionably casual young woman of color. Kathe overheard her address the obese woman at the desk. "Excuse me, but, can you tell us where we might find Bette Halberson?"



"Well, a woman named Bette is being prepped for surgery right now." The fat woman wrote something down and looked at the clock. "She's scheduled for midnight. I'm glad someone knows her last name. That will help us a lot. Even her advocate," she pointed at Wanda outside smoking, "doesn't know her last name. Are you friends?"

"Yes!" said the bald man. The old man nodded his head vigorously, smiled and stamped his cane softly.

Kathe lost the conversation. Midnight surgery. Must be serious. She looked back at the wheezing man, and he was sleeping, chin on chest. He drooled on the Popular Mechanics, which began to slide slowly down his legs.

An orderly wheeled someone out, paused, looking at the chart hanging from the gurney. "Anyone here for a John Doe?"

"I am," said Kathe. She moved to his side. He stared at the ceiling. "I'm Kathe Bozeman. I work security at the mine where the accident happened." He turned his head to her and she asked, "Could you tell me your name?"

He turned to the window, stared at the people talking outside, turned back quickly, suddenly wild-eyed. "John Doe. My name is John Doe. Get me out of here."

Kathe and the orderly looked at each other, shrugged. Kathe said, "He'll take you to your ward. You need to sleep. I'll come back tomorrow." He nodded, and was wheeled away, head turned to the wall.

"I'm so sorry. I am so so sorry." Wanda dropped her cigarette, ground it out on the concrete of the verandah, looked up at them and tears came. "If I'd a known. If I'd a just a known that man could a done such a thing..." She buried her face in her hands. "That tire iron a coming down on her head, and me right there, couldn't do a thing, just watched him ruin her life."

Charlie put his big arm around her shoulders, squeezed and gave her a little shake. More tears, her head limp on his shoulder, he helped her to a bench. "It's okay, Wanda, it's okay. Nobody could guess Ben would try and kill somebody. If it's anybody's fault, it's mine, I should of never let you two go after Ben without me."

Matthew sat beside her, leaned his cane against the bench and held her hands, patting and smiling. Jaimiee introduced herself, said she'd come to see that Matthew got home, left it at that, and listened.

Charlie asked Wanda how it happened. As he heard the story he began to redden, his thick neck muscles swelled and twitched. "I ever catch that..."

Jaimiee listened, then asked more questions. "Any response from the state police? Do you know where they're looking?" When Wanda told her how it seemed to be a low priority with the police, Jaimiee excused herself, called on her cell and got the case investigator's voice mail. She identified herself and her expertise, then let him have it. "Just because you perceive these people to be transients, and therefore of no interest to you or your community, doesn't give you the right to shove this case to the bottom of the pile. I'll be in your office first thing tomorrow and you damn well better have an action plan for finding Ben Marconi. That's right I know his name and a lot more about him. I'll be at your office at eight." Life is cheap if you're not a local. She watched a janitor glide his huge dust mop down the shining endless hallway. Maybe I was hasty. Overworked and underpaid like most cops. Doing his best maybe. But, these people need justice. Squeaky wheel...

Wanda lit another cigarette, and told them what happened at the hospital, about how much help Linda had been, and as much of the bad news as she could remember. She looked at her watch. Bette should be in recovery by three and into a room by morning. Could they stay with her, just for tonight?

## Chapter Sixteen

He stands in a dark rain. Fluorescent pink cotton candy drips. Carnival spectral highlights swirl color and flicker joylessly. Her father dissolves slowly, receding in fading conflagration. Come back.

Stained ceiling, bare bulb, squeaking bed. Stranger stinking rotten grapes, vomit, presses her with limpness and sweat, spits on her, whips his flaccid ego. Whore. Pulls on yellow underwear. Worthless whore. Fistful of pills in her crotch. Lunges, rakes her face and breasts with filthy fingernails. Fills the room with bile and fear. She lays unmoving and begs. A raised arm, knife blade flashes, swipes across her white soft belly, deep in a slice of whiter white, laid open, crimson flows, gushes.

River of blood, endless swirl of rank red. Her mother laughs, clutches tattooed naked one who squats in mud, scrotum swinging. Shelters a baby from evil Mother who leers, eyes pinched and rummy. You don't deserve that baby. Go find your own father, she cackles, pushes them into the hot blood river. Torn away from the banks, she sinks, tries to hold her baby high, sinks to rise, to suck blue air, sinks again, rises and begs. Baby fades from her clutch. Come back.

"We're getting quite a bit of REM here," said the surgeon.

The anesthesiologist agreed. "I'll keep eye on it, maybe take her a little deeper."

"Agreed," said the surgeon as he continued removing small pieces of skull and dust left by the electric saw. He asked a technician, "How are we doing, Mary, on shaping that plate?"

While they worked on the fit, a nurse mentioned, "This one is the second indigent case today. The other one was some bone-setting on a guy caught in an explosion at one of the gold mines."

New-mowed grass itched her back, cool, looking through the oak leaves at the sky and fields across the valley, more oaks and meadows and cows. Black and white cows, a man herds them, her father and his cows. She runs across golden fields, jumping. Thunderheads raise white and billow, pillows of soft and comfort and joy on a blue-sky childhood.

The anesthesiologist shook his head. "Oh man, I wish you hadn't told me that."

"If you get anything at all, it takes a year at least," said the surgeon.

"What do you think, Doctor?" said the technician.

"I think we need to revise the whole system, but to tell the truth, I have no idea how to do it."

"No, Doc," she laughed. "The plate, what do you think about the fit?"

He gave it a cursory glance. "Good, looks good to me. Clean it up a little and we'll prep for the final." He looked at his watch. "Let's wrap this one guys, I promised the wife I'd be home by now. Suction please." He quickly finished attaching the plate. "Looks good. Somebody else's problem now."

## Chapter Seventeen

Ben was aware of a weak light. Someone to his left shifted and moaned. A small pump labored. A green digital clock flicked a new minute at him. One-thirty-one a.m. His back hurt. He tried to reach it to rub it. Couldn't. Tried to roll over to relieve the ache. Couldn't. Dammit. Blinked his eyes, looked, and saw chrome braces immobilizing a white mummified limb in a cast. He couldn't move. Shit. Tried to move again. His right arm moved. His right leg moved. Twisted to roll over. Uh! Sharp rib pain. He gasped and it brought the pain again. Tried to lie still. Back pain deepened, spread, gnawed at him. He looked around. The curtains were open. A night light glowed, fell on tight sheets, shining floors, beds on wheels, and a foot, blue wasted foot poking from under a sheet. God that's an awful looking thing. Dropped his head. Raised it again. Jesus, my foot. Looked at the green numerals: One-thirty-three a.m. Pain there still. It became his focus, suffused his mind and overwhelmed all thought. Tried to move again. Got to get some relief!

"Nurse!"

No answer.

"Nurse, dammit, I need a nurse!"

His neighbor stirred. The man rolled over and looked at him. "Shut up."

"What?"

"I said shut up."

"I need a nurse."

"Then push the damn call button, there," he pointed. "Clipped to your sheet."

Ben looked. "Oh." He pushed the button three times, waited. It got worse again, now that someone was coming, worse. He pushed the button three more times.

"I'm comin', I'm comin', I'm comin'," she sang her way into the room, letting in irritating brightness from the hallway. "My, ain't we the patient one." She peered down at him over her glasses, arms folded, "Your angel of mercy is here now, Mr. Doe, what can I do you for?"

"My back is killing me and every time I try and move my ribs hurt like hell and I can't stand it anymore. Do something!"

"You know somethin'. You the third fella named John Doe that's been in that very bed this month." She pointed a big black finger at him, folded her arms, smiled mischievously. "Must be the same fella, just looks different. Other two was just about as patient and polite-like as you."

"Please."

"Now we're talkin'. You want some dope, I bet?"

"Anything."

"You already had some dope. We'll jus' try a back rub first." Her large strong hands turned him gently and began kneading the muscles of his back like bread dough. He tried to pull the sheet up over his exposed backside. "Now don't you worry yourself none 'bout your peanut butt. I'm sixty-three, an' I done seen more peanut butt than you can shake a stick at. I don't pay it no nevermind." She pulled the sheet up for him. "You just relax and let Billie work them kinks out of your back, that way we can both rest some." Ben gave in to her hot strong hands and drifted away, deep, deep.

In surgery recovery: White shapes hover, say things Bette doesn't understand, and disappear. Nausea. Horrid pain spins orbits of color. Dry

heaves. Shapes again. More pain spins white on white, a sharp magnesium orb drillburns deep, bursts forth, spews razor webs that pivot gleaming, and fall back through her eye. Spiral the pain deeper, holding deep, digging-in claws of suffering, hanging on, gnawing, round and round...

She wants to scream. Gags. Wants to beg. Dry heaves. Wants to thrash to rid herself of this thing. She can't speak. Can't move. Can only suffer in a burning lake of pain.

Ben's room: The pain was back, along with a new pain, knitting bones. He pressed the call button. A small blonde nurse came, an orderly waited in the doorway.

"What do you need, John Doe?"

"Pain. Bad pain. Everything hurts."

"Sure, we can get you something."

"Where's Billie?"

"She went home, shift's over." She turns to the orderly. "It's always this way. They all want Billie." She turned back to Ben. "What is it that Billie does for you guys that's so great?"

"Back rub."

"Back rub, right, back rub." She sneered, and the orderly laughed. "That old woman is giving out something more than back rubs around here in the middle of the night!"

"Please. Please get me something."

"You bet. I don't do back rubs, but I've got some morphine you're going to love."

Quick pain, penetrating hard and deep, quick out, cool bite of alcohol cotton. Warmth spreading, muscles letting go, mind releasing fear and pain.

Nothing. Softness and peace. Smile at the clock. Four a.m. Smile at the ceiling. Nice ceiling. Press the call button. She comes. More please. Smile and float. Smile and float.

On the verandah: Wanda's cigarette glowed. She looked up at the stars. The stars. The stars were different there, down under the equator in Kenya. The Southern Cross, other constellations she can't remember. Buster hid her hand in his as they stood on the banks of the Mara, his other hand pointing out the constellations as they came out, and naming them for her. Wish I could remember those names. Wish I had a picture with their names printed on it. No, what I want is Buster to show me, hold my hand again, squeeze on it while he talked, like he always did, me not paying the least bit of attention to what he was saying, just feeling his sweaty hand rubbing love into me. Night sounds of hippo and leopard came to her in the cooling humid air, half way around the world, with her Buster.

Huge blue-black clouds and pink lightning filled the savanna sky from escarpment to escarpment, dwarfed thorn tree and baobab, lion and topi seeking shelter there. Winds pressed elephant and giraffe to earth and flattened the emerald green of wet season grasses. Buster drove, slipping, sliding, precariously, this way and that on the shiny red gumbo, her hands gripped his leg for purchase while he boomed defiant laughter at the firmament. Dear God, is that why you took him; because he knew no fear, of you, or death or of any other thing?

The rain increased, gentle slopes ran sheets of water, the lightning set the ungulates to wandering aimlessly, no shelter to be found, and the plains were filled with them. The Rover stopped there, finally stuck in the green grass water plain. Storm pounded and subdued by the deluge, climbing in back and making



love. Dear God, that man knew how to make this woman happy. Maybe that's why you had to take him away. Well, fine. Maybe it's time to take me too.

Twenty years gone. I'm tired of being alone. Tired.

She looked and saw Linda and Jaimiee talking, Charlie sleeping. Tired. She looked at her watch. Four a.m. Should have heard about Bette by now. She looked up again and the surgeon was there, pacing around the waiting room, impatient. She hurried inside.

He told her Bette survived the surgery well. He explained that the procedure was only to remove the broken pieces of skull and relieve the pressure. She could require more surgery after evaluation by a neurosurgeon. There are none in Winnemucca, he told her, so they will have to go to San Francisco, Salt Lake or Portland. He wished Wanda well and jogged down the long hallway, white coat flapping.

## Chapter Eighteen

Kathe came into Ben's room. He was staring at an untouched tray of breakfast.

"You better eat some of that," said Kathe. "It takes food to heal."

He snapped her a look, turned away, then back, squinted. "Who're you?" He rubbed his eyes with his knuckles.

"Kathe, Kathe Bozeman," she said. "I'm security at the mine where you were hurt."

"Oh," he said, reticent. "I remember. What do you want?"

"We're worried about you, for one thing. You could have died out there if it hadn't been for the failure of some blasting caps in the drill hole directly above you."

So that's what happened. "I'm fine. I'll be on my feet before long."

"We want to make sure you're taken care of," she said. "I'll be talking to our insurance people soon, and I'm sure they'll want to see that you don't have to pay for all this"

"Thanks."

"We do need to have some information though, like your name, and how you came to be there at the time of the blast? Just for our records."

"John Doe is my name." He watched her eyes widen. "Mind you, Jonathan is my real name, but naturally people call me John. My dad had a funny sense of humor."

"I'd say."

"Yeah, he was a strange bird."

"So how did you come to be at the bottom of a gold mine pit so early in the morning?"

"Well, I took a walk and then I got lost and had to spend the night out. Went to sleep by that big rock and woke up like this."

"Uh huh," said Kathe. "Does that Trans Am we found up on the ridge above the mine happen to be yours?"

"No." His eyes found her and then looked past her. "Why would you think that?"

"Well, it wasn't there the day before, there aren't any other vehicles abandoned nearby, and the mine is miles from the interstate. How else could you get there?"

"I like to walk."

"The desert, in street shoes?"

Ben was quiet. He looked at her hard.

"Well if you people were a little more concerned with the safety of innocent people we wouldn't be in this mess, now would we?"

"Well, I..."

"I think I'll just wait until I can contact an attorney. I'll let him do the talking."

There goes my job, thought Kathe.

Ben saw her concern. "Listen, Miss, I don't want to get anybody in any trouble. All I need is a few hundred bucks, a change of clothes and a ride to San Francisco, and you'll never hear from me again."

Where am I going to get that kind of money? Will the Boss go for it?

"But it's got to be soon."

"Why so soon?"

"I've got personal business in San Francisco."

"Let me see about the money."

"I'd need two thousand at least."

"You said a few hundred."

"I changed my mind. I'll need pain medication for a good while, and that's not cheap."

Kathe called the foreman and told him the deal.

"Sounds good to me Toots. Use the corporate card to get cash, I'll authorize it. The PIN for that much cash is RAID. We'll think of something to blame it on. Oh, make sure you get a release."

"This guy, John, Jonathan Doe, doesn't have any ID, remember. He's keeping his name from us. What good is a release? He can still come back on us and deny he ever signed anything."

"He won't come back on us. He's got to be hiding something and you can bet your sweet ass he wants out of here pronto." He paused. "Kathe, listen, I don't really give a shit what this guy's game is, two grand is cheap enough to get him out of our hair. Don't ask questions, just do it."

Kathe went back to Ben's room. "Boss says okay. I'll have the cash for you tomorrow. I don't figure they'll let you out of here for a couple more days anyway."

"You be here tonight before midnight with the money and I'll be ready to go. Oh, and rip out the pants seam for this cast."

"Even if you were ready to get out, they won't check you out until tomorrow morning at the earliest."

"Kathe," he paused. "Listen. Trust me. Just trust me for now, and you and your boss will be rid of me for good."

"But you can't just walk out of here..."

"I just want to put this all behind me and get on with it. I need your help. I appreciate you hanging around for me. I just need this one last favor. Get me the money, and get me to San Francisco."

"Okay, John Doe, Jonathan, I'll be here tonight."

He watched her leave. Jesus, Ben, you're a bastard. Her ass is going to be in a sling when they figure out who I am. Too late to catch me I hope.

He pressed the call button and decided to phone the admissions desk to find out about Bette while he waited for his shot. She's alive, and in this hospital, or Wanda and Charlie and the old man wouldn't be here. Wonder who the young woman was?

"Admissions, how may I help you?"

"Hello, I'd like to check on the condition of a Bette Halberson please."

"Just a moment please." The phone clicked, on hold.

He adjusted his pillow for comfort. I want morphine. He looked at the clock and calculated he should be able to get a couple more shots before midnight. I could steal some Demerol from this jerk in the next bed.

"Patient Halberson's surgery was successful, but she is still in guarded condition. She is out of recovery and into a ward."

"What room number is that?"

"Could you hold again? I'll have to get that information for you." Click.

Brother. Hurry up nurse. He pushed the call button, twice this time. Over three hours. He looked at the clock again. Ten a.m.

Click. "Sir?"

"I'm still here."

"She's in B Wing, ward twenty-three."

"Thanks."

"But sir?"

"Yes?"

"She is not expected to regain consciousness any time soon. Visits are not advised at this time."

"Thank you, I'll check back."

"You're welcome sir."

Didn't kill her. His right hand twitched, he shook it, flapping from his wrist, shaking away the feel of the tire iron crushing her skull. Past the soap opera actors, dripping transparent emotion from the corner television, he saw blood and hair explode into his face, felt its splatter. He wiped his mouth with his gown sleeve.

The blonde nurse came with the morphine. "You thought I'd forgot you didn't you?" He jumped, then smiled weakly. "Turn over the other way. I believe in equal employment practices when it comes to cheeks." She jabbed the needle in, pressed the plunger and he felt the drug harden the surrounding muscle and then begin its slow steady journey to his brain. "This is the last one of these for you Mister John Doe."

"What?"

"Don't want you getting hooked on this stuff. Don't worry, I'll get you some more Demerol."

"Nurse?" he said over his shoulder as she swabbed the small red puncture.

"Yes?"

"Could I get somebody to take me around the hospital this afternoon?"

"You bet we can. Matter of fact, you're scheduled for some mobility training this afternoon. You'll get plenty of time out in the hall to see and be seen."

"You think I'm ready for that?"

“You better be, Mister John Doe. You’re an indigent case. You’ll be back out on the street day after tomorrow.”

Kathe looked at her watch. Ten p.m. Where the hell is he? I don’t like this. Why does he want to leave in the middle of the night? I told him the foreman was going to pay the bills. What’s his hurry?

Billie loomed in the doorway of the hospital room, blocking the hall light. “That little fren a yours is one feisty little booger. Where he gone to now? They tole me he spend the whole damn day staggerin’ around here, hurtin’ hisself on them crutches, and then begging for more dope. Look like he trying to get hisself heal-up altogetther in one damn day. Wonder why that John Doe so hurry-up?” She looked at Kathe, inquisitively.

Kathe shook her head, avoiding Billie’s eyes. She wanted to tell the nurse she's taking him away tonight. But, she promised not to talk, and get him to San Francisco by morning. Not likely if he doesn’t come back soon.

Billie looked at Kathe, started to say more, sighed and moved on, down hallways where people in dimmed rooms needed her.

Ben looked at the clock in the hall. He was late. He’d been crutching up and down the wing for an hour, trying to get his nerve up. His leg hurt, his arm hurt, his last morphine was wearing off.

She’s in there. He stopped by the quiet ward. Someone snored, an oxygen pump throbbed softly. Bette’s bed, just there. He could see her feet, splayed under the sheets like a corpse, like he left her there on that Black Rock Desert road. When was it? He can’t remember. So long, but not. A clattering at the nurses’ station. He looked to see a nurse bend to retrieve a dropped clip-board,

took the opportunity and crabbed through the doorway, his crutches squeaked to a stop at the foot of her bed.

He looked for the face among the tubes and bandages, found it. Looked around. Can't be her. Looked back. Goddamn. Pale and flaccid, framed by bandages, all her life and power gone. Jesus Christ. His head slumped between his shoulders, hanging on the crutches, weaving. He looked up again, hopped carefully along the side the bed, avoiding tubes and wires, and bent to look into her barely open eyes.

"Bette?" he whispered. "Bette?"

Her eyes flickered and parted. He started. They settled back, whites showing, quiet again.

"I'm sorry Bette." He followed the IV tube down from the hanging bottle, across the stiff bleached sheets and to the needle, ending in a blue bruise and swollen hole, deep in a flat vein of her hand. Back to her eyes, flickering again, he held fast to her bed, wavering against the truth, afraid to stay, afraid to go.

"Bette, I want to make this right." His eyes moved to her bandaged head, back to her eyes, still moving, focused on infinity. "I can't, can I." He touched the back of her hand, just above the needle. "I can't ever fix this — anything."

He stroked her forearm, the red hair soft, hiding age freckles and dried skin. He stroked again, and again, looking, his fingertips touching her.

His fingers stopped moving, lay there, connected somehow. He turned his eyes to hers. Her eyes were open, blinking, and turned to his, focused, but empty of understanding.

"Bette, I'm sorry. Can you hear me? I'm sorry, I'm... I don't know how to say it. Do you understand? Dammit, dammit, dammit." Ben pounded his open hand on the cold bed rails.



Her brow knitted, for just a moment, lips pursed, tongue moved thickly. But no sound came and she retreated, eyes blank, face slack.

"No Bette!" Ben turned her face to him with his fingertips. "Bette, Bette, try Bette. Try."

Nothing.

"I can't stay." He turned, trailed his fingers down her arm, across the needle and left, crutch rubbers gently conversing down the quiet hallways.

Kathe was waiting when he returned to his room.

"Where've you been?"

"Taking a walk."

"I thought you were in a hurry. I was worried."

He looked at her. "I'm here now. Hand me those slacks." He pulled the curtain around his bed.

She handed them to him. "The seam is fixed. Anything else?"

"Do you have my money?"

"Yes, yes I do have your money."

"Let me see it."

"What?"

"I said let me see it," There was an edge to it.

Money rustled, and her hand reached through the curtain holding twenty, one-hundred dollar bills, fanned for his convenience.

It was quiet behind the curtain. "Throw me that shirt."

She wadded it up and tossed it over the top.

"Thanks."

He opened the curtain and looked at her. "Listen, I'm sorry I'm being a shit. I'm in pain and I'm lower than I've ever been."

"Sure," she sighed. "Okay."

"No, no it's not. You're helping me more than you have to, and I really need you. Forgive me, please?"

"Okay," she smiled weakly.

He handed her the arm brace. "I wish I had one of these for my leg. Could you strap this on for me?"

"Sure," she began working on it. "Probably too soon for the leg. Maybe in a couple of weeks." She finished and looked at him. "Where will you be in a couple of weeks?"

His eyes evaded her as he reached for his watch on the nightstand. "Who knows, maybe I can come back here after I'm done in San Francisco."

"It's not a bad place to be. Maybe the boss would give you a job." She laughed. "Right. Sure he would." She paused. "You wouldn't want to work for that sonofabitch anyway."

"That bad huh?" He threw his suit jacket over his shoulders. "Could you help me with my shoes and socks?"

"Sure." She bent and began putting on his socks. "Yeah, it's that bad." She finished tying his shoes and gave his foot a pat. "You're good to go."

He reached for his crutches, paused to shake out several purloined Demerols and tossed them back dry. "Check the hall for nurses. Let's get out of here."

## Chapter Nineteen

Mid morning in Bette's ward: Wanda, Jaimiee, Matthew and Charlie gathered around her bed. Wanda held Bette's hand and stroked her forearm, like she did on the side of the road while she waited for help.

A new doctor assigned to her explained to them that Bette would be unresponsive for days at least, perhaps longer, a long time. "Go home and rest," she told Wanda. "We'll call you if she wakes up, or if there is a problem." She looked at Bette's chart and current EKG and blood pressure read-outs. "I think she's stabilizing now. The Dexamethasone is holding the swelling in check. We could be able to do a passive neurological evaluation as early as tomorrow." She looked at something on her clipboard. "You should probably set up an appointment with one of our counselors." She looked at Wanda. "You've got a job ahead."

Before she, Charlie and Matthew headed back to Fields, Jaimiee wanted to tell Wanda what she accomplished with the state police investigator. He was very apologetic for the impression that the case was not important, and outlined for Jaimiee the steps that were being taken to find Ben. He appreciated the information she provided and would contact Seattle police for more detailed information. While she was with the inspector, a report came in that Wanda's car had been found abandoned in a remote mining area to the east. They would confirm the license and look for clues. This was the first solid information they'd had, and Jaimiee felt sure they would find Ben soon.

Everybody said good-bye. Charlie would fill in for Wanda at the diner, and come visit them often. Jaimiee said she would be available if they needed help. "If nothing else, I have to hear that Kenya honeymoon story you

promised.” Matthew moved slowly to Bette’s bed, took her hand, leaned over and whispered something into her ear.

Wanda and Linda stopped at the hospital administrative offices and made an appointment with counselor Winfred Ermine for the next day. Then they went home and Wanda slept through the day and late into the night.

She awoke to faint pink hearts filling her darkened room. A beer sign on the tavern across the street flashed blue through the lace curtains, turning the hearts purple.

How long did I sleep? Looked at the electric alarm clock on the nightstand. Midnight, almost. Twelve hours. Linda’s at work. She rolled out of bed, found her new chenille robe and padded out to the kitchen. There was a note from Linda. “Some leftover spaghetti in the fridge, zap it for a couple of minutes. I like to add a pat or two of butter to mine. Get lots of rest. I’ll check on Bette. See you in the morning. Linda.”

She got the leftovers and began to warm them in the microwave. I need a cigarette. She forced down the spaghetti so she could have a moist mouth for her first cigarette. The first cigarette after breakfast is always the best one of the day. One for pleasure, two packs for habit.

Out in the yard, the cupid stood alone. The sky was clear still. Stars. Just out of reach. How am I going to do it? Got no more than fifteen-hundred bucks. Trans Am probably is busted. Can’t pay all those medical bills. Maybe the hospital won’t be too hard on us. Money just to live on. And, all that therapy stuff they keep talking about.

She looked to the east over the roofs of the night buildings toward the mountains where they found her car. Wonder if they’ve caught up to Ben yet.

Might be up in those mountains freezing to death. She buried the cigarette filter under some pansies, lit another one.

## Chapter Twenty

Kathe stopped to gas up the Blazer at the Flying J. A man in a white suit stood in a pool of green light beside the entrance. At his feet sat a valise, a sign attached, "Eseldorf." The smile under his mustache, the way he flipped open the old-fashioned pocket watch, served to reinforce a feeling she'd been having; that she was part of something out of her control, a fiction, plunging toward an unsettling conclusion. She shook it off and looked at her passenger, deep in his own world.

By midnight they were headed south on the interstate, a straight shot, to Sparks/Reno, then a turn west over the Sierra Nevada to Sacramento and San Francisco.

They didn't talk much, each lost in private thoughts and the monotony of the night road. Then, he saw the Lovelock exit sign, and laughed at it.

She looked over at him, back at the big green and white sign, and smiled a crooked smile. "You've had some bad luck in that department too, huh?"

"Oh yeah. Oh yeah."

They were quiet again, the green dashboard lights glowing between them, Tammy Wynette standing by her man on the radio, mixed with clear-sky static, and the low roar of the knobby tires.

"Stand by your man..." she sang along with the radio, then stopped. Yeah, you know all about that don't you Kathe. She pounded the wheel with her hand. I was too goddamn good at standing by Travis. He was one good-looking cowboy. Tall and thin, great wrangler's butt, shoulders as wide as Lake Tahoe and eyes as blue as the north sky in winter. Sighed again. Goddammit. Still miss that bastard. Still hurts too.

He was down on his luck when she found him. Wrecked a reefer hauling beef down in Utah and got fired from driving. Couldn't get another ride with a bad record. She was over visiting her sister in Moab when they ran into him at a cowboy bar south of town, out on the state route between the red rock and the green La Sals.

Standing there, against the bar, a head taller than the rest, holding a long-neck beer like it was a work of art, admiring the label, drinking, Adam's apple bobbing up and down his long neck. Stared at him until her sister had to drag her to a table.

He asked her to dance a country swing. Lord, could he dance. Big boots stepping and shuffling, never on her feet, those long arms spinning her every which way, big smile and deep blue eyes under a tilted back cowboy hat.

Travis was her high point and her low point. She could attract the men. Was a lot prettier then. But that all changed when she met Travis. Wasn't about to go back home to Winnemucca without him, so she stayed there in that red-rock country down by the Colorado River, waitressed, worked in a bank, until he came around. There were other women, two or three, wasn't sure, until she got him to marry her and settle down. She should have known how it was going to be.

She stayed with the bank and he was out of work for a year. She bought him his long-neck beers and sobered him up. Loved him so much, all that was forgotten when he held her and looked her in the eyes with those blues of his. She'd stand by him forever. Take care of him. He'd had some bad luck, but he'd be on his feet again, she'd stand him good for awhile.

Then he got a job with the river rafting people, taking tourists down the Colorado through those high, red-walled canyons with the pictures carved there

by the old Indians way before. At first he drove the trailers that put the rafts in the water, and then went to pick them up way down river.

Then they taught him to run the rafts and he was good, a natural, his long arms could lever one of those big rafts around a house-sized rock, roaring pile of whitewater stacked up against it, with what looked like a flick of his wrist. A natural river driver. Not a cowboy anymore, but he still looked like one.

Took her vacation from the bank, his second year on the river, they had an extra seat for her, and went way down past where the Green River comes in. Never forget it. Ever. Hot nights on red sand beaches with the cliffs on fire with sunset color. Later, the full moon would come up and pour quicksilver down the canyon walls. They went off from the others and rekindled their romance in little side canyons. There in the dark they made love to the echoing of drips from springs high on canyon walls. The scent of flowers and greenery from the hanging gardens under the springs mingled with her sleep.

Turned out he was the most popular boatman on the river. Took her years to figure out why. Finally somebody told her. Everybody in Moab knew about Travis and the tourist women. Everybody but her. Good Mormon girls from Salt Lake came down to have a fling with the heathen cowboy boatman. There were others: Catholic girls from Brooklyn, corn-fed beauties from Columbus and Iowa City. Some of them booked the next year on the spot. She wondered about those side canyons where they made love. Wondered how many women he'd had there already. How many since. She forgave him, time and again, forgave, and he promised, time and again, promised.

She had a couple of miscarriages and then couldn't get pregnant at all because of some disease he gave her that stopped up her tubes for good. Ten years, and nothing but a broken heart to show for it. She let him go and moved home to her mother.



Ben watched her. Gripping the steering wheel, hunched forward, squinting into the tunnel of her lights. Banging the wheel, her face beginning to tick just above the corner of her mouth. Tick. Tick. Thump on the wheel. He wondered what she was thinking about. Love, he supposed.

Love. Sure. Guess that's what it was. He still had the pictures in his mind. A strip of six from one of those instant photo booths. She, sitting on his lap hamming it up for the camera. A laugh, now a pout, now she's a model, now a sweet young thing, playing to the camera's eye, the world her personal plaything. He's watching her, transfixed by her beauty, her energy, her self-centeredness. He doesn't look comfortable. Wasn't.

Jennifer. Wavy blonde hair, smelling of shampoo and menthol cigarettes. Long red fingernails she dug into his back, hurting him until he begged her to stop, then laughing at him. Sometimes she would fake an orgasm and then tell him about it later. "Did you know I was faking last night?" She teased him about his size and his face, called him her Rat Prince and her favorite nerd. She'd tease him until his eyes watered-up and then she'd hold him and beg forgiveness, promise eternal love.

There was a day. A rounded hilltop of meadow and daises, sunshine and storybook clouds, curious cows. A bottle of tawny port, sharp cheddar on sourdough. Oh yes. Naked under the sun, on God's rounded breast. Fingertips on her creamy soft thighs, lingering longer, much longer, slower, than before, she compliant, responsive, much more than ever before. He found her downy mound. She spread and opened moist warm lips and received him. She enveloped him, pulled him in, demanding hands gripping him to her. He held, delicious denial, he held, until she moaned and gasped and thrashed against the earth. Oh yes.

She lay in his arms under the sun, that sun, and she slept all afternoon. He stayed awake, cramped but unmoving, and savored each trickle of her sweat across his belly. The scent of their mingled juices rose to him on the warm air, along with pungent waftings from clumps of ripe daisies, busy with bees. He could have died then. Should have.

After that day she drew back, quit hurting him and teasing him, drew away and finally disappeared. She left him with one perfect day and an abiding fear.

He looked at Kathe. Her grip relaxed on the wheel. Her face quiet.

"Penny for your thoughts?" said Ben. He turned toward her trying to find relief for his leg. Hurting again.

She turned to him, puzzled at first, then smiled. "Oh, nothing. I've been wallowing in my past, and I just decided not to do that anymore."

"Sounds like a plan to me." Ben laughed.

They talked. Talked about places they've lived; Moab and Seattle and Brooklyn and Winnemucca. Talked about school days and jobs, and taxes and death, other inevitabilities, other desert nights.

"You were waiting there for the blast weren't you?" she turned to him, green light softly washing her face from below.

"Yes."

"Why? Do you mind telling me?"

"Because I'm small and because I look funny."

She looked at him again, smiled. "You're joking."

"Maybe. Just a little."

"Well, I've got a broad ass and a bad attitude."

They laughed.

"I like your attitude," he said. "I don't know about the other. Let you know after daylight."

Laughing again, they looked at each other and then turned to the road again, each lost in their own darkness.

Ben watched her in the green light and the brighter light of oncoming traffic. Not bad. Little heavy maybe. Not really, just a little broad. Cute face. Lot better looking than mine. It's been so long. No woman wants an asshole like me.

Then it came upon him again. The memory of it. What he did to Bette. Bette, so helpless. The life he took from her.

Bette. Jesus, Bette. His chest felt full, his nose ran, eyes filled. He choked and turned to the window. His eyes pinched shut, squeezing out tears, gushing hot salty tears down his face. His shoulders convulsed. He covered his face with his good arm and shuddered.

"Jonathan?" she said. "Are you all right Jonathan?"

"Yes. No." He banged his head against the window. Finally he lost control and wailed. Wailed at it all, cried for all that was gone and all that never was and all that never would be.

Kathe slowed, found a wide spot on the shoulder.

"Can I help?" She put her hand on his shoulder.

He turned and lay his wet cheek on her hand. The warmth and female softness of it brought the flood again. Through the wash of tear she looked an angel. More tears. She pulled him to her breast and held him while he cried, rocked his head, patted his back, emptied her accumulated years of unrequited warmth and caring into him.

They stayed pressed together and silent, wind shaken by passing traffic, shaken again by long neglected needs. Ephemeral lights chased two fugitive shadows across the desert dark.

A woman's breast. How long. Dear God, so long. I never knew. Softness and warmth, scent of powder and sweat — sweet sweet peace. After a time, he sighed and pulled himself away.

"I'm sorry." Shaking his head slowly. "I don't know..."

"You know," she said, reaching to touch his sleeve. "Try telling me."

He looked at her and wiped his eyes. "No. No, I can't. Not anyone." He shook his head and turned back to the window. "You'd..." He turned back to her. "You don't know who I am."

"I don't care who you are, Jonathan Doe," in a quiet voice. "You need me."

They were quiet for a time and then she turned the Blazer back on the interstate and merged with traffic — moving capsule of doubt and reticent desire.

They fell through the tunnel of headlight in the desert night, on to Reno, past casino schlock and colorswirl. On they bore, into the high Sierra snow. Moonblanched mountains hung above them, then slid beneath, silver white falling behind, against a starry sky. Down, down to the valley, color like Christmas lights ironed out on black velvet toward the far bay. Roseville, Sacramento, and miles to go in quiet talk.

Dawn caught them on the Bay Bridge. Flashing girder shadows sped them into the city with a hundred thousand others.

"Treat you to breakfast?" she said, while they inched toward the toll booth.

"Oh, I don't know." He saw her disappointment and was cheered by it. He reconsidered. "Well, I am hungry."

"Good." she smiled. "Now all we have to do is find someplace that sells real grub. Someplace with more to serve-up than espresso and finger-food."

"Bacon and eggs and home fries," he warmed to the idea.

"Big stack of flap-jacks with two sunny-side-ups on the top." She punched up KGO on the radio, listened to the traffic and decided to use the next exit.

On the edge of a close-in industrial district, they found a storefront cafe: donuts and sausages beckoned them inside. "I can't believe I found a parking place, on the street, this time of day. I feel lucky today."

She helped him through the door and along by the counter to a booth where he could stretch his leg in the aisle.

"With you in a minute folks," said the cook, laboring over a grill with a quick spatula. The room smelled of cooking fat, eggs, sweet syrup and strong coffee.

Kathe inhaled deeply. "Boy am I hungry now."

"Me too," said Ben. "Long night, especially for you, driving all night. I'll bet you're tired?"

"Yeah," she said, "I'm tired. I may get a room and sleep before I head back."

While they waited to be served they sat quietly, uncomfortable to be looking at each other across the booth. It was easier in the Blazer, side by side, the road always an excuse to look away.

"Morning folks." The large short order cook stood before them looking uncomfortable in his starched white uniform and paper hat. "What can I get for you today?" He tapped his short blunt pencil against the order pad, lifted it, licked it, tapped it again and waited.

"Uh, you first," said Kathe.

"Okay," said Ben. "I'll have bacon, eggs, over easy, and home fries."

"Toast?"

"Sure."

"White or whole wheat?"

“Uh, white.”

“Butter or margarine?” The cook flicked a toothpick from side to side in his mouth.

“Margarine I guess.”

The cook wrote, looked at Kathe and raised his eyebrows in question. He looked over his shoulder at the grill where the home fries were beginning to smoke. His toothpick sped up, fell from his tongue, he caught it but dropped his pencil on the table. Kathe handed it to him.

“Short stack of pancakes, two eggs up and butter,” she said. “No toast. Coffee for both of us.”

“Thanks. Have it for you in a jiffy.” He ripped out the order sheet, flipped the pad closed and hurried for the smoking home fries.

“Busy man,” said Kathe.

“Busy man,” Ben nodded.

The sound of spatula on grill, forks on plates, low conversation and coffee slurps filled the silence between them. He fiddled with the lunch special menu, and she excused herself to the restroom.

“Guess I’d better go too, come to think of it,” he said. “These crutches make everything such a pain in the butt.”

The men’s and women’s were side by side, and they could hear each other.

He’s trying to pee down the side so I won’t hear it. That’s cute. Still shy about making bathroom noises, like a little boy. She felt close to him.

He shook, flushed, and washed his hands, then scurried his crutches back to the table before her.

“What are you going to do next Jonathan?” she said, smiling as she slid into the other side. “I mean, in general, you know, just in general, no details,” she added when she saw his discomfort.

He looked across at her, her hands folded on the table, comfortable. Could he trust her? He needed to tell someone, at least part of it.

“My name isn’t really Jonathan,” he said. “You probably guessed that.”

“Sure did,” she smiled.

“My name is Ben, Ben Marconi.”

“Hi, Ben,” she extended her hand across the table and smiled. “I’m Kathe Bozeman. Pleased to meet you.” Her smile broadened. “That wasn’t hard was it?”

“Not so far.”

“That’s a good start, Ben,” she said. “Don’t push it. There’s time.”

“Who’s got the flapjacks?” said the cook, two heaping plates of breakfast on one arm, two cups of coffee in his other hand, and looking for a quick answer.

“I do,” said Kathe.

He placed the plates in front of them, “Enjoy,” tips his toothpick. He pivoted behind the counter, grabbed a coffee pot and deftly topped off all the cups down the line of men reading newspapers, nodding and mumbling their thanks.

Kathe looked at Ben’s plate, then her own. “Sure am glad I ordered the short stack!” Her eyes were wide in exaggeration. “These things are huge.”

Ben laughed, and they both dug in.

They finished eating and lingered over their coffee, talking. Ben avoided the most recent events, his unemployment and crimes, his pain over Bette, fear of being caught. Instead, he chronicled his childhood and college years, trying to

find some happy times, some success to share. That mostly failed, and he could tell she was feeling sorry for him. It was the same for her. In the telling of her story, the disappointments loomed large, the happy times faded into insignificance, usually precursors to pain and loss.

The conversation fell flat, nowhere else to go except to more commiseration. Neither of them wanted that.

Ben looked at the diner clock. She saw him.

"Yeah, well, I guess it's time to go," she said.

"Uh huh." He looked her in the eyes and saw something he was not used to seeing in a woman's eyes.

"I'll be driving around to find a cheap motel. Anyplace I can drop you?"

"Streetcar maybe. That'll get me to where I'm going."

"No, really, let me drive you where you're going. I won't pry." She pointed to his cast. "Besides, you can't get on a streetcar with that thing anyway."

He looked down at his leg, the crutches and his arm, then back to her. "I don't know where I'm going Kathe. I can't tell you because I don't know."

They looked at each other. Eyes drifting away from eyes and then back again; a place of rest in a world without rest. Plates clattered and cups filled, eggs turned. Men talked about the Giants and the Athletics and chances for a new stadium, folded *Chronicles* back, rattling and smoothing them on the counter to better read the box scores. "More Java, Joe," the blue surge suit said. "Or is it more Joe, Java?" Groan from the other regulars. "Go to work, Bill and leave us normal people alone." A chuckle. The dishwasher kicked in and drowned out the rest.

She reached to him across the table, nearly touched his face, paused, and lowered her hand to cover his.



“Come with me.”

Somewhere beyond the heavy orange curtains traffic droned. Beside Ben's head an alarm clock hummed. Four p.m. The sheets smelled of stale cigarette smoke and their lovemaking. She was sleeping. He touched her shoulder lightly, fingers then palm, feeling the warmth, caressing her. He allowed his hand to slip to the sheets and sighed.

He lay in the dim light, his bare leg warm and damp between hers, the other one hurting again. Getting used to it. He remembered the morphine. The sea of forgetfulness. Wouldn't be hard to find something that good on the street here. Not hard at all. I have a few Demerol pills. I still have to go. Soon.

She stirred, settled to him, smacked her lips and smiled, eyes still closed, yawned, settled herself even closer and slept again. He pulled the sheet up, paused to look at her there, molded softly around him. He noticed the dark hair on her upper lip. He wanted to touch it. Didn't.

A crack in the curtains let a mellow light fall on the stained carpet, hanging television, illuminated dust in its slantlong shaft and upon the Gideon Bible resting on its shelf.

Shouldn't have come here. I should be on a bus somewhere. Why now. Why the hell now.

She stirred again, settled. He rubbed his face, looked at his open hands and remembered. She'd led him through the door, sat him on the bed, and begun taking off his shoe and cast sock. He started to say something and she shushed him, finger to lips, “Enough talking.” She kissed his toe and laughed, then took off the rest of his clothes, caressed his shoulders and undressed herself quickly. She came to him, pressed herself against him, kissed his lips, and

touched him with such tenderness that he shook. The cast, his arm and sore ribs were forgotten, their lovemaking mature, slow, gentle.

I can't drag her in deeper. Can't ask her to hide me, run with me. He looked again, touched her hair, felt the roundness of her shoulder under the sheets, tried to memorize the line of her hips, but his vision blurred and warm tears fell and beaded in the hairs on his chest.

Slowly he extricated his good arm and leg from her. She stirred and reached out to him. He pulled the comforter up to replace his warmth. She settled again, deeper in sleep now.

His skin was damp and warm where she lay against him. The cool air of the room turned the warm to a chill. He went to the bathroom blew his nose, and contemplated the wretchedness of the face in the mirror. He dressed quickly, and quietly. He avoided looking. Soft sleeping sounds burrowed deep, painfully deep, finally drawing him. He stood over her watching the rhythmic rise and fall of her breasts, hearing her breathing. Can't touch her, can't wake her, not now. He turned away.

Ben wrote on the nightstand note pad. He lay the twenty crisp bills on the note, paused, picked up the money and left, taking one last look through the gently closing door.

He hobbled out of sight of the motel, found a phone booth and slid his cast through the door, sweeping broken glass aside with a crutch. The phone had been bludgeoned, but still worked, took his quarter. He called a cab. Five minutes was the promise.

Half an hour later the cabby pulled up and threw open the rear door.  
"Where to, Bub?"

"I'm not sure."

The cabby adjusted his baseball cap, stared out the windshield. "He ain't sure." He reached across Ben to close the door. "I got to have one every night." He looked Ben in the eye. "I don't got all night, Bub."

"I need some help," said Ben. "I want to leave town. Now."

The cabby frowned, "Bus or train?"

"Which one leaves first?"

The cabby raised his eyebrows. "Where you heading?"

"Doesn't matter."

The cabby nodded. "Uh huh." He adjusted his hat again, rubbed his chin stubble, looked at his watch. "Amtrak. Northbound." Looked at his watch again, then Ben, and rubbed his thumb and forefinger together. "I could get ya there for a little gratudity." Raised his eyebrows. "And forget I ever saw you for fifty."

"Deal."

She rolled over. Eyes still closed, she began to smile. Rolled back, reached out for him, patted the mattress, then pillow. Cold. The mattress was cold. Eyes opened wide.

She jerked upright, looked around the room, toward the bathroom. "Ben? Are you in there, Ben?" No answer. She jumped out of bed and ran to the bathroom. Empty. Ran back. Stopped. She stood in the middle of the room. Gone. She felt naked.

She saw the note. "No!" Picked it up, carried it to the bed and read it. He was sorry. She would soon know why he had to go, and be thankful. Forgive him.

She put down the note and stared at the orange curtains, slant of light, dancing dust. She began to rock back and forth on the bed, arms across her breasts, back and forth. The ugly room fell in on her. Her chest trembled inside.

She began to suck air, loud heaving sobbing gasps of utter despair. No relief in that, only weariness. No relief in prayer, or any other thing.

## Chapter Twenty-One

“Well. I understand you are willing to assume the responsibility as the primary caregiver for Ms. Halberson,” said Winfred Ermine.

“Pretty much,” said Wanda. She took a sip from the cup of burned coffee Ms. Ermine had offered. She looked at it. Looked up and smiled at Winfred. My God, does anybody drink this stuff. Looked down. Swirls of oily color snaked across the surface of the steaming black.

“I also understand that it does not mean you are willing to accept financial responsibility.” She looked over her scrolled and sequined glasses at Wanda.

“Well, I tell you, I feel real bad about that, and I would if I could, but I just don’t have any money myself.”

“Are you a relative of Ms. Halberson?”

“No.”

“How long have you known her?”

“What day is it?”

“Today?”

“Yeah.”

“Monday.”

Wanda counted on her fingers. “Four days.”

“Four days!” Winfred’s eyebrows rose and she took off her glasses and fiddled with them. “Four days?”

“Yes,” said Wanda. “Unless I counted wrong, it’s been four days. She came into the Roadkill Cafe up in Fields last Thursday, I waitress there, and we got to talking. Turned out she needed a little help and I helped her. Then this

awful thing happened to her. I come here to the hospital with her and I been here since late the day I met her.”

“And you’re going to take care of her now?” Winfred rifled through her papers on the Halberson case, looking for a clue, confounded.

“Yeah, that’s right, I’m going to take care of her.”

“Excuse me if I seem incredulous. But, why?” said Winfred, turning her head to one side. She placed both palms on her desk to steady herself, then turned them up. “Why would you want to commit to this, this, hellish job? If you don’t have to? If you were a relative, or longtime friend, but...” Her palms smacked down on the desk in frustration.

“I don’t know.” Wanda looked down at the cup she cradled in her two hands, cooling, the oily color still now.

“I can’t tell you for sure why.”

She brought the cup to her lips, drank the bitter drink.

“I just know I’m going to do it.” She looked up at Winfred, who listened, mouth open. “She doesn’t have nobody. So, I guess the way it turns out, I’m supposed to be her somebody.”

Wanda drank again from her cup. The oils softened the bite, some. Probably could get used to this. Drank again, and looked at Winfred, who stared past her. An orderly wandered into the employee kitchen, coffee making noises: pop and whoosh of new can opening, soft granular shoveling of coffee, water running to freshen, gurgling into the maker, switch snapping on.

“This is very difficult,” said Winfred, sitting back in her chair, hands on armrests. “But, all my professional training tells me that I can’t approve this, this, most unusual arrangement.”

Wanda started, looked at the woman with large eyes, cradled the cup closer, and began to cry, still looking into Winfred's eyes, tears running down her cheeks, shoulders gathering, inching higher.

"What do you mean, can't allow? What does that mean?"

"The patient is comatose and unable to make her own decisions. There are no relatives and there is no legal guardianship. This means the state has de facto responsibility for her wellbeing. We can't just let you walk out of here with the patient, regardless of your stated good intentions."

Wanda shook her head. "Wha..." She shook it again, the hair on the back of her neck squirmed. "You..." She set her cup on Winfred's desk, pushed it toward her. "Wha... Just what the damn... What the hell good can the damn state be to her? You tell me that! You tell me that dammit!"

"Please be calm," said Winfred, alarmed.

"Sure, you bet, be calm." Wanda wiped her eyes and nose on her sleeve, leaned forward and burrowed into Winfred's eyes. "You going to be the one to feed her three times a day? Huh? You going to be the one to clean the shit off of her ass, maybe for the rest of your life? Huh? You going to be the one to go to her in the middle of the damn night when she can't turn over and she hurts and you can't do nothing to make the hurt go away?"

"Now please."

"Now please nothing!" said Wanda. "You answer me."

"Of course I'm not going to be the primary caregiver to the patient. My job is to advocate for the client, with the goal of appropriate placement meeting state standards."

"Client?" said Wanda. "Client? Placement? What are you some kind of a goddamn social worker or something?"

"Yes, I'm the hospital's patient advocate, but..."

Wanda looked at her hard. "Then use some goddamn common social sense, and turn Bette over to somebody who's willing to do the dirty work."

"We have procedures..."

"We have procedures," mimicked Wanda. Her shoulders slumped.

"There are certain things that have to happen in a case like this," said Winfred, pausing, surprised that Wanda was now listening. "We have to do an evaluation of the care situation and make a decision based on that."

"I need a cigarette," said Wanda. "Mind if we step outside and talk."

Winfred brightened, relieved that Wanda had calmed. "Good idea." She slid open her desk drawer and looked inside, scooting things around. She frowned. "Looks like I left mine in the cafeteria."

"Marlboros do you?" Wanda held up her pack and Bic.

"Sure. Thanks."

On the way out they stopped for fresh coffee.

"This is much better," said Winfred. "I'm sorry about that first cup. It smelled dreadful."

"Pretty bad." Wanda winced.

Winfred laughed. That Marlboro is going to be good.

Outside, they found a place out of the wind to hide. Wanda tapped out a cigarette for Winfred, lit it for her, then her own. Muffled sounds of exhaled smoke and satisfaction between them, secret handshake, sisters in addiction. Nearby, three nurses and a surgeon smoked and looked warily around for patients.

"Okay," said Wanda, exhaling. "So what's with this evaluation thing? What does that mean?"

"Basically, it means I'm responsible to the powers-that-be to make sure the patient gets released to someone who can pick up and go with the



responsibilities of her recovery and rehabilitation. It's a safety thing for the patient, and it gives the state, and the hospital, an idea whether or not they're going to have to pick up the tab later."

"So, before you can let her out of here to go with me, you got to have some kind of proof that I can take care of her."

"That's it, in a nutshell," said Winfred. "You're very good at convincing a person of your willingness to care for Bette." She smiled. "But, you have said that you are, how shall we put it, financially insolvent, and that's a big problem."

"That's putting it just about right," said Wanda. "In other words, I'm broke. Can't lie on that one."

"Is there anyone, anywhere you can call on for financial assistance?" Winfred dragged on her Marlboro, rolled it between her thumb and forefinger, looked at it. She flicked the ash into the ornamental bushes.

Wanda thought. Mrs. Fields was barely making a go of it at the cafe and store, and Charlie was worse off than her.

"Other possibilities? Anyone?" asked Winfred.

Wanda's gaze drifted off into the desert. Magnolia maybe. No. Not after what I done. None of the other sisters for sure.

Wanda turned back to Winfred, saw she'd finished her cigarette, looked down, and put her own smoldering filter in the ashtray. "There might be somebody," said Wanda. "How long do I have before I got to fight with the governor to get Bette back?"

Winfred smiled and shook her head. "Bette will be here a few more days, but you should get this done as soon as possible. All I need is some proof that you have a minimum income for the two of you to live on. I'll be glad to do

some research on rehabilitation for you, and look into some sources of assistance.”

“I’d really appreciate that,” said Wanda. “When should I get back to see you?”

“As soon as you have something for me on the basic income. The rehab centers are all in cities; do you know where you would like to live?”

“Well. If I’m going to have any money at all, I’d say it looks like Portland.”

“Good medical community there.” said Winfred. “I should be able to find something for you.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

After Winfred went back to her cubicle, Wanda went to the cafeteria, ordered a cup of coffee and took it onto the warm patio where she lit up. Going to be a hot one. She looked off at the shimmering desert mountains.

Sure wasn't hot that October. Cold and rain. Miserable. It was the third week of the month and the third week of rain. All the rivers high.

She and Buster celebrated his fifty-fifth birthday by spending a few days up on the Washington coast. There was a restaurant there, The Ark, that Buster loved for the seafood. It was down the road from a town called Oysterville, with mudflats of oysters running out of sight into Willapa Bay. Watching Buster eat oysters still had the same effect on her as it did when they were first married. So naturally there was more sex than usual. It was so miserable outside that there wasn't much to do except eat, sleep and snuggle.

They were happy. Rain or no rain, when they were together they were happy. Must have been about the third or fourth day, Buster started feeling poorly, and they decided to go home. She drove.

It happened when they were coming over the Longview Bridge, the brown swollen Columbia below them, a good forty miles from home. He started having bad chest pains. She wanted to go back over the river into Longview for help, but he wanted to get home. Said he'd be fine. Just keep driving. Finally he looked like he was sleeping, but she was scared, and speeded up. She was going ninety when the Saint Helens police pulled her over. The officer called an aid car, and they worked on him right there on the concrete in the parking lot of the Dairy Queen. They got him stable and rushed him to Good Samaritan.

He was talking to her, reassuring her, from his hospital bed when the big one hit. That's when she got shoved aside by all the nurses and doctors, and Buster died flopping under the electric paddles.

Wanda finished her cigarette, lit another. I don't know if I can do this or not. Bring it up again. Thinking about Buster. Maybe I better forget about the whole thing. She snubbed out her cigarette and called Linda at home.

"What are you up to today?"

"Nothing much," said Linda. "I just got up. I have to get some groceries and go to the bank, that's all. Sounds to me like you've got something in mind."

"Lunch maybe."

"You know me," said Linda. "Name the place."

"I don't know any places here, Linda. You pick." Wanda paused. "Kind of cheap though."

"Gottcha," says Linda. "Not too far from the hospital is a little oriental place called Smitty's — don't ask why. Lunch specials are four bucks, all-you-can-eat for six. Meet you there in an hour."

Wanda was settled into the smoking section when Linda arrived. "We can move over there." She pointed to the non-smoking section.

"I'll live," said Linda.

They ordered and the waiter brought tea.

Wanda got to the point. "How am I ever going to afford to take care of Bette when I don't have any money?"

"I wish I could help, honey, but I can hardly afford my maple bars as it is."

"No, I don't mean that, I know you can't afford any more than I can," said Wanda. "You're doing more than enough just giving me a place to stay."

"You're good company."

"The social worker lady at the hospital, Winfred what's-her-name, said I have to prove I have enough money to live on before they'll release her to me."

"Yeah, I've heard that before."

"Anyway, I've come up with a long-shot deal for some help with living expenses, but I don't know what to do about it."

"Spit it out."

"Buster had three sisters, but his favorite was Magnolia, and she was the only one was friendly to me while we was married. She'd have us to her house to eat and was nice enough not to mention my table manners, but we never was close exactly. I guess we was just too far apart on the social ladder. Marrying into money wasn't enough to turn me into upper-crust, I guess."

"Your husband had money?"

"I guess so. We lived real good. Buster owned the whole building where our apartment was, and I figure most of the block from the people that came to pay on rent-collecting day. Except for going to the stockbroker place every day or so, Buster never worked none that I could tell. Oh, we'd go take the plunger to somebody's shitter every so often. He spent a lot of time at Powell's Book Store, just up Burnside a ways, reading and bringing home books. Had so many books, he had his buddy, Clawhammer, come in and put up bookshelves all over the walls, up to the ceiling."

"Buster used to read to me just about every night. Had a soft voice that he could just round out the words with those big lips. I can see him now, all sunk back in his big old stuffed chair, book propped on his belly, tapping his foot and lifting up his eyebrows.

"Wanda?"

"Yes."

"All this is very nice, so romantic it makes even me sick, and I do want to hear more about you and Buster one of these days. But, what I want to know now is how come you're so poor if your husband was rich? I mean, usually a man's wife gets whatever's left over when he dies."

"Well, I was getting to that. You see, I run off after the wake went bad."

"Wake?"

"Buster's wake. You see, when Buster had his heart attack and died so sudden, I was in a state. My life was over. I couldn't hardly think enough to know when I needed to go the bathroom, let alone know what to do about all the arrangements and stuff.

"Well, any-old-way, Buster had made me promise him that when he died he wasn't to be set up somewhere in an old funeral home for a bunch of people he didn't like to walk by and look at him and say how nice he looked. No, what Buster wanted, was for me to have a wake and invite all his friends, and we was to get real drunk and remember all the good times we had together. He didn't even want to be pickled."

"Embalmed," said Linda.

"Whatever," said Wanda.

The waiter delivered the lunch special of steamed vegetables for Wanda, the all-you-can-eat platter for Linda, and a huge bowl of steaming white rice. Linda went off to fill up her plate, returning with it heaped high with crispy duck.

When she had settled in, Wanda said, "Anyway, he wanted to be cremated and scattered off of the Steel Bridge."

"Sounds reasonable to me," said Linda, working on a piece of crispy-duck. She wiped her chin and licked her fingers. "That's what I'd want done with me."

“Well, any-old-way, when I told his sisters what his wishes was, there was a big blow-up. I mean, big. Magnolia tried to tell me that she was sure he had just been joking when he said that. She was nice about it. But, the other two, well, they just pitched a hissy-fit. They threatened me ever which way if I didn’t go along with them to have him embalmed and have a regular open casket funeral home thing. And they was hard-as-nails against the idea that Buster’s friends from the neighborhood was to be invited. Well, finally I give in. They was just too much for me to stand up to. Magnolia thanked me for being considerate of their feelings, and told me I wouldn’t be sorry.

“Well, I was sorry, real quick like. Churchill, the shoeshine boy, and Cactus, the newspaper boy, and Coyote and some more of Buster’s friends from the neighborhood heard he was dead and they came over to our place to be with me. Well, I had to tell them that they wasn’t going to get to come to see Buster and get drunk on his booze and say a proper good-bye like I knew he wanted. I don’t believe there was a dry eye in the house. I felt even worse then. Not only was I without my Buster forever, but I’d let down his closest friends. Let me tell you, I was just about as bad-off as a body can be and not blow their own head off.

“Oh my, honey,” said Linda, as she humped her way out of the booth, headed for the buffet. “That must have been awful.”

Wanda fiddled with her cigarettes, trying to decide whether to have one or not. Is Linda ever going to stop eating? Takes this all-you-can-eat business serious. Decided to wait, slid the Marlboros and Bic back over to the ash tray, gave them a pat.

Linda returned, plate overflowing with egg rolls and pot stickers. “I don’t see how you kept from going crazy.”

“I think I did go crazy. Wait ‘til you hear.”

“Uh oh.”

“All of a sudden like, Coyote’s eyes lit up like fireworks. He had the most beautiful eyes I’ve ever seen on any man, black as marble and twice as shiny. Well, I had pulled out some of Buster’s Jack Daniels and we was all getting well lubricated, you know. Coyote’s idea was to steal Buster’s body, in the casket of course, and go somewhere and have us our wake.

“Oh, my God,” said Linda.

“You said it,” said Wanda, reaching for her cigarettes again, fiddling with the pack.

“You didn’t do it, did you?”

“He said it would be just like us all coming by and asking if Buster could come out and play, and then taking him back home in time for dinner, excepting we just wouldn’t ask.”

“Oh, my God, you did do it.”

“I’m afraid so. It seemed like a real good idea at the time.

“I’m full,” said Linda, pushed her plate toward the passing waiter. “Go ahead and have your cigarette. So what happened next?”

“Well, any-old-way, everybody went to sleep on the rug. Next morning, a Wednesday, and the casket was to be open that night and the funeral was to be Thursday, so we was to steal Buster that very night. Well, over the night I’d sobered up and was about to back out of the whole thing; scared the bejesus out of me sober. But, Coyote said he had a vision during the night – Coyote had him visions all the time, said it come from his being descended from medicine men, but I think it come from the booze, he always had his visions when he was drunk – and it was of all us around a big bonfire drinking toast after toast to Buster who was smiling at us from his casket. He said everybody was so happy to be saying a proper good-bye to Buster, in his vision I mean, that we had to go



through with it. Said it was real bad luck to ignore a vision. Well, I'd done had me enough bad luck for awhile and I sure didn't want no more."

"Churchill wasn't too hot on the idea neither, but he went along too. Clawhammer said we could use his handyman truck, to haul the casket. That truck was as cherry a thing as you'd ever want to see, first-class; chartreuse, 1954 Chevy long bed. Beautiful thing.

"Coyote said he had seen the right spot in his vision. It was across on the east side of the riverbank, down below the train tracks and under the big cloverleaf where the two interstates come together. There was a real pretty view of the downtown city lights over the water.

Linda looked at her watch. "Finish it up later tonight. You can keep me awake on my shift. I got to get some groceries and go to the bank."

"Okay. I'll sit here and have me another cigarette. I got to decide what to do about calling Magnolia. Can't put it off too much longer."

Wanda slouched in the booth, rested her feet on the vinyl bench under the table, lit up. Exhaled, added her marbled blue smoke to the dust in the sunny afternoon air. She closed her eyes, drifted.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Alone in the funeral parlor, left alone with him to grieve. Pressed into the corner of the huge velveteen couch, farthest from the casket, darkest part of the awful place.

Buster, there in his gaping casket of shining black and golden trim. Padded creamy silk pressed his shoulders, framed his face, face that smiled flatly at the sconce light pooling on the ornate ceiling.

Why did you go and die on me?

Somewhere a clock murmured, prepared to strike. Struck eleven times, an eternity between each. She listened. Waited for the end. Silence crept into the empty places, hummed in her ears, pressed moaning to her chest, pinned her arms to the prickly velveteen. Tamped down by silence and despair, she looked to him, profile amid white roses, washed with pallid light.

How did we get here, you and me? What am I gonna do?

She pushed against the weight. Insubstantial, she failed. It was winning. Grief. It took from her small mass to add to its own. Pressed down and filled in around the little left of her, and smothered.

She slept.

The clock gathered itself again, laboriously struck once. Half-past eleven. She woke to find Grief there still.

Leave me alone! Buster? Take it away.

Come to me.

She rose against the weight, crossed the winesoft carpet to his side. Looked at his face, moved to his hands, across his chest, the gold band she pushed over his knuckle that day of sunshine. Touched his hand, hand that

touched her, loved her. Touched his lips, lips that kissed her, loved her. Cold.  
All cold now. Never again.

Go to him.

Yes, Buster.

Roughly, Grief took hold, shook her, made her bawl and heave and shiver and want to die. Dropped her to the carpet beneath the flowers by the casket, rolled her until she pounded her fists and begged and screamed. Screamed and cried and sobbed to sleep.

The boys entered through the door she'd jimmied for them. They found her there.

Churchill lifted her gently, she was sobbing again, held her in his arms and rocked her, rocked her. "Dear God chile, dear God. I never seen a body so broke up. You poor sweet thing, done lost your best fren." Wanda nodded and sobbed again, wetting his shirt. "I know baby, I know, I done been twenty years without my woman. It get easier." He paused, rocked her. "Some."

Coyote shooed them out to the truck behind the pallbearers laboring with Buster's casket. "Perk up now. Buster's going to get his wake, just like you promised. Look at that, he smiling now!"

They loaded the casket into the Chevy and just as Clawhammer was about to fire it up, Coyote decided Buster wanted to bring the flowers. They ran back inside and cleaned the place out, piling flowers to the top of the high racks until the truck looked like a Mardi Gras float. Wanda and Churchill rode with Clawhammer and Buster, the rest filled two waiting Yellow Cabs to overflowing. The hearse-float rolled through the wrought-iron gates and slowly away. The cabs fell in behind.

As they crossed the Burnside Bridge, they saw a crowd of a hundred or more, strung out, moving over the dark river, pushing laden grocery carts, shouldering bedrolls and clutching paper bags. They waved at the float as it passed, raised bottles to lips in salute. Clawhammer tooted his horn.

Wanda was dumbfounded. "All these people going to the wake?"

"Every damn one," said Clawhammer.

"All these people know Buster personal?" she asked.

"Lord yes," said Churchill. "Everbody know'd Buster. Everbody done hit him up for some thing or the other sometime."

"Yeah," said Clawhammer. "Remember when Fidels' mama died down in Puerto Rico? That was before your time, Wanda. Buster rode the bus out to the airport with him, give him a hundred dollars, and bought his ticket. Flew that sucker right to San Juan on an open ticket."

"Fidel," said Churchill. "He didn't come back 'til it was springtime." Looked over at Clawhammer. "Wasn't no dummy!"

"You mean he just give money out like that all the time?" said Wanda.

"Well, sort of," said Churchill. "See, the way it was with Buster, you sort of know'd somethin' had to come back, not to Buster, but to somebody else what needed it. Buster give Fidel the job of getting the widow Whipple on to the bus and up to the hospital for her treatments of a Tuesdays and Fridays. Knew she'd die if'n he didn't get her there, so he was sober most of the time after that. Liver got better too."

"Buster was kind of sneaky that way," said Clawhammer.

"Smart," said Churchill. "Smart as hell." He turned to look back at the casket, patted the window separating him from Buster and smiled.

Wanda looked out at the people streaming toward Buster's wake, and started crying, and then wiped her nose with her sleeve and when she lowered

her sleeve she was laughing. "My Buster, all of them people love my Buster too." She shook her head, cried some more, laughed some more.

"That's the damn ticket little girl," said Churchill, hugging her to him.

"That's what we need to see. This a wake we goin' to."

Clawhammer reached into the glove box and pulled out a pint of sloe gin, broke the seal and passed it to Wanda. "Just as well start on this, pass it around."

The procession passed Baloney Joe's and the Gospel Mission, turned toward the river and the old brick warehouses, rail sidings, broken glass and dead rats under the huge interstate cloverleaf. Another car joined the procession, white with blue and red lights on the roof. Portland Police Sergeant, William Clancy at the wheel.

They stopped underneath the Burnside Bridge. Wanda wanted to see the concrete ramps Buster had built for the kids to ride their skateboards and freestyle bikes on. Leaping, soaring, spinning, defying gravity, sometimes crashing hard. Having fun, learning to try hard, crash-and-burn, then get up and do it again. Buster would sit and watch, fat man dreaming of youth gone, helping others make the most of theirs.

Coyote jumped out of the front cab and ran to the truck.

"We got us some company."

Clawhammer looked in his mirror just as the blue and red lights began their blip blip, blip blip, off the skate ramps, bridge abutments and old brick buildings.

"Uh Oh," said Clawhammer.

"Oh no." Wanda hid her face and slid down in the seat. Churchill hid the pint under the seat.

"It's Clancy," said Coyote. "Here he comes."

Clancy sauntered toward the truck, glancing into the two Yellow cabs, fingering his nightstick, looking at the flowers, then saw the casket, stopped, did a double-take. He flipped a switch on his mobile. "Clancy here, keep this band open and send me a backup."

"Well, Coyote, looks as if you gentlemen have outdone yourselves this time." He glanced in the window, recognized all but Wanda, nodded to her, looked back at Coyote.

"So who's the stiff?"

"Clancy, Clancy, show a little respect. Lady here is the widow."

Clancy removed his cap, "My apologies ma'am." He replaced his cap and looked at Churchill. "I'll rephrase that. Who is the deceased?"

"Buster Parks," said Churchill.

Clancy's eyebrows shot up. That crazy Parks. One that gives his money away. "Isn't he at that funeral home over on Seventeenth?"

"Not any more," said Coyote. "We are escorting the widow and her deceased to the deceased's wake."

"Wake?"

"Sure, Clancy, a wake," said Coyote, surprised. "You're Irish. You're supposed to know all about wakes."

"Yeah, you bet, I know about wakes!" Clancy turned to see the first wave of raggletag guests shuffle by, carts banging across spur tracks, bottle bags switched to their lee sides. "Mother of God." He turned back to Coyote. "You put a stop to this. Right now."

"Do what?" said Coyote.

"Stop this!" said Clancy, more agitated. "Send these people back where they came from. You can't have a wake."

"We're not a breakin' nary a law Clancy," said Churchill.

"You have to have a permit for a parade." He turned to see his backup car trapped in a sea of street people. He pointed "That's a goddamn parade!"

Churchill said, "Listen up, Clancy, here's the deal, straight out now. We got us our fren's body, and his flowers and his widow here is part of the proceedings. Seems like to me she got a right to take her man's body to his own wake with his frens if'n she's a mind to."

Clancy looked at Wanda, eyes red from crying, nose red and running. Looks like a widow. "You can't have a parade."

"Look, Clancy, they's about all done crossed over them tracks an down over that riverbank. To have a damn parade, you got to have some peoples marchin'. They's all bout stopped now."

"Stopped on private property," said Clancy. "You disperse those people or I swear to God in heaven that I'm goin' to call in the riot boys and bust some heads!"

"Officer Clancy?" asked Churchill.

"What." snapped Clancy.

"You rightly remember the last time you boys come out here with the shields an long sticks an dogs?"

"You mean the Martin Luther King birthday riot."

"That be the one."

"Well, what about it?"

"You remember that bunch of meetings they had about that whole thing, and what happened to the cop what was there first?"

"That inquiry? Yeah, poor sonofabitch got fired."

"Uh huh. Well, what you think gonna go down when you bust up a bunch of homeless peoples' heads tonight? Hate to tell you capt'n. Them

bleedin-hearts gonna latch on to your poor ass worse than a snappin' turtle, and they ain't goin' to let loose afore it thunder."

Clancy looked at Churchill, pushed his hat back on his high forehead, watched practically the whole homeless population of the city stream past, and reconsidered his position. "Okay, okay, go on and have your damn wake. For now. I got to get some higher-ups in on this." He looked at Wanda, and Churchill and Clawhammer and Coyote, one by one. "No bottles out of the bags, no drugs and no fightin'. If there's trouble, I know who to come get." He turned and walked back to his waiting backup car.

Coyote slapped the side of the truck, "Goddamn Churchill, goddamn, you're a goddamn fu..." He noticed Wanda. "A goddamn genius!"

"Ain't been born yesterday."

Clawhammer pointed down over the riverbank where a large bonfire spit sparks high up under the cloverleaf. "Looks like they're startin' without us. Let's get at it!"

He drove to the dead end of the street, bumped up over the curb and then slowly over three sets of railroad tracks and down the bank to the fire and turned off the key. The truck shuddered and died with a backfire, puff of black smoke.

Willing hands grabbed the flowers and began arranging them around a bridge abutment, facing the downtown city lights. Buster's casket was leaned there and opened. There was applause and bottles were raised in solemn salute. People arranged their sleeping bags around the bonfire. They crowded in together, sharing familiar ripe odors, tortured delusions and the sweet breath of fortified wine.



Wanda was seated on a vegetable crate beside his coffin, wrapped in a stained quilt and given a pint of orange vodka. She took a drink, gasped and grimaced.

Cactus hobbled up beside the casket dragging his leg. He took a swig from a fifth of Jack Daniel's and put it in the crook of Buster's arm. He lowered his head and raised his long ape arms, palms out. A murmur ran through the assembled.

Cactus started to speak, was drowned out by a Kenworth downshifting, the Jake brakes crackled and spit as they eased the log truck around the narrow French curve roadway high above them. Eyes looked up expecting the worst. Cactus took his bottle back, swigged and gave it back to Buster. All were quiet.

"I come to this here town when I was just a half-growed pup, and so was Buster. I'd just got throwed out of the hospital down't K'Falls fer a not payin' my bills after that lodgepole pine fell on top me." Cactus scratched his chin stubble, lay a finger upside his nose and blew a wad of snot on the ground.

"Goddamn bastards." Shook his head. "They put me in the woods soon's I finished eighth grade. Took my daddy's arm off at the sawmill and then done this to me in the damn woods." He retrieved a crumpled filthy handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his nose, one side, other side, back in his pocket. "I come up here broke and broke-up."

He looked up at Buster "If'n it wasn't for Buster I never would a made it. Back then people didn't know 'bout Buster. He wandered around down amongst us bums. Rich kid, he was young then, dressed up real purty all the time." Turned to look at Buster. "All stepped out, just like he is now. We made terrible fun with him. Tease him awful, I tell you. We was jealous. Thought he was bein' mean, hangin' around just to make us feel bad, especially us young fellers."

"One night some of my friends got me all drunked up and took the last of what little money I had. That wasn't too bad, but then they went and threwed me over the riverbank, yonder side, under the Steel Bridge, and left me. Die I reckon. It was of a January, and I woke up plum froze down under there, half in the water and half out. These legs..." He looked down at his scarecrow body. "Ain't much good on flat land, ain't worth nothin' on the slant. Well, along come Buster, and he was strong in them days, he just picked me up all soppin' wet and throwed me over his shoulder." He shook his head slowly from side to side. "I swear to God I puked right down his damn back, and before he got me home I pissed on the both of us."

Some laughed, remembering when they'd been that bad off too. That close.

"He never let that slow him down none. Took me home, throwed me in the bathtub and like to boiled the skin off'n me gettin' me heated up. Poured the hot soup down me when I quit pukin', then wrapped me up and laid me by the fire. Laid there for three days and then I felt good enough that I wanted me a drink."

An understanding murmur flowed around the bonfire. Heads nodded, others bowed and shook sadly.

"So, I got ready to move on, and I asked him what I owed him for savin' my life. He wrote somethin' down on a piece of paper and give it to me. Said I was to go to the Oregonian and ask for this man. Said the man had a job for me." He looked up at Buster. "This old boy know'd me for sure. Know'd me better'n I know'd myself. Didn't take me long to figure I had a lucky break and by damn I was goin' to make out with it. I been sellin' papers for thirty years now. Get drunk off and on again, but I never miss my papers. Never." He looked over at Wanda who was crying again. "Thank you ma'am." He bowed his head to her,

turned to go, paused and turned back. "He loved you mor'n anything ever. Told me that. Figured you ought to know."

Tentative applause. Quiet. Cars thrumped thrumped above. It began to rain, giving substance to the lights that swept the black sky. The muddy river roiled; raindrops cast concentric dimples across the refracted cityscape.

"It be my turn," said Churchill, moving into the firelight beside the casket. He turned his lank frame to Wanda, bowed from the waist.

"Lots of folks don't know that Buster was on the shy side. Leastwise he were when it come down to the ladies." He shook his head. "All that money and he were feared to death to speak his piece with womens. Spent a whole bunch of years a lonely man, 'til this one come along." He looked up at Buster, turned a wry smile to Wanda. "Said this one done spoke up for her own damn self and ast him to step out! Said he couldn't see what a skinny young thing the likes a her could see in a fat old man like him."

Wanda looked up at Buster. "You silly."

"He wasn't scared none after that first date. Said he just figured God had done blessed him with one a his angels, and wasn't no damn way he gonna let her get away. Gonna marry that girl he said, when I was a shinin' his shoes that mornin', gonna marry that girl." Churchill looked over the crowd. "You missed that weddin', you done missed the best time whatever was round this place."

Churchill paused to think, tapped his foot. "Tell you what about Buster. Buster he teach me how to take care my money. Jus' like he done with Cactus. He taken some an put it away for me. Now I'm all set up fer when I get too old to shine shoes. He be smart man and he hep his frens. Best thing Buster done was to be my fren. First damn rich man to hear a damn word I say. Rest of them blue suits I shines them their shoes never look me in the eye. Mornin' Churchill,

they says. Think it gonna rain Churchill, they asks? Whip open them papers and stuff their heads in the sports page.”

“Buster’s different. He pay some mind to what I got to say. Look me in the eye. Take me a time to be his fren, I don’t trust a lotta white men, leastwise rich ones. But lemmie tell you I done lost a good fren. I done lost my best fren since my woman died on me.” He looked at Buster, shook his head. “Gonna miss you, Boy.” He looked down, wiped his eyes. He made his way down the steep bank in the rain. Firelight cast his soft shadow on the river.

Fat Bitch stood at the edge of the light hefting her bulk from one foot to the other, looking into the fire, clapping her hands together, making fists and talking to the fire. Then she changed, glared at the people, eyes darting bleak and mean.

“Where’s the goddamn food around here? What kind of a goddamn place is this ain’t got no food for me to eat on? Gimme some goddamn food, goddamn it!” Eyes turn to her, retreat from her gaze. “What’s a matter, you people don’t want me here?” She lights on Chester Zebble and lurched for him. Small and quick, he scrambled just out of her reach in the slick mud. She slid, both feet skiing, grabbing handfuls of air and sat heavily. She wailed. “This a goddamn Salvation Army thing? By God I’m goin’ to sue you sonsabitches! Get me up outta this Goddamn mud!” They all turned away from her, safe that she was down, but not safe from her voice. The tirade continued, the proceeding stopped. Somebody produced a loaf of day old white bread, somebody else volunteered a bottle of Wild Irish Rose. D-cup put a blanket over her shoulders.

She smiled now, folded slices of bread into her mouth and washed it down. She sat in the mud, legs straight out, feet wagging out her pleasure in the food and drink. B-cup dug through the woman’s huge grocery cart, found her medication and convinced her to take it.

Others came to say their piece, some bold and some shy, others drunk and forgetful.

Tiny and beautiful Honeybee Blossom, a name Buster gave her after many failed efforts at oriental pronunciation, remembered serving him at Newberry's, before it closed. "Always smile. Big, big man. Big, big smile. Big smile for little Honeybee. Make Honeybee special. Always ask Honeybee for family in Laos, how they do? Give always Honeybee lot time count change, find right word." She turned to Wanda, made a short bow. "You lucky woman have Buster. We miss for you him."

Carl hobbled forward on his cane and told about Buster finding him under the Everett Street exit, drunk and froze, laying in his own puke. "Took me home just like he did Cactus. Dried me out. Fatted me up some and paid up a room for a month." Wanda smiled at Carl. She remembered helping Buster strip the clothes off him, wash him up and bundle him up on the couch. They had to burn the clothes in the fireplace. Carl snored all night. Some men bring home flowers and wine, Buster brought home bums.

Carl tugged at his pants, grabbed his crotch to settle things and turned his paper bag bottom up to finish it off. Fortified wine ran red down his salt and pepper stubble, dripped down his front. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve, staggered and leaned against Buster's casket. It slipped, a gasp went up with the bonfire sparks, then a sigh as it held fast to the concrete. Carl tipped his empty bottle, looked at it seriously, heaved it into the river. Tears joined the wine on his chin. "I done all right for some little time. He done that for me mor'n once, took me in, hep me out." He looked up at Buster, then at Wanda. "I failed him ma'am. But he shore as hell done his part."

A northbound freight throbbed down river and slowed for the Steel Bridge speed limit. Twin spotlights oscillated back and forth across the tracks,

casting jerky shadows of the celebrants against concrete and flowers and mud, out across the dark and unsettled river. Railcars boomed down the tracks, squalling brakes echoed off the cloverleaf. A signal block stopped the freight short of the bridge, cutting off the wake. The idling locomotive thrummed in their chests, threw sound out over the river. Heads turned and eardrums buzzed. Waiting.

Wanda was aware of a burning sensation. She jumped up from the booth and swatted at her lap, wiping hot ash from her leg, danced a little dance. Damn. She snubbed out the butt of her Marlboro in the ashtray and surveyed the damage. A quarter inch hole in her new green polyester pants. Damn, cost me ten bucks. She sighed and sat again in the booth. Her skinny butt was numb from sitting. Her tailbone burned. If it's not one thing it's another. Didn't want to think about that wake no more anyhow. She paid for her lunch, walked back to the hospital waiting room and found a pay phone.

"Information for what city please?"

"Portland."

"Go ahead please."

"Parks, Magnolia Parks," said Wanda.

A short pause. "We have no listing for a Magnolia Parks."

"But you have to. I know she lives there, at least she did live there one time. She'd never leave Portland."

"I'm sorry ma'am. We have no such listing. Could she be under another name or an initial?"

"Oh, you mean like, M. Parks?"

"Let me try that."

"Yes, we do have an M. Parks. We have three of them. Do you know her address?"

"No. I know she lived in the rich part of town up around where the rose gardens and the zoo and stuff was."

"I'm not supposed to make value judgments like that ma'am." The woman sighed. "But let me look. One of them is in northeast, that's not it. One of them is in downtown, I think those are high rise condos, and the other one is in Tigard."

"Give me the downtown one. I'll give that a try."

Wanda scribbled the number down, thanked the operator and hung up. She needed one more cigarette before she called Magnolia. She made her way out to her familiar concrete bench. It hurt her bottom, but it was in the shade, cool in the desert afternoon. She looked out over the city to the dry hills and drifted back to a wet riverbank wake, and the part she would like most to forget.

A late hatch of moths filled the air above the bonfire, competing for space with sparks only to become victims of swooping bats. Churchill came up the bank and mentioned to Clawhammer that the river was still coming up. Clawhammer looked, shrugged his shoulders and took another drink.

The wake was in full bloom. Speeches were drowned out in a general maelstrom of noise. A fight broke out over B-cup. Fat Bitch woke up and added her wail. Three o'clock and Wanda wondered if she should take Buster back to the funeral home, but she didn't want to stop the party. It's what Buster wanted. She was drunk herself, and tired.

The northbound freight was finally released to cross the bridge and it rumbled over the river on the bottom deck.

Churchill tried to get the pallbearers together to put Buster back in the truck, but they were all either unmanageable or passed out.

A southbound freight rounded the bend and headed upstream on the mainline. This one didn't slow. The five locomotives rumbled and wailed toward them, dancing spotlights sought them out once again.

The locomotives passed them and labored into the distance. A long line of tank cars squeaked and lurched, pitched and rolled, as they passed the switch downstream.

Wanda felt uneasy. She steadied herself on Buster's casket and watched the railcars pass, rolling and complaining loudly, hazy through an orange vodka blur; figures gestured, pitched and lurched in the firelight, dancing to the tune of the rails.

A loud, metal-ripping, gut-wrenching bang and roar turned them all toward doom. A tank car turned sideways, curling a corkscrew of rail at them in a hellstorm of blue sparks. Another tank car, missing its rear wheels was dragged past them, spewing them with burning shrapnel. Churchill fell on his knees. Coyote cursed. All those who could, rushed to the place where Buster leaned behind the bridge abutment. The corkscrewing stopped. Railcars accorded into a roar of ripping steel, bounced and tumbled booming into the river. Just upstream, the wounded tankcar broke loose and plowed down the bank, groaning. It lay, split in half, in the water, oozing a cold white fog of liquefied petroleum gas.

All was quiet. Sobered now, they talked among themselves, glad to be alive. Clawhammer looked at the dying tank car, sniffed the air, looked at the fire. "Some kind a gas!" The stampede began with Fat Bitch, who suddenly could run like a halfback, stiff arming all in her path, followed by anyone who



could still run or hobble. Churchill called Clawhammer and some others back to help Cactus and Carl.

Wanda began to bawl, slumped beside Buster's casket and grabbed a handle. "I'm not leaving Buster!" The smell became stronger. The white fog hugged the water, flowed downstream, neared the bonfire. Churchill pleaded with Wanda to leave with him. Several men saw them and came back to help. In their drunken fearful hurry, they knocked the casket into the mud and it slid slowly down the rain slick bank toward the water. Wanda scrambled after it, lost her footing and was just saved from the river by Clawhammer. They turned to run. Only Wanda stayed, and Churchill with her, to watch the casket part the water and float slowly into the swirling, gathering fog. Buster still smiled.

The bonfire collapsed in on itself, sparks erupted.

Suddenly, silence and white.

When Wanda could see again, she was on her back. A fireball boiled high above her. Deep inside it flashed crimson and blue, against the dark. It rose, expanded to envelop the cloverleaf and blanch the night sky. The light from it lingered.

Churchill found her. They were unhurt, but gasping for air. The bonfire had been flattened, sucked out, flames began to flicker as the air came back to them.

Wanda turned to a river of fire. It burned white hot and spread, gathering the bleedings from the other tankcars. It hugged the roiling rising surface, spread, washed skyscrapers and highways and bridges with blinding white light, and the people with amazement. In it floated her Buster, burning, smiling at the sky.

Churchill held her and let her sob. "Dear God chile, you done had all the bad luck in the world. Ol' Job hisself got nothin' on you. God sure do ax in some funny ways sometime."

She nodded and cried, nodded and cried, watched Buster burn.

Finally his form was gone and the charred remains of the casket sank under the bridge.

Wanda stopped crying, shook her head and sighed. "He's gone." She sighed again, looked through the fire to where he was.

"You know what, Churchill?"

"What chile?"

"He wanted to be cremated and his ashes dropped off of the Steel Bridge."

Churchill followed her gaze. "Then he done got what he want."

"Uh huh," she said. "Had his wake and got cremated. Had his ashes mixed with the river under the Steel Bridge." She looked over the burning river one last time and turned away.

Sirens split the night as emergency vehicles, police and fire converged on the disaster. A fireboat fought a losing battle on the river.

Wanda looked at the huddled figures, wrapped in sleeping bags and blankets and fear. "Say good-bye for me, Churchill. I'm leaving, and I'm not never coming back."

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Wanda sighed, put out her cigarette, looked at the piece of paper with Magnolia's phone number. Dropped her arm. Shivered in the night chill. I can't. She wadded it up, began to throw it in the ashtray, stopped. A faint window light pooled on the ground from Bette's ward. Wanda looked at the light. Can't give up on her now, just because of what I done in Portland. Had to run then. Can't run from Bette. Can't hide anymore.

She unfolded the small paper, went inside to the telephone, and slowly, carefully dialed the number.

"Hello." The voice was small, far away and weak.

"Magnolia Parks?"

"Yes, this is she."

Wanda was paralyzed. She started to hang up.

"Hello? This is Magnolia Parks. Do you wish to speak to me?"

"Magnolia?"

"Yes, this is Magnolia. Do I know who this is?"

Wanda began to cry.

"Excuse me?" said Magnolia. "I don't... Is this some kind of joke?"

"No," Wanda blubbered. "No. No ma'am. I'm sorry..."

"It's okay dear. I'll wait until you are able to speak."

"I... It's been a real long... I don't know how..." Wanda began to cry again.

They were both quiet, Wanda crying softly, sighing, trying to get herself together, trying to shake off the fear and humiliation she still felt twenty years later. Magnolia listened, wondered, until finally...

"Wanda? Is this Wanda!" Her voice rose, gained strength. "Wanda!?"

"Yes, it's me." She blew her nose. "It's Wanda."

"Oh Wanda, you don't... I am so thankful it's you, finally you. I thought I'd die before..." Magnolia began to cry.

"I'm sorry Magnolia, I'm so so sorry about what..."

"You be quiet now!" Magnolia's voice strong. "You just forget about that. Where have you been? I've been looking for you for twenty years Wanda, where have you been? Where did you go? We had them drag the river for you until Churchill came and told me you had run away."

"I had to run away. I couldn't face you all after what I done, what I let happen."

"You don't know how hard I tried to find you, Wanda." Magnolia sighed. "If you only knew."

"I shamed the whole family, the Parks name, and I knew I couldn't face you."

"You poor thing. I'm so sorry you felt that way. We must have scared you to death, my sisters and me. We didn't mean to. I didn't mean to run you away."

"It was so awful what I done."

"No it wasn't. Buster wanted it that way. You were right to respect his wishes, and we were wrong to make you feel so bad you would run away."

"I know I never made much of a Parks for you all."

"Buster loved you and you made Buster a very happy man for the few years you had together. That means the world to me. I saw him suffer with loneliness for so many years and I saw how happy you made him. I never told you how much I loved you for that." Magnolia began to cry again. "And, I've been paying for that omission for twenty years."

"Now don't you cry Magnolia. You got no call to feel bad. I sure do appreciate all you're saying. I hated being cut off from all Buster's people all

these years. I never had nobody to talk to about him and his cute little habits and such. I bore everybody to death talking about him, but it's just not the same as talking with relatives. You always was his favorite sister by far, you know. Said you was his baby sister and always would be."

"Keep talking like that, reminding me of how much I miss Buster, and I'll not stop crying!"

"Okay, we'll save that for some other time. I can't talk too long because I'm borrowing a friend's phone card and I don't know when I'll be able to pay her back."

"You're not destitute are you?"

"I don't think so. What does that word mean?"

"It means without funds, poor, broke, all those things."

"Oh. Well, I hate to say it, but that just about fits me to a tee."

"Oh, I was so afraid of that. All these years you've been poor. That is the last thing Buster would have wanted. I am so ashamed."

"I haven't been poor the whole time, it's just that I've not got time to work these days and my savings is run out."

"Wanda, do you realize how much money Buster left you?"

"I didn't think too much about that."

"A great deal Wanda. He left you a great deal of money. My sisters wanted to contest the will after you didn't show up for several years, but I insisted that the money go in a trust for you. If you'll come to Portland to claim it you will not have to worry about money again. Until then, I'm the executor of the trust, and your wish is my command."

"Well, I sure could use a little bit of money now. Don't want much, but I do need some to help out a friend what's had an accident."

Wanda told Magnolia about Bette's condition and the therapy she would need and about her ruined car.

"We have a great deal of catching up to do Wanda, and I fully intend to interrogate you at length just as soon as you get to Portland. I hope you can come soon."

"I'll try. It looks like Bette is going to live for sure now. It just depends on how long before she can travel."

"I can't wait to see you, and meet your friend Bette. I hope her prognosis will turn positive by then."

"Uh huh."

"How much money do you need right now?"

"Enough to get me and my friend to Portland where she can get some help. Maybe I could buy a used van or something so Bette could ride easier."

Magnolia laughed "Let me take care of a few things for you. Do you have a phone number where you can be reached?"

Wanda gave her Linda's number. Then she remembered and asked Magnolia to call Winfred Ermine at the hospital and tell her Wanda could afford to take care of Bette, so they would release her to Wanda's care.

"I will call her today and follow up with any documentation they might require. I'll be calling you in a day or two with a bank for you to contact," said Magnolia.

"Thank you."

"Wanda, you will never know how happy this makes me. God bless you. I'll be speaking with you soon."

Wanda hung up the phone, looked out through the window to the desert and mountains, and the world was new.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Bette's eyes darted around the ward: ceiling, walls, hall windows, people in pale blue coming and going. She tried to move. Tugged against the wrist-restraints that bound her arms. The pressure built, she screamed and grunted, she thrashed.

Wanda leaned over her. "Bette, Bette, it's me, Wanda. Please don't do that. Don't you go and hurt yourself."

Bette's eyes found her, filled with hate, blame. Her tongue pushed against her teeth. "No!" she screamed, lunged at Wanda, winced in pain and fell back. She tugged again, forgot why, fell back again, remembered, tugged again to raise her head, and spit.

"On, no, Bette! Why'd you go and do that?" Wanda found a tissue and wiped her arm.

Bette looked at her. Tugged again. She rested. Wanda came close again, wary this time. Bette reached for Wanda. Wanda pulled away. Bette whined and Wanda moved back. Bette grabbed her hand and gripped hard. She held Wanda with her eyes. She tried to speak. "No." She shook her head. Tried again, "nnno!" Her eyes widened, face reddened and she grunted and cursed, "goddamn, goddamn, goddamn!" She was still for a moment.

"You trying to say something to me Bette?"

Bette struggled to speak, only grunted, and gripped Wanda tighter. Wanda turned, distressed, to Dr. Mills who watched from the doorway. "This is the aphasia I told you about that first night. Try not to worry. She'll probably get better with time. The first few days are the worst."

"Does she have to have them wrist straps on her? It's a making her awful upset."

"We have to restrain them when they begin to endanger themselves like she did when she thrashed her way out of bed. It probably makes things worse for awhile, but she has to heal her skull first. There is partial paralysis and she could do a lot of damage to herself if she got out of bed."

"Should I stay away so as to not upset her so much?"

"No, she needs to see someone she knows. It'll help her find her way back to reality. Maybe it would help you to know that she will have no memory of this painful time later."

"That's a real good thing. Hope I won't."

"And, while I'm thinking of it, there's something you can do for me while you're with her."

"What's that, Doc?"

"Just pay attention to her actions and speech, and report to me when I make my rounds. It will help me evaluate her progress."

"Sure, Doc." Poor man still looks tired.

He made a few notes on his clipboard, waved and turned down the hallway.

When she turned back, Bette was still fixed on her face. When she tried to leave, Bette became agitated. She reached for Wanda's face, caressed her cheek and began to smile. As long as Wanda allowed it, Bette was content; stroke, stroke.

Looks like I got me a baby on my hands. Bette's hands were warm on her cheek. Wanda closed her eyes. Nice. She smiled at Bette, touched the hands touching her.

Bette finally slept, and Wanda went to look for Winfred Ermine to see if she had the information about places to go for help in Portland. Just outside the



administrative offices, she met the state patrol investigator, Sergeant James. During questioning of a mine foreman near where Wanda's car had been found, he'd learned that a man was injured in a blast and transported to Humboldt General.

"You mean that Ben is here!" said Wanda.

"Was here," said the investigator, who went on to explain that Ben had left the hospital sometime late at night with a security guard for the mine; she was being sought for questioning. "I plan to invite Jaimiee Murray to be here," said the officer.

"Just so Ben's gone from here," sighed Wanda. "I got enough to worry about."

Winfred greeted Wanda warmly. "Your sister-in-law filled me in on your financial situation," her eyebrows raised. "I don't understand how you could have been worried Wanda. It seems your late husband left you very comfortable."

"I didn't want to take none of the family's money since all I ever did was marry their brother. But now's I need it to help Bette, I'm sure glad it's still there."

"Magnolia is sending the necessary letter of documentation, and has instructed me to forward the hospital bills to her for payment."

"That makes me feel lots better," said Wanda. "That Dr. Mills and everybody did such a good job with Bette, I'm glad they're going to get paid."

Winfred gave her a packet of information referring her to a support group in Portland and a contact at Good Samaritan Hospital.

"That's the hospital where my Buster died. They did all they could but he died anyway." Her eyes began to tear. "It'll be hard to go back."

“Everybody says Good Sam is one of the best,” said Winfred. “And that support group will be more help than you can imagine.”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Jaimiee got back to the hospital late in the evening, called the investigator to let him know she was available, and found Wanda in Bette's ward. Linda came to work early and helped Jaimiee find Ben's night shift nurse. Billie told Jaimiee about Ben disappearing, what must have been very soon after she saw the woman from the mine in his room. She put the time at around midnight. "Just what I told that state policeman."

"That's weird," said Wanda. "Dr. Mills asked me if I'd been in to see Bette about that time. Said he had some doodads hooked up to her that told him she'd been all stirred up."

"Ben could have been there!" said Jaimiee.

"Don't tell me that," said Wanda. "That's enough to give me the willies."

"That could be why he wasn't in the room with the woman from the mine when Billie came in," said Jaimiee. "I suspect the woman will get us about as close to Ben as we're going to get."

The next morning Jaimiee called Sergeant James who told her to come right away, that the woman had just arrived. Jaimiee rushed across town to the office and was ushered into a small room. A woman with red eyes, holding a soggy tissue sat slumped in a chair. He introduced Jaimiee to Kathe Bozeman.

Kathe sniffled, wiped her nose, rubbed her eyes. "I'm kind of a mess huh?"

Jaimiee smiled understandingly. "They don't make make-up to withstand a good cry."

"Not mine anyway." She wiped her nose again, blew. Jaimiee saw the tissue box on the Sergeant's desk and handed it to her.

"After the suspect was injured at the mine, Ms. Bozeman was instructed by her mine foreman to help him in anyway possible, including giving him two thousand dollars," said Sergeant James. "Apparently the foreman's logic was to get the suspect out of their hair and avoid a large insurance claim or litigation. Is that right Ms. Bozeman?"

"Yes," Kathe nodded. "I didn't think it was the way to go at first, particularly since he used the name John Doe at the hospital."

"You changed your mind?"

"I guess I did. I went along with it anyway. By the time we got to San Francisco I had started to trust him. I felt sorry for him."

"Besides the fact that he had been injured in the explosion at the mine," said the Sergeant, "why did you feel sorry for him?"

"Well, he was so depressed. He broke down and cried. I could tell he was really hurting. I couldn't help but feel sorry for him."

"So, you drove him to San Francisco..." said Jaimiee.

"That's where he said he wanted to go, and the boss said to take him where he wanted to go."

"When did you learn his name was Ben?"

"In San Francisco he told me his name was Ben Marconi. Is that his real name?"

"Yes."

"That's something, I guess," she shook her head. "Maybe he was beginning to tell me the truth."

Jaimiee caught something in her voice. Something only another woman might notice.

The Sergeant asked the right questions and took notes. Jaimiee half listened and began to wonder about Kathe, wonder if she was holding something back.

After a couple more questions, the Sergeant looked up at Jaimiee, "Well, he's out of my jurisdiction now. I'll write this up, get it on the network and hope for the best. We have an artist coming in for a composite." He looked at his watch. We'll get that on the wire too."

"Do you mind if I have a few minutes with Ms. Bozeman?" said Jaimiee.

Kathe looked up at her, puzzled.

"Sure," said the Sergeant. "As long as it's okay with her," he said as he left the room.

Jaimiee pulled a chair close and sat.

"Kathe, why were you crying when I came in?"

"I've been a mess since I found out he was a wanted man. I helped him escape. I didn't mean to, but I did. I was afraid that I'd be held responsible. The Sergeant said I wouldn't be held responsible as long as I helped them out, told them everything I know."

"Have you done that?"

"Why, yes, of course I have. What do you mean?"

"I sensed you were holding back some emotions earlier, when you said that maybe he was beginning to tell you the truth."

"Well, yeah, I started to care about what happened to him. I didn't want him to get hurt any more than it seemed like he already had. I wanted to do more than just drop him off and say good-bye."

"Did you?"

Kathe looked away from Jaimiee. Her eyes filled. She pulled her knees up, hugged them and began to quietly sob.

"Don't ask me this. Please don't ask. It doesn't have anything to do with anything. It won't help catch him either." She looked up at Jaimiee, blinked away tears and begged. "Please understand, I can't, I just can't..."

Jaimiee looked into her eyes and knew she was telling the truth. She laid her hand on Kathe's knee, rose and left.

"Any luck?" asked Wanda, when Jaimiee got back to the hospital.

"No," said Jaimiee. "Ben kept her in the dark pretty well. All we know is he was in San Francisco yesterday. And, she thought he was probably leaving right away. He could be hitchhiking or on a bus, train... Hell, he could even afford to fly with the two grand they gave him."

"I'm tired of thinking about Ben," said Wanda. "Forget about it. If they catch him they do, if they don't they don't. Don't really make much of a difference to Bette one way or the other."

Jaimiee shook her head. "Damn shame he was so close to getting caught here and managed to get away."

"Oh, well..."

"They're putting out a bulletin on him. Some police officer somewhere might recognize him, if he gets into trouble. I'd say that's a good bet once the money runs out."

"Thanks for helping out Jaimiee. What're you going to do now?"

"Head back to Seattle and write my report, and sleep for about two days!"

"What about the old man?" asked Wanda.

"I'm going to take Matthew back to his home, and make sure that nephew and his wife let him live out his life there. I've been thinking about talking Charlie into going there to live with him."

“They seemed to be pretty good buddies,” said Wanda. “And it looked like the old man loved that dog Spot as much as Charlie did.”

“Say, do you have some way we can get in touch after you go to Portland?” asked Jaimiee, as she handed Wanda her card. Wanda dug around in her purse and came up with Magnolia’s phone number, and they hugged good-bye. Jaimiee didn't know just how soon Wanda and Bette would need her expertise.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ben leaned against the window of the Coast Starlight and watched the emerald Willamette Valley stream past. Beyond the valley, foothills of dark conifers levitated the snowy pyramid of Mount Jefferson. He asked the woman with the baby across the isle for the time. Just after two. Should be in Portland by four. The clacking of the rails wormed its way into his cotton-filled head. He adjusted his aching leg. Portland. Then what?

He found some comfort and drifted into the fitful sleep of travelers; surfacing, shifting, fading again. The train lurched him awake with rough track. He was looking out over the Willamette River at the city's bronze and silver towers. Bridge girders slid between him, and the river, and the city, flashing shadows through the train. The train slowed, eased up under the red brick clock tower topping Union Station. Air brakes bled loudly and the smell of asbestos greeted him as he hobbled off to stand alone beside the train.

A conductor saw him standing there and asked if he needed help. "No." He crutched into the high, marble, main hall. Sound enveloped him from every direction, people far away spoke into his ear, those close, sounded strangely far away. He was disoriented. Signs: Parcels, News, Cigars. Fans whomp whomped steadily from the ornate ceiling.

Two older men, dressed as farmers stood near him. Brothers. One of them argued about ticket details, the other wheat prices and religion. The first one made the sign-of-the-cross.

Two young women traded babies. An older, distinguished couple, far away, yawned in unison. He could hear them. A beautiful oriental girl in jeans and matching jacket double-checked her schedule, tapped her foot. An old



woman slumped in her wheelchair. A young man walked up purposefully and pushed her toward the street. She did not wake.

Ben looked wearily at the huge clock high on the far wall. Four-fifty-three. Have to find a place to lie down. He made his way across the hall, crutches squeaking loudly on the buffed marble. People looked.

He found a display of hotel advertisements, settled on one, the Jack London Hotel, fifteen dollars for a single. He picked up the battered direct line telephone. Dead. He memorized the telephone number, began to leave, turned back to look at the number again.

Outside under the broken Portland sky, he looked up at the clock tower. Four-fifty-nine. A mini-van pulled up to the curb. A man helped his wife and an older woman out, got them settled with small bags, kissed his wife, the older woman on the cheek. A small girl leaped out clutching a pink doll. "Me too, Daddy!" He picked her up hugged her and said something to her that made her giggle. He put her down and the three walked into the station waving. The girl turned, stole a last look at the man, stumbled, recovered, waved again and ran after the women. The man saw Ben looking. Ben turned away. The man stood for a moment watching the doors swing closed behind his family. He turned and watched Ben crutch his way down the street. He got slowly in his van and drove off into the afternoon.

A long block brought Ben to the Greyhound station. He went inside to find a telephone. A security guard watched him from an office, got up and moved closer. Ben found a telephone, searched for a quarter, couldn't find one. He looked toward the ticket desk. No one there. He looked the other way. The security guard spoke to him. "There's a change machine down there." He pointed to the other end of the concourse. Ben nodded his thanks and began

crutching the distance. The guard watched him. Ben got his change and came back. The guard was still there, arms crossed.

"Jack London Hotel."

"Do you have any single rooms for tonight?"

"I'll look."

Ben waited, the security guard turned to watch some teens come through the door. "No skateboards in here." His voice echoed across the room at them. They grumbled and left.

"Yeah, I got a couple of the fifteen dollar rooms and a couple of the seventeen dollar rooms."

"What's the difference?"

"Seventeen dollar ones is in the remodeled part. More bathrooms on those floors."

"Can you save me one of the seventeen dollar rooms?"

"First come first served."

"Where are you located?"

"Where are you at?"

"Greyhound station."

"Catch the TriMet bus south and get off at Ankney. We're between third and fourth on Ankney."

"Thanks."

"Better get here. Sometimes we fill up."

Ben found a bus stop. Lots of people waiting. Which bus? Busses stopped every minute or so. He didn't recognize any of the destinations. He got on No. 44. "How much for the fare?" The bus driver looked up at Ben and accelerated away from the stop. Ben lurched, grabbed a pole and lost a crutch, retrieved it. "No fare until you get off." Her badge said simply, Red. "Fareless Square next

twenty blocks. Please be seated.” The bus lurched to a stop and more people got on. The bus was full and he couldn’t find a seat. “How far is it to Ankeny?” The bus driver’s gaze was locked on the digital timer on her dashboard. She didn’t look at Ben this time, didn’t answer. A rain shower wet the windows and the street signs became hard to see. The bus driver looked in her mirror. “Somebody needs to make a seat for this man,” she announced. She found Ben in the mirror. “You got to find a place to set or I am going to park this bus and a whole bunch of people are going to be mad at you.” A small round Indian woman met Ben’s eye, looked away. She was wrapped in a large white fur coat, blue and white muffler and white fur hat. It was spring, and warm. She scooted to her right and left Ben a sliver to sit on. He sat. “Thank you.” She nodded, still looking out the window. He looked at her again. Her arms stuck out to her sides from all the insulation. She looked as if she could roll off the bus. “Thanks for the seat,” he said. She looked over her shoulder at him, eyes wide. She wrapped her arms tight around her breasts, nodded and quickly turned back to the window.

“Ankeny,” the driver called out. More people got on. Ben swam against the current and barely managed to get off before the bus pulled away. A pall of diesel smoke lay on him and swirled after the bus down the shining avenue.

The rain shower stopped, and in the west a sliver of bright sky shone. Homeward commuters swarmed, silhouetted against a bright solstice light, their shadows sharp against sidewalks, brick walls. Tall glass buildings reflected geometric color on indifferent streets.

A man in a dark suit moved away from Ben and returned to reading his Wall Street Journal. A tall, auburn-haired beauty in spike heels looked over his head for her bus. He was invisible. Brakes squealed and puffed, hydraulic doors banged open, closed. Lines of busses idled, then accelerated down between the walls of glass and stone. The glass rattled and the stone turned black.

All around him, people moved quickly and with purpose. Everyone had a place to go. He oriented himself, waited for the walk-light and hurriedly crutched his way toward the Jack London.

He almost missed it. Construction materials littered the lobby. Two dark men sat smoking in the window.

"I called about a half hour ago about a room. Do you still have a single?"

"You wanted the remodeled room didn't you?"

"If you have it."

The man squinted his eyes to avoid the smoke from his cigarette, dragged and put it down on the edge of the counter while he looked at a legal pad.

"Still got it. Number 206. On the street side. Nice room." He shoved a registration card at Ben and picked up his cigarette. "That'll be seventeen-forty-four a night and there's a refundable five dollar deposit for the telephone and damage."

"Okay." Ben looked at the card. Uh oh. Can't use John Doe again, that was dumb. Can't use my real name.

"Got a problem with that Bud?"

"Oh, no, no, I'm just tired."

He wrote: Ben Tierney, stealing the surname of a Boeing colleague, and put his mother's old address in New Jersey. Then he saw the social security number. Can't put mine. Why do they ask all this stuff? He looked up at the clerk, saw the man watching him and looked back down quickly.

"We'll need some ID with that you know."

Ben looked up at him, surprised.

"Yeah, state law."

"I don't have any ID. Never have had a driver's license..."

He pulled the card back from Ben, looked at it and then shoved it back to him.

"Not much I can do, Bud. I'd get my tit in a ringer if I let it slide." Ben took the card back and looked at it, looked at his crutches.

"But, I need a place to sleep."

"Sorry, Bud. Tell you what. See Cliff over there?" He pointed to a thin man with a dowagers hump and jet black hair. "He can help you out. He's good at this stuff. Got connections." He waved at the man. "Hey Cliff, man needs your expertise."

Ben crutched over to the man who smiled funny at him through his cigarette.

"Just gettin' into town Bub?" He pulled his Camel down with yellow stained and cracked fingers, crossed his knobbed knees and leaned forward.

"I guess I need some sort of ID to get into a room here."

"You got to have some ID to do damn near anything in this goddamn town." He paused to look Ben up and down. "How long you been without ID anyhow?"

"Not long."

"What I figured." He took a drag on his cigarette with a palsied hand. "I can help you out, Bub. Cost you a hundred bucks."

Ben looked surprised.

"I know. I know. You got that much?"

"Maybe."

"That's what it costs, okay?"

"I guess I don't have much choice."

"You run out and get yourself one of them passport pictures and bring it to me. Give me the money. Fella at the desk will witness for you. Then I'll get

you some A-number-one ID that'll work any damn where. Get it before dark tomorrow."

Ben slumped in a chair and leaned on his crutches. "I need a place to rest this leg tonight."

"Salvation Army's about four blocks thataway." He pointed.

Ben turned away.

"Too proud huh, Bub?"

Ben looked at him.

"You'll get over that foolishness. This ain't no place to be proud." He pulled hard on the last of his cigarette, threw it on the floor, mashed it out; dragged his hand down over his stubbled face, yellow ulcerated eyes, gapped and twisted brown teeth.

He looked at Ben, sighed. "Ain't that cold, Bub. Get yourself a bottle of hooch and curl up with it down under the riverbank. One night won't kill nobody."

Ben came back with the picture, gave Cliff the hundred and asked for the nearest liquor store.

He took the bus, bought a fifth of Jim Beam, and crutched to the river drinking out of the sack. The bite, the scent and the heft of a bottle felt familiar; never thought he'd go back to the booze.

He caught his reflection in a dark window. Behind him the empty street, bare buildings raked with amber, beside him elegant women naked under nefarious nothings of sleepwear. Him, unshaven and downcast, rumpled, torn and dirty, he saw what he had become. Look as bad as I feel. To complete the tableau he raised his sack and drank, sweet drink. He looked the glass ragman in the eye, turned away.

The river was contained by a seawall high above its slightly swollen waters. Black clouds framed a white pyramid of a mountain to the east, faded to yellow sky and another mountain in the north. A boat left round shiny ripples on the river; they animated the first headlights of the evening on the interstate. The sounds of traffic skipped off the river and thrummed at him from the buildings behind.

He drank again. The bite eased. He turned the bottle up and drank, shook his head. He felt the fuzz grow behind his eyes. Familiar fuzz. Oh yes. He drank again. Yes. Turned to the walls of glass and grinned, raised his bag in salute. He watched and drank, listened and drank.

Another drink and another. Smile at the buildings, turn and smile at the river, the mountain, fading now. Click. Somewhere deeper than the fuzz. No inside, no outside, no here, no there. Narrow window watching, only watching, only waiting.

He staggered against the seawall, lost a crutch and fell. He saved the bottle. Drank, looked for the cap, found it, blew the dirt out of it and managed to screw it on the bottle. Shook the bottle and looked at it through squinted eyes. He pulled himself vertical, stuffed the bottle in his front pants pocket and looked around. Saw a Yellow Cab. Hailed it. Cabby looked and drove on. Sonofabitch! Saw another, dug deep in his other pocket and waved a handful of bills. Cabby stopped and helped him in the back.

"Where to?"

"I need to... I need... get me a beer. Hell!" He waved his arms wildly. "Buy everybody a beer." He looked out the window, lay his face against it. "I'll buy the goddamn place..."

"Oldtown Inn do you?"

"Les go."

He fell out of the door when the cabby opened it. The cabby gathered him up and helped him inside, held out his hand. Ben reached deep for his wad.

"That'll be ten for the ride." He pulled a ten from the fistful Ben held in front of his eyes. "And ten for my tip." He pulled a twenty from the wad and left Ben staring at it and weaving.

"Hey, Bro!" A young man, wearing a beret and a big smile, slapped him on the back. "What say we find us a place to set a spell. Lemmie go and help you here." He ushered Ben to a table, sat beside him, arm around his shoulders, offered his hand. "Willard here. What's yours?"

Ben tried to keep his eyes open. "Huh?"

"What's your name Bro?"

He struggled to remember the right name. "Bud." Nodded to Willard. "Bud."

"Put 'er there Bud." Willard offered his hand again. "We gone be brothers, you and me, best buds." He laughed. "Bud!"

Ben looked at him and smiled. "Wanna beer?"

"You bet!" Held out his hand. Ben looked at it, pulled his wad out again, fussed with it trying to pull out a small bill, failed and laid it on the table. Jacksons, Grants and Franklins unfolded and littered the table. Word of this event passed down the bar. They all turned. Willard whistled. He pulled a fifty from the pile, smiled at Ben. "You best gather all that up into your pocket afore somebody lot less your friend than me decides to roll you now Bud." Ben slowly stuffed the bills in his pocket. One fell on the floor behind him. A young woman jumped up from her stool, leaned around Ben, kissed him on the cheek, picked up the fifty and slipped it in her blouse.

Ben turned to look at her, bewildered. "How come... you kiss me?"



"Cause you're so good looking!" She pranced back to her stool laughing. Others at the bar laughed with her. Some turned away.

"Here you go, Bud." Willard brought two glasses and a pitcher and set it on the sticky table. He filled the glasses, and blew the heads off. "Bottoms up." Ben looked hard in the direction of the glass, squinted and reached for the image on the right. "Uh oh!" said Willard, as the glass skittered down the table and dumped. "Here you go, I'll do you again." This time he folded Ben's hands around the glass. "Drink up, Bro."

Ben brought it carefully to his lips and swallowed. His tongue was thick and he couldn't taste the beer. Looked at it. Looked at Willard who was laughing, grinning, floating above the table, saying something he couldn't hear. Head felt heavy. Decided to rest, lay his head on the table, inhaled beer through his nose. Sputtered and coughed. Laughter everywhere. Felt sick, spasmed and spewed.

"Jesus!" said Willard. He jumped away. "Man's dangerous." Ben laid his head in the beer and puke and slept.

"Who's with this asshole?" said the owner, fingering his pepper spray.

"Hey!" said Willard. "I ain't done nothing. This dude come here his own damn self. Come in a cab."

"Somebody get him back in a cab. I'm gone to get a bucket of Lysol. He better not be here when I get back."

"Sure, sure we can do that," said Willard smiling. He paused, looked down at the bum lying in his own puke, and his smile turned to sneer. Like my old man. Worthless piece of shit. Somebody should a done up and killed that bastard. "Yeah, we can do that very thing," he said to the room in general. "That very thing." He looked down on Ben, gathered deep flem and spit on Ben's head, watched it slide down his face. Some laughter in the bar. He motioned to a

big man with a backward baseball cap. Grinned at his buddy. "You gone help me take care of my bud here?"

"Reckon I can do that."

Willard pulled Ben up by the shirt-collar and poured the rest of the beer over him. Ben tried to wake, slumped again.

"Lights done gone out on this dude," said the friend.

"I hate these goddamn bums," said Willard.

They took him between them, the big one brought his crutches.

"Don't you boys be mean to my sweetie now," laughed the fifty-dollar girl.

They carried him outside and quickly around the corner. There was a police car idling down the block, but the cop was inside the neighborhood station and couldn't see them. Willard found a grocery cart and they stuffed Ben in it bottom first, threw his crutches on top. The cop came out to get something from his car and saw them, stopped to look. They pushed Ben down the street toward the river, singing and staggering. Two drunks taking a friend home. The cop shook his head, went back inside.

They took him to the Steel Bridge, back in some bushes by the McCormick Pier condos and dumped him out. He began to wake up. They loosened his belt, pulled his pants off and emptied his pockets. It was their lucky day. Wads of fifties and hundreds. Counting quickly, over a thousand dollars, almost two.

Ben's eyes began to open. Willard looked at him, saw the fear there. "This sonofabitch don't deserve to live. He too stupid to live."

"I ain't in for no killin'. Give me half and I'll split. I don't want to know nothing."

"We be doin' him a favor if we kill him," said Willard. "He too damn easy. I hate it when they're so goddamn easy."

"You kill 'im, I'm leavin'. Give me my money."

"Okay, Okay. Lets us just mess him up some." Willard looked down at Ben, eyes wide and confused. "Ugly sonofabitch." He kicked hard into the side of Ben's face, rolling him over twice.

Ben couldn't see it coming, couldn't feel it, but he heard bone crack and his left eye went black, then he couldn't hear anymore.

Willard came at him again. "Stupid bastard." A rib cracked. Ben puked and it mixed with the blood pouring from his nose down his face. He felt like he was drowning.

"Come on Willard." The big one pulled him away. "Stop this shit, man. Ain't nothin' but trouble. People seen us with him, man." He shook Willard. Willard was wild-eyed. He looked over his shoulder at Ben and began to go for him again. "No you don't." The friend jerked Willard hard. "I gonna kick shit out of you, you dumb shit."

He began pulling Willard away, who resisted, but the other one was stronger. "C'mon man, we flush now, we go uptown and get some good shit and some high class pussy."

Ben couldn't hear them leave. Felt himself fading. Couldn't hang on.

The sun was high when his eye opened. Pain everywhere. He tried to sit up. Couldn't. He got dizzy and his vision was fuzzy. Couldn't see out of his left eye, hear out of his left ear. He lay back. Maybe I'll die this time.

Suddenly, an apparition: a glowing seraphic figure of a beautiful young man, dressed in white, his beard gold. He knelt close to Ben and spoke quietly, "Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid," he gently closed Ben's good eye.

There was a blinding light. Finally dead thought Ben, and opened his good eye. A nurse blocked the light, "Not dead yet I see." The nurse checked his IV. "Close enough. Who brought you here? You just appeared on a gurney."

Ben moaned, "Don't know."

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Wanda stayed by Bette's bedside most of each day. There were small improvements. Words began to come easier. She could ask for things: ginger ale, painkillers, food, Wanda. She learned Wanda's name. Wanda's face became her anchor. She twirled Wanda's hair through her fingers, stroked her face. Wanda told her stories about her girlhood in Fields, and living in Portland. Bette gazed at her and smiled.

Dr. Mills decided Bette should be ready to leave the hospital in a week and to travel after another week. Wanda pushed her around the hospital in a wheelchair each day. At first Bette had trouble sitting up straight, her balance was impaired, but coming back. She moved her legs, but the partial paralysis made walking impossible, for the time being. A therapist worked with her daily.

"She's doing much better than I would have thought possible when I saw her that first day, Wanda," said Dr. Mills. "I'm afraid I overstated the difficulties you might face in caring for Bette. I'm surprised you didn't give up."

"I guess I'd made up my mind, Doc," said Wanda.

Dr. Mills made arrangements for Bette to be evaluated at Good Samaritan in July. In the meantime he wanted Wanda to work with her on some basics. They made a large calendar and hung it beside Bette's bed. Each day Wanda made it a ritual to mark off the day while repeating the year, the month, and the day of the month.

She also pointed out the time on the large clock near Bette's bed for such important happenings as meals and visiting hours. At first it seemed to have no effect, but soon Bette began to associate the clock hands with the time that Wanda would leave her; she became agitated as the hands approached eleven.

Wanda called Magnolia. There was fifty thousand dollars in a Winnemucca bank for her.

“My goodness, I don’t need that much! I could live years on that.”

“Don’t be silly, you use what you need, and don’t be so frugal.”

“Thank you Magnolia. You don’t know what a load you’ve taken off of me.”

“You just call me if you need me to do anything for... what’s your friend’s name?”

“Bette.”

“Bette. I’ll write that down. My memory is not what it used to be. I’ve been redecorating a room for you; a large room with two double beds and a view of the mountains.”

“Magnolia, you don’t need to be going to so much trouble!”

“Wanda, my life has been very pedestrian the last few years, and having you in town promises to liven things up.”

“I hope not,” said Wanda. “Not like last time anyways.”

Wanda and Linda went RV shopping one afternoon. Wanda crawled underneath and checked out the engines, suspension, and drive trains, and Linda checked out the kitchen facilities and tested the beds for structural integrity.

They looked at a twenty-two footer that slept four, had a stove and microwave, shower and a huge V8. Wanda liked the powerful engine. She sat in the driver’s seat, grasping the big wheel. “Vroom! Vroom!” “Sure is a nice rig,” sighed Wanda, shaking her head. “But I just can’t bring myself to spend that much money.”

Linda rolled her mass slowly on her side and looked down at Wanda from where she was testing the overhead double bed. "But Magnolia said you had more money than you ever could spend, didn't she?"

"I know, but it just don't seem right anyhow. All I ever done was marry Buster. Now's he's been gone for twenty years and I just don't feel right getting his money. Soon as Bette's back on her feet and I can get me some work, I'm going to turn it all back to the family."

Linda shook her head and laughed. "Wanda, Wanda, Wanda, look at me." Wanda looked up at her friend. "There is some reason for all of this that's happened to you. I think you're supposed to have that money. Buster knew you'd do right by his money or he never would of left it all to you. So now you got to hold up your end of the deal and get used to being rich."

"Never would get used to it, I don't believe."

"Looks to me like you and Buster was cut from the same pattern when it comes to that kind of stuff."

"What're you saying?"

"Well, when you finished up that story about the wake, I couldn't help but be struck by all the good that Buster did with his money. The stories all those people told about what he did for them were really something. Those are the kind of stories they ought to put on all those tevee talk shows, instead of stuff like husbands who got their baby-sitters pregnant and stuff."

"Well, Buster was one of a kind, that's a fact."

"Well, honey, look what you're doing here. You'd just met Bette when she got hurt and here you're taking over for her just like you were family or something. You're just like Buster was, by God, no different."

"Well, maybe a little bit, but..."

"No buts, no buts about it woman. My humble opinion is that you were meant to take over where Buster left off, do with his money what he would of done with it if he'd lived."

"Well, I don't..."

"You give it back and them mean sisters will just pass it on to their kids, make them richer than they already are, and won't anything good come of it."

"It don't feel right."

Linda smiled at Wanda and smacked her on the head.

"Ouch! You big ol' woman picking on little ol' me."

"You just think about what I said."

Wanda looked at Linda. What a sweet woman. Stupid men, can't see a good woman for a little fat. "Okay, I'll think about it. But right now, we got to keep looking. Bette's going to be in a wheelchair for a good while yet, and it'd be nice if we could find something with one of them wheelchair lifts in it. Could maybe put a lift in that limo, but I don't think I want to even see it again, ever."

"I'm with you on that. Okay, let's go look some more. Help me down."

"Help you down? My God, Linda if you'd fall on me there wouldn't be nothing left but a greasy spot!"

"You're awful funny for a skinny bag of bones!" Wanda laughed as Linda managed to haul herself down the narrow stepladder. "Just for that our next stop is going to be Dunkin Donuts!"

After Linda's donut and Wanda's cigarette, they tried another RV lot and could find only one with a wheelchair lift. It was forty feet long and slept eight.

"I don't think so," said Wanda. "I'm not driving no interstate bus."

"Bus!" says Linda. "That's it, what you need is a bus."

"But I don't want a bus."



“Not a big bus, a little bus, one of those special ones the county transit system uses to go get people in wheelchairs who can’t get up the steps of their regular buses. Paratransit buses, they call them. They got a wheelchair lift built right in.”

“Do you think they’d sell us one of them para, para-what’s-it, busses?”

“Worth a try. Maybe they’ve got an old one.”

They checked with the county transit authority. No they wouldn’t sell them a bus. But the man knew a nursing home that just bought a new one. Maybe they had an old one?

Linda pulled into the parking lot of the Desert Manor Adult Care Center.

“There it is!” cried Wanda.

On the back of the lot, parked beside a shiny new bus, sat a smallish, tired looking, but very bright chartreuse bus. Wanda jumped out of the car almost before Linda got it stopped. She ran all around it, looked underneath, through the windows, and tried the driver’s door. It was unlocked. She got in, sat at the wheel and screamed, “Yahoo, this is it, this is it!”

Linda padded over to her. “You sure about this? Looks kind of funky to me.”

“It’s wonderful!”

“But that color?”

“We’ll get some spray cans and pretty it up some. Let’s go inside and buy it!”

The nursing home director was shocked, but he was pleased to find someone to buy his old bus. “It burns some oil, and you’re going to have to fix the windshield wipers, other than that it runs good. Lift works fine. Uses a little bit of gas, about ten miles to the gallon. My oldest boy put in a new engine a couple years ago and he put in some big whopper of a V8.”

"How much you want for it?" said Wanda.

"Wanda!" Linda gave her a look.

"Well now," the man rubbed his chin. "I'd just have to have at least three-thousand for her. We could use her yet for backup in case..."

"Sold," said Wanda. "You dig out the papers and I'll get my purse in the car."

Half an hour later Linda drove off shaking her head, Wanda followed in the bus, laying a strip of rubber out of the parking lot, and grinning.

Wanda drove the bus directly to the hospital. She parked in a no-parking zone, and hurried straight to Bette's ward.

"Bette, you're not a going to believe this, but I done bought us the cutest bus you ever did see. It's got a wheelchair lift so we won't have trouble getting you in and out, and it's got lots of windows so we can see the countryside. I figure I can get a mattress to throw in the back to sleep on and we'll be all set."

Bette smiled at Wanda. "Set? Set?"

"Set for you to get out of this place so we can go on a road trip."

"Road trip?"

"Back to the Roadkill Cafe first. Then we're going to try and remember how you got there in that big old limousine. Maybe check out the hot springs. Charlie said you stopped there on the way to the Roadkill."

Bette's eyebrows darkened, her lips pursed. "Charlie. Charlie." She nodded. "Had a dog."

"Spot, that was Spot."

"Old man like dog. Where old man?"

"Matthew went home. Charlie and Spot went with him."

Bette turned to the small windows on the hallway by her bed. A janitor mopped the floor with chlorine bleach and water. She turned back to Wanda. "Matthew."

"Matthew's his name. The old man's name."

"Uh huh." Bette stared at the ceiling. She sniffed the air.

"Do you smell the bleach?"

Bette looked at her, at the man mopping, sniffed. "Candy. Sweet."

"You silly! That's bleach, it smells bad."

Bette looked at her, confused. "Sweet."

Wanda remembered what the doctor said about her taste and smell being messed up. "You say so." She smiled at Bette. Bette smiled back. She always smiled when Wanda smiled. The angry times have stopped.

"Do you remember the Roadkill Cafe?"

Bette shook her head.

"That's where you met me. Remember me telling you that story about how I met my Buster in Portland?"

"Buster?"

"Remember, he ate the oysters and it like to drove me crazy for to get him into bed?"

Bette laughed, reached out, pulled Wanda's hand to her breast and enfolded it with hers. She beamed at Wanda.

Wanda laughed. "You remember?"

"No."

"Oh."

Bette frowned, eager to please. "Yes." She brightened.

"This'll take awhile." Wanda smiled at Bette. "We'll just have to practice our patience, won't we now?" She returned the squeeze.

Bette smiled.

Wanda considered bringing up Ben, and what happened, decided to leave it for another day. Instead she told the story of the time she got caught with a bullfrog in the pocket of her jumper at school. She'd planned to put it on Jimmy Newton's head, but it peed in her pocket and somebody smelled her and told the teacher.

Bette didn't laugh, just gazed at her. Wanda became aware of her hand against Bette. They both were quiet in the lazy hospital afternoon.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Wanda and Linda worked on the bus every free moment. Wanda changed the oil and filter, put in new spark plugs and fixed the windshield wipers. Linda washed the windows, made and hung curtains, red hearts on a purple background. Then they tackled the thorny paint problem. Linda insisted the green was way too ugly. Wanda loved it.

"The damn thing looks like a frog!" said Linda.

Wanda's eyes lit.

"Uh oh," said Linda.

"No, really Linda, now just listen, how about we paint it up like a frog!"

"You're kidding!?"

"Why not?" said Wanda. "We'll paint great big legs back here along the sides, and little tiny legs up front here. Then we'll get some white and round out the windshields to look like frog eyes..."

"You wouldn't!" She sat on the bus steps and laughed until she cried.

Wanda looked surprised. "Why not?"

"You would!" And Linda began laughing again, harder this time. Wanda sat on the ground to wait out the laugh attack. She almost had time to finish a cigarette before Linda subsided in exhaustion.

"Okay," said Linda. "But, if we're going to do it, let's do it right. I think this frog should be a spotted frog; lots of different colors of spots all over the thing. What do you think?"

"Maybe. But, while I was waiting for you to quit your howling, I remembered a rubber frog I got when I was a little girl. I got me a new pair of Mary Janes over in Boise, and for free they give me this rubber frog. He was on

some sort of tevee show I never got to see because we never got the big antenna up on the hill until I was in high school."

"I've seen those. Little boy I played with had one," said Linda. "Had big old feet and eyes that stuck up on his head and he wore a red jacket and a black bow tie..."

"That's it! That's Froggie!"

"Had a squeaker whistle in his back, and if you covered it up to hold in the air, he would stick his tongue out," said Linda.

"I remember that part!" screeched Wanda. "I used to make Froggie stick his tongue in Barbie's ear!"

"Oh gross, you are sick, sick, sick."

"I know, I know it's the truth!" said Wanda.

The next day, Wanda worked freehand with a spray can to make the legs and jacket and tie. Linda used a string as a protractor to make stencils of circles for her spots. It took a good part of two days, but the bus became a frog. Along each side they painted "Froggie" in big rounded yellow letters.

"I sure hope Bette don't mind riding in this thing," said Wanda. "Liable to scare her into a relapse!"

"That bonk on the head didn't kill her, riding in this bus isn't going to do it," said Linda. "But, then again, I'm not so sure I'd ride very far in it. Liable to attract some strange characters along the way."

Wanda thought about that. "I sure hope so."

They stood back admiring their work. Wanda gave Linda a big hug. "I don't know how I ever can say just how much help you've been to me. I don't believe I could a stood all this if it hadn't a been for you."

"Oh, hush now."

"There's a lot of something real behind all of them hearts you put up all over your place."

At the end of the week Bette was discharged to Wanda. She took her to Linda's house in Froggie. Bette didn't notice she was riding in a frog, and Wanda was discouraged.

After a week at Linda's, Dr. Mills gave the go-ahead for the trip. "She's on a new path now, Wanda. Rehabilitation is not the same thing as hospitalization. We had to go slow here, but it's time for her to be challenged. There can be no rehab without some pain. It's up to you to push her just a little now. Good luck."

Linda waved a pink hankie as they pulled away from her house. Bette leaned out the window and waved good-bye. Then she looked back along side the bus and turned to Wanda as they rounded the corner. "Frog bus," she smiled.

Wanda laughed. "Froggie is his name, and Linda and me painted him all up just for you."

Bette turned to look at the inside. The wheelchair lift was folded against the side doors. In the back was a big mattress with pink-heart sheets and purple-heart pillowcases, red-heart curtains. There was a cooler on the floor and a box of groceries holding mostly chips and cigarettes.

"Froggie." She looked at Wanda and laughed for the first time since the accident.

"So you think our bus is funny do you!"

"Funny. Funny bus. Froggie frog bus!" She laughed again.

"Well, me and you and Froggie is on the road now, Bette."

"On road again... I'm the road again." Bette attempted to imitate Willie Nelson.

"Of all the things for you to remember. This is going to be a long damn trip."

By the time they got to the place where Ben hit Bette, she had tired out and Wanda helped her into the back to sleep. Wanda was glad to keep on driving through the Black Rock Desert afternoon toward Oregon. She planned to pull off in the desert to sleep and get to the Roadkill for breakfast in the morning.

Wanda heard Bette moving around in the back. She pulled over to help her back into her seat. But, she remembered what Doc said, and let Bette do most of it for herself.

"Have a good nap?"

"Good nap." Bette nodded. "Where... we are?"

"Black Rock Desert. Don't forget your seatbelt."

"Oh." Bette fiddled with it until Wanda decided to help her. Bette studied it, trying to remember."

"Remember this place? This is where we was chasing that big old limousine of yours."

"Limo...sine?"

"That big white car. Ben stole it and we was chasing him. Remember any of that?"

Bette looked out over the desert. "No."

Wanda shrugged.

Bette looked blank, then smiled at Wanda. She reached over and held Wanda's hand.



“Just how do you suppose I’m a going to drive this thing with you hanging onto my right hand?”

“Oh.” Bette let go.

Wonder when this touchy-feelie thing is going to be over with. She looked at Bette who was watching a dust devil skitter across the road. Don’t bother me none.

A few miles farther, Wanda drove Froggie up a jeep road to a small butte for a view. While Bette slept, she sat and smoked and watched twilight come to the desert. When Bette woke up they ate saltines and string cheese, washed down with a big bottle of orange drink.

It was hot in Froggie and Wanda decided to drag the mattress out on the ground. They lay awake under the stars and listened to the coyotes’ evening song. This was all new to Bette. Everything was new to Bette. She stayed awake asking Wanda questions: “What coyote eat?” “Why are stars bright?” “Where do the moon go?” She finally slept.

Wanda woke up for her two o’clock cigarette. Discovered she couldn’t get up. Bette had one arm and a leg over her.

Well shit. Hate to wake her up.

She patted the ground in the dark, found her Marlboros and Bic, lit up. Tiny glow warmed nearby rabbitbush and juniper. The stars were close and the air now cold.

Well, this ain’t too bad. Least-wise she’s warm.

Bette stirred, pulled Wanda closer, sighed and slept again.

Could squeeze a body in two.

Wanda felt the weight of Bette’s body, remembered Buster and how it was. She took a last drag, flipped the butt into the sand, watched the glow slowly fade. She sighed, closed her eyes and focused on where they touched. She

let go to the breathing, the mingled heartbeats, shared warmth. She began to cry softly. She wiped the tears away with her hand and opened her eyes to the expanse of desert sky.

## Chapter Thirty

Mrs. Fields scurried out to greet them when they pulled up in front of the Roadkill Cafe next morning. She hugged Wanda and waved at Bette through the windshield, then stood back to size up Froggie. "My, oh my... Well... Can't say as I never seen a rig like that before."

Wanda laughed. "Glad you like our new home."

Mrs. Fields shook her head and grinned. "So, you two had any breakfast yet? Course not. Get on in here and let me get some eggs on."

"We'll be a minute Mrs. Fields. We're not used to this wheelchair elevator thing yet."

Wanda rolled Bette up to the screen door. "Uh oh. I forgot there wasn't no ramp here. How we gonna get her over that sill?"

Mrs. Fields looked around the cafe. "Sheldon?" A big cowboy looked up from shoveling in home fries, saw the need and jumped up. "Reckon you could give us a hand here?"

"Yes ma'am." He nodded to Bette and Wanda, moved around behind Bette and picked her up, wheelchair and all, and lifted her over the threshold. Bette looked at him admiringly.

"Whoa," said Wanda. "Always thought you was a strong cowboy!"

He smiled. "Been brandin' calves ma'am. Builds a body up some I reckon."

"I reckon!" said Wanda.

Sheldon returned to his home fries while Bette got herself situated at the end of a booth.

"What'll you two have?"

"Lemmie do it Mrs. Fields. Been a long time since I handled a spatula. Been wondering if I forgot how."

"Phooey! You're the best short-order cook I ever saw. You'd never ever would of forgot."

"We'll see." Wanda grabbed the coffee pot. "Lemmie top this off for you Sheldon. Say how's those kids of yours?"

"Right good." He wiped his mustache with a napkin, looked up. "My oldest, Nadine, is going off to Eugene this fall to learn to be a teacher. Junior is doing right good at the baseball this year, ain't much for school though. Guess he wants to be a cowboy like his pa."

"That ain't bad."

"Not too bad. Hard work and all, but sometimes cows is better company than some folks, so I ain't too peeved he's taking after his pa. I believe it's 'cause of that girl over at Frenchglen though. He's about wore out that old pickup a drivin' over that mountain to her." He smiled. "Just like I did with his mother, 'cept I wore out an old mare."

Wanda and Mrs. Fields laughed. Bette looked blankly at the man, turned and stared out the window at the desert.

Wanda fixed Bette eggs, bacon and home fries, herself a pancake. She carried the plates on her arm, two cups of coffee in the other hand, to Bette's booth.

"Here you go."

Bette looked past her.

"Breakfast Bette."

Wanda began to eat, still looking at Bette's expressionless face.

"Here you go honey." She picked up Bette's hand and put a fork in it. Bette look at her, then at her hand and the plate in front of her.

"Oh." She began to eat.

Mrs. Fields sat in the booth across from Wanda. "She like this often?"  
Looked at Bette.

"Pretty often. Several times a day. Doc says not to worry." She looked at Bette slowly eating. "I worry. She should be shoveling in those eggs like nobody's business. Look at that. Little tiny bites. Chews a hundred times. That likes to drive me crazy sometimes. Just ain't right."

"Right who?" says Bette.

"Never mind, Bette."

"Oh," she paused, looked up, "what day is it?"

Wanda remembered she hadn't brought their calendar along. "You got any extra advertising calendars, Mrs. Fields. Good for her to look at one every day so she can get herself orientated with the days and stuff."

Mrs. Fields looked over her shoulder. "Got one from the feed store in Burns. Guess I don't need to be advertising the competition anyhow." She brought it to Bette.

"What day is it anyway?" said Wanda. "Damned if I know myself."

"June seventh," said Mrs. Fields.

"Money's on the counter Mrs. Fields," said Sheldon. He put on his cowboy hat, ducked out the door.

"So long Sheldon."

Wanda marked off the days through June sixth. She looked at Bette who was watching. "Today is June seventh." She marked off the day.

Bette looked up at the cafe clock. "Ten fifteen."

Wanda smiled. "We're getting there."

Bette perked up and enjoyed her meal while Wanda and Mrs. Fields talked.

"I don't know what I'm a going to do without you around here girl."

"I wish I didn't have to run off from you like this." Wanda looked at Bette. "But, she's got to have that rehabilitation that they've got in Portland. I can't do it all by myself."

"Oh, I know. You're doing the right thing. I'm just so happy you got in touch with that sister of Buster's and you're getting on good. With your folks gone so long now, his family is about all the people you got."

"I suppose. I like Magnolia, but I'm not in no big hurry to run into the other two sisters anytime soon."

"Every family has got some rotten eggs of one kind or the other."

"Uh huh." Wanda looked at Bette. "I wonder where her people are. She might have forgot all about them. Doc said her memory would be bad for a while. Said a lot of it would begin to come back, but there'd be things she'd never remember."

Bette looked up from her food. "Who?" She didn't wait for an answer, went back to her slow, careful eating.

"I got to stop doing that. Talking like she wasn't here at all. One of these days she's going to catch on and that'd make her feel like hell I bet. Would me."

Wanda looked at Mrs. Fields, reached across the booth to pat her hand. "Don't you worry about not seeing old Wanda. Soon as Bette's doing real good, we'll be back down this way for a visit."

Wanda had driven less than an hour when they came to the Alvord Hot Springs. They had spent nearly the whole day visiting with Mrs. Fields and it was getting toward evening so Wanda decided to stop for their dinner. A bath wouldn't be a half-bad idea. Not a bad place to sleep neither. Drag that mattress over to that deck and sleep out under the stars again.

"Here we are Bette. Time for dinner." She turned to see Bette looking out at the steaming springs. "How's that sound to you?"

Bette nodded, turned back to the window. "Been here."

"When would you..." Wanda stopped, thought. "Did you-all stop here on the way to the Roadkill?"

"Who?"

"You and Ben and Charlie and Matthew, and Spot the dog."

Bette smiled. "Spots. The dog had spots and he played in there." She points. "Mat...What you say, Ma...tthew?"

"Yeah, that was the old man you kidnapped by mistake, remember?"

Bette frowned. "I remember an old man." She laughed. "Cute old man. Skinny thing!"

Wanda laughed too. "Skinnier than me?"

Bette looked, put her hand over her mouth, snickered. "No."

Wanda pretended to frown. "You best be careful now. You dropped a few pounds in that hospital. You don't watch it, I'm a going to be calling you skinny."

Bette looked down at her body. Shook her head. "No."

"Okay let's get you into that wheelchair and..." Wanda looked at the boards laid out to the springs. "I think we can get you across that."

Wanda got Bette to the deck and out of the chair so she could hang her legs in the hot water. She lugged the mattress, pillows and food to the deck and stopped to catch her breath. "I keep this stuff up, I'll be getting in shape for the first time in twenty years." She looked around for her cigarettes, found them, tapped one out and looked at it. "Maybe I'll quit these things." She lit up, looked over the desert and remembered something.

"Would you believe this is the place I come to be with my first boy when I was, what was it, sixteen?"

"Be with?"

"Well, you know. The biblical be-with. As in, you know, screw."

Bette's eyes get big. "Oh!"

"Yeah, Oh! That's what I said too. More like ouch. I was a little thing and a virgin of course. You remember being a virgin?"

Bette thought. "No. Yes."

"How'd you lose it?"

She thought again, "Man my mother was with. Tattoos." Her voice became husky, dark. "Stinks. Ugly. Dirty. Smother me. Hurt. Mother watch." Bette began to cry.

Wanda had never seen Bette cry. She dropped her cigarette, went to Bette, held her. "I'm sorry. I never thought it might of been that bad for you. I'd a never brought it up."

"Okay." Bette looked at her, wiped her tears with the back of her hand, sniffled. She looked at Wanda, took her hand and kissed it, held it against her cheek.

They were quiet for a time and watched the sunset.

"Let's eat." Wanda hauled out a can of spiced kidney beans, bag of tortilla chips and a summer sausage. "And just for a special occasion I got us a bottle of port wine." They shared a plastic spoon and ate beans from the can, sliced sausage on the chips and drank the wine in big gulps.

"Hungry," said Bette.

"Me too."

A coyote howled, another answered. Bette thought it was funny. She howled back, they answered, and Wanda collapsed in laughter. Bette smiled,



howled again, and again, smiled. She is pleased to be pleasing Wanda, who rolled and laughed and coughed.

“Stop! Stop!” begged Wanda, coughing again.

Bette stopped. Wanda calmed down, took a deep breath, coughed again and spit. “Lord, that’ll clean your tubes out.”

“Okay?”

“Oh yeah. Probably good for me.”

Wanda shoved the remains of supper aside and took a drink of the port, passed it to Bette, who chugged.

“I got us our towels and some soap. What do you think about a bath in this big old tub?” said Wanda.

“Good,” said Bette. She began stripping, throwing clothes on the deck.

“Woman’s in a hurry!” said Wanda, following her lead. “I better hurry up before you use up all the hot water!”

Bette looked at her, looked at the big steaming hot spring and began laughing. “Use up water!” Laughed again, and slipped off the decking and into the pool.

“Wait!” Wanda remembered Bette’s paralysis.

Bette stumbled away from the deck flailing her arms, and went under.

“Bette!”

The water was only chest deep but Bette couldn’t stand, couldn’t reach the edge.

“Oh, God.” Wanda jumped in and tried to lift Bette from where she floundered, wide eyed and bubbling, on the bottom. Bette, clutched at her, toppled Wanda in with her. Wanda recovered, sputtering, and stood over Bette who climbed her to the surface and hung on, gasping, coughing. Wanda

wrapped her arms around Bette and they stumbled to the edge where they leaned, holding on, breathing amber twilight.

Wanda began to cry, softly at first, then sobbed hard against Bette's soft warmth. Bette held her firmly, rocked them in the womb of water, hummed a song somehow dimly remembered.

Later they lay in the night, pressed together against the chill, wrapped in steam and possibility.

Far across the dry lake, the seraphic figure of a young man stood watch.

## Part II

### Chapter Thirty-One

It was almost airtime for The Old Time Salvation Hour. Neat rows of folding chairs quickly filled with the saved, and soon to be saved. The choir was in place behind Brother Jim. He had just managed to catch his organ player before she'd become too immersed in happy hour at The Boilermaker.

He was wearing his new suit of clothes and the fineness of it filled him with pride. He'd paid a month's commissions from his day job selling wholesale cigarettes for the white silk suit and crimson bow tie. He'd searched for weeks for the white buck shoes, now freshly polished and roughed up with the copper wire brush. He glanced down at his black pearl cufflinks and Rolex, both fake.

His first job had been selling used cars, then Kirby vacuum cleaners, encyclopedias and Bible storybooks, all door to door in the countryside around Lynchburg, Virginia. It was there he had come under the spell of the Reverend Jerry Falwell, dean of America's media savvy preachers. The first time he saw the master at work, he knew his destiny. Jim began preaching up and down the Blue Ridge at every pulpit open to him. There were many since so many small rural churches had to make do with sharing their preacher among several congregations, hearing a sermon only once or twice a month. Some Sundays the silver hardly covered the bottom of the collection plate, so he kept his day job,

but his sales experience had taught him how to hold a reluctant audience until he could move in for the sale. All he needed was an audience with money.

He soon gained a following for his hard-driving, vitriolic damnation of sinners, which included almost everybody but struggling mountain farmers and their wives. They seemed to respond most to hearing of the ultimate descent into Hell of liberals and homosexuals. Jim knew what his people wanted to hear, and he gave it to them with bulging neck and sweating brow. He noticed how women responded to the way the fat tenor on television dabbed at his forehead with a white hankie and gestured with it expansively as he sang. Now Jim didn't cotton much to opera, but he knew a superstar when he saw one. He got a video of Pavarotti, memorized the gestures and began to include them in his sermons. He expansively wiped his brow, glowing with God's anger.

His theatrical style soon made him a popular guest preacher at the many summer tent revivals throughout the Blue Ridge. On warm summer nights some farmer's field would fill with pickups and faded cars, picnics were spread on the hay stubble, children played around the tent guy lines in the lowering sun. When cicadas sang in the trees and the humid night air began to cool, the faithful wandered into the tent to fill the folding chairs, to hear the message of truth, to be entertained. First there were the hymns and testimonials; the women sang clear and loud, and the men proudly bore witness to the depravity of their lives before Jesus saved them from a life of sin.

Through deft choice of hymn and passionate prayer, Brother Jim cajoled his congregation to a fever pitch of faith, prepared them for his sermon. He bellowed the commandments of the Almighty to starry heavens, dew drenched meadow cricket, woodlot owl, to coon dogs moaning across night ridges. He invoked the presence of the Holy Ghost, under tent and in hearts. His powerful delivery drove men to speak in tongues unknown and release emotion long

repressed. Women fainted and lay moaning on the worn grass. Others reverently covered the fallen's knees with modesty towels.

On these magic nights, Brother Jim could feel the Power of the Lord coursing through him and knew that greater things in Jesus lay ahead for him. His hunger grew.

Regardless of his closeness to the Divine, Brother Jim had feet of clay. It was when he decided not to let all that passion he stirred in his female followers go to waste, that he ended up in Portland, Oregon, a continent away. The sixteen year old from Eggleston in Giles County began showing around early November. At first she claimed immaculate conception, but soon admitted that Brother Jim had ably assisted the Lord. By the time her father had gathered the clan for an old-fashioned tar and feathering, Jim was on his way to a new calling, saving the Pacific Northwest heathens for the Glory of God.

He looked at the hall, nearly full now, then at his watch. Time to give vent to God's power and anger for his growing congregation, and the good folks out in radio land. He expected some folding money in the collection plate, and a passel of fives and tens in the mail come Tuesday. The subject of his sermon would be one of his old standards, rewritten and choreographed for his new attempt at glory in the Lord, "Abominations Right Here In River City." He had plenty of examples all around him in Old Town: the legendary Darcelle XI, the drag queen who drew even the suburbanites into his all boy/girl revue and sent them away in tears of laughter; the horrors of drink witnessed daily, and laid at the doorstep of secular humanism; the teen hookers, runaway pot heads, and the mumbling, cursing outcast paranoid schizophrenics of an overburdened mental health system. Social failure was all around him, and Brother Jim was adept at using it to further the work of the Lord.

He nodded to the organist and she played the opening chords of his theme hymn, Onward Christian Soldiers. He saw the hall full of adoring faces, all eyes on him. Thank you Jesus, he thought, looking over the assembled. He caressed his leather bound bible. Thank you Jesus.

Then Jim saw him, through his storefront-church door, a vision from Revelations. Shock and fear quickly gave way to dismissal. Of course not, he thought. Some crazy.

It was a slim young man; his woolly hair was white, his skin pale pink, his beard gold. His eyes were the red of burning coals on a cold night. He wore a white robe that fell to his bronze shoes. A glittering gold sash crossed his chest; on it was embroidered a sword. Seven gold stars were pasted to the palm of his right hand. His staff was topped with seven votive candles dripping over his hand and onto the sidewalk. He walked slowly and his voice was like the sound of falling water, but few heard. "Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid."

Few noticed him, and those who did dismissed him as just another street nut. No one listened to his words of encouragement as they filed past him into the hall for Brother Jim's Old Time Religion Hour.

They came from all over Northwest Oregon and Southwest Washington, drawn from the less sensational messages of their own pastors, to hear Brother Jim. He gave vent to their fears of people not like them, people with deviations from the norm that both drew and disgusted them. They needed the protection of the Lord from worldly horrors. Brother Jim's weekly tirade against sin stirred them to further vigilance, further rumination on the evil place their world had become.

They came to hear about the lives of sinners; the drinkers and addicts, the fornicators, the gamblers, the criminally insane, the sexual deviants, the homosexual men and women. It was this possibility of men loving men and

women loving women that angered and drew them most. This deviation from God's master plan for the sexes was the most dangerous weapon Satan had yet brought to bear in the war between good and evil. Certainly this lifestyle was so attractive as to lure their young people away from the straight and narrow than any other.

One of the most devoted followers of Brother Jim's bitter tongue was Tig Johansen from rural Wahkiakum County in Southwest Washington. He was a salmon fisherman who was losing his livelihood to federal government restrictions on Columbia River salmon. He blamed environmentalists and liberals in general for his declining fortunes. He became a listener to AM talk radio and his devotion to it fed his anger over the years to the point of alienating his less political friends. No one knew what to make of his vitriolic parroting of whatever his favorite talk radio shock-jock was flogging. He was also letting himself go downhill, drinking, sitting in his easy chair eating snacks, his white underwear shirt riding up over his belly, watching cable news until night came when his favorite shock-jocks were on the radio.

Tig's wife, Joanne was long suffering in the manner of most rural housewives, but she finally had enough of his anger, sometimes aimed at her, and left him, taking their small daughter, Sofie. Having no income of her own she went to live with a divorced woman friend while she found a job and got on her feet. She stayed with Lilly after finding a job at a truckstop on Interstate 5.

Tig didn't think much of it until he was listening to Brother Jim one night, hunched over the kitchen table, five beers into a six-pack and two bags of chips down. Brother Jim was ranting on the evils of lesbians. Jim hinted that any two women choosing to live without a man could be assumed to be lesbians. He was particularly eloquent on the damage that could be done to any children allowed to live in a two-woman household. As he listened he became convinced that

Joanne and Lilly were living in lesbian sin and his daughter Sofie was in danger. He stormed over to their house in a drunken rage, accused and threatened them and terrified Sofie.

The Sheriff's deputy who responded was an acquaintance from his favorite beer joint, or he would have been sobering up in the county jail. He took Tig home and commiserated with him about losing his wife to a woman. Tig's mortification and anger seethed in the squalor of what once was a happy home, and he slid deeper into depression.

Tig had never seen reason to attend church, but now his hatred found justification in Brother Jim's ministry, and he never missed a meeting. He was Jim's most reliable amen corner when the abomination talk got hot.



## Chapter Thirty-Two

Magnolia Parks, Buster's spinster sister, lived in a condominium development. Not many years after her brother died and Wanda left, she discovered she could no longer negotiate the winding narrow streets of the old-money west hills neighborhood in her 1958 Cadillac town car. She hired one of Buster's friends, Churchill to drive for her. She called him "My lovely black man," and he became her best friend. When he died suddenly of a stroke, she sold her mansion and Cadillac and moved to an upscale high-rise condo in the Pearl District. She was on an upper floor where she could watch over the Willamette, the Steel Bridge where Buster had burned and sunk, and wait on the end.

The Parks family connections, and money, got her the best condo in the development and she loved how convenient it was to downtown. After a mild stroke limited her mobility, she had taken to driving her battery driven cart to the Greyhound station where she could people watch. Often she wandered through Old Town where she would sometimes meet a down-and-outer who remembered Buster, and thanked her for his friendship and generosity.

If only she had known how important her brother was to these people, perhaps she could have helped. Like Buster, she had felt the burden of wealth throughout her life, had felt the need to somehow share her good fortune with others. But unlike Buster, she had not been able to bring herself to spend time with people so different from her circle. Instead she had supported the arts, and often graced the society pages of the Oregonian. She rubbed elbows with the elite, while Buster hung with the homeless in Old Town. It was only at Buster and Wanda's wedding that she had the opportunity to see Portland's

dispossessed up close and come to see them, if not like her, at least as part of the Human Race.

Now that she lived so close to Old Town, she often drove her cart there to be near to the people Buster had loved so much. On one of these forays, she ran into Coyote. They reminisced about Buster and Wanda's wedding day when he'd hit her with a water balloon and she'd retaliated. They had a good laugh about that, but both teared up when they talked about losing Churchill, best friend to both of them. She asked him if he'd consider taking over for Churchill. He agreed, so long as he could take part in the pow wow circuit each summer. Not only had she agreed to the stipulation, but for years Magnolia traveled the summer pow wow circuit with Coyote, where he was a much sought after heartbeat drum player. She loved the powerful feeling of sitting near his large drum and hearing the beautiful singing that went with the dancers whirling and stomping in the center. Such life! It made her feel young again.

Coyote always managed to get them accommodations in somebody's teepee where they slept on an air mattress. After her first summer of pow wows, she became accepted into the community. She was adopted by several "granddaughters" who sewed native style clothing for her. She began wearing feathers in her silver hair and going barefoot on her cart. The sight of her new Mercedes, with electric cart rack on the back, parked next to a teepee in some remote part of the Intermountain West, became common. Magnolia scooted around on the grass and dirt in her cart, giving kids rides, delivering oil and flour to the fry bread concession, or rounding up dancers operating on Indian time, late for their contest. Indians have always respected their elders, and Magnolia came to hold the same high status as any old Indian woman.

Magnolia's place was in the arts district, where she could indulge her penchant for fine works of contemporary art and French antiques; a blend that worked for her. Her favorite restaurants were close, and her weekly visit to Powell's City of Books was a few blocks away. She was convinced she lived in paradise. There were busses, a streetcar and the Max light rail nearby, so she could quickly be anywhere in central Portland, the airport, the many parks or the zoo. She reveled in city life now, though her increasing personal isolation made it less satisfying at times. Ever since the fight with her sisters over the disposition of the assets Buster had left Wanda, they had been distant, cool. Not that she missed the shallowness of their lives, but still, family is family, and she missed the contact, particularly with her nieces and nephews and now several grand-nieces and grand-nephews.

The months of dark days and rain beginning in November often left her sad and lonely until Coyote came. Much as she loved Coyote, and his sense of humor, she often wished for the companionship of women; most of her interest in art, furniture and gourmet cooking was lost on him. But that was all about to change. Wanda was coming, with her friend Bette, and she had new purpose.

She missed Buster terribly, wished he was alive to share her thoughts; perhaps she could be helping him with his work, instead of slowly fading away in her apartment. She wasn't invited to as many teas and galas as before. She suspected her electric cart wasn't appreciated, and Coyote, who often escorted her, raised a few eyebrows. Perhaps it was just because she was getting old.

She still gave money regularly, and they sent her cards of thanks, and even flowers if the check was substantial, but she knew she was being taken for granted, or rather her money was being taken for granted, and it hurt more than a little.

Wanda's call had revived Magnolia, and she had counted every day until Wanda and Bette's scheduled arrival. The day she discovered Wanda was alive, and needed her, was the happiest she had been for years; since Churchill died and broke her heart.

Wanda called from Multnomah Falls where she had stopped to renew an old friendship with the spectacular cataract, one of her favorite places in the world. She and Bette slept in Froggie in the parking area, had their usual bacon and eggs before Wanda called Magnolia from a pay phone. Wanda said she would push Bette for a close look at the falls and then they would drive into town. Wanda wondered about parking.

"You mustn't worry about that, Wanda. One of the properties Buster left you is a vacant block near the Greyhound station. It has been leased as a parking lot since Buster died. I'll call the manager and tell him the current owner will be parking there for the foreseeable future."

"I own a parking lot?" said Wanda.

"Not a very big one, I'm afraid," said Magnolia, "but it is in a prime location and is quite valuable. The developers have been clamoring for it, but I thought it best you should decide the matter."

"Oh," said Wanda, turning to shrug at Bette.

Magnolia gave directions to the lot and her condo. "We'll have Devonshire Tea this afternoon and I'll make dinner for you tonight."

"Devonsir what?"

"Devonshire Tea!" laughed Magnolia. "Do you enjoy sweets?"

"I know Bette'll eat anything with sugar in it, and I been known to eat a cream horn sometimes."

“Well you will certainly enjoy a Devonshire Tea! Oh, and about dinner. Do either of you have any special dietary needs? I’m sure I can accommodate most any requirement.”

Wanda laughed. “No ma’am. We eat just about anything that’s not nailed down.” She looked at Bette for confirmation. “Oh, there is one thing. We been eating lots of canned beans lately, and if you could leave off the beans, that sure would be nice.”

“Beans! Oh my.” Magnolia laughed and then composed herself. “Yes, Wanda, I can certainly make something without using tinned beans.”

“Thank you Magnolia. We’ll be there in a few hours. I got something to show Bette before we come to your place.”

“Very well. You take care. You can’t know how I look forward to seeing you after all these years.”

## Chapter Thirty-Three

Wanda pushed Bette along the sidewalk overlooking the Willamette River in the riverside park named for a former governor, Tom McCall. Everything was new. When she'd first come to Portland, Tom McCall was telling Californians to come visit Oregon, but reminding them not to forget to go back home. Of course that had attracted national attention, and had the opposite effect. Folks from crowded California, and all over, figured Oregon must be a wonderful place to live if Oregonians wished so fervently to keep it to themselves. The population of rainy Portland had skyrocketed since Wanda left, and she didn't recognize it anymore.

"I'm sure it's around here somewhere, Bette," Wanda pushed hard to get the wheelchair over a crack in the sidewalk. She wanted to show Bette where Buster's wake had been held. She needed help explaining why she had left Portland in such a hurry, and why she was putting off their meeting with Magnolia Parks. On the freshly mowed grass nearby, homeless men lay in the spring sunshine watching the world go by, waiting for nothing in particular.

Saturday Market bustled with yuppies buying falafels and pottery from aging hippies. World music blared at the shoppers and eaters. Everyone was in a good mood. Portland was happy, self-satisfied, basking in the first sunny Saturday of spring. The long, wet winter was over. The clouds had departed, the mist gone away and all was well again. Even the homeless men sometimes smiled.

Wanda pushed Bette north until she saw something she recognized. "There it is," she said softly. "That's where it happened."

Bette looked across the river, heavy with spring runoff, to where Wanda pointed.

"Over there under that big old cloverleaf, was where we had Buster's wake."

"Wake?" asked Bette.

"I never told you about that yet." Wanda looked at Bette's upturned face.

"Told me what?"

"Buster's wake."

She looked at Wanda, puzzled.

"This one didn't turn out so good." Wanda locked the brake on Bette's chair, leaned against the floodwall, and told the story of Buster's wake; the drunken party, the heartfelt testimonials to Buster's love and charity by the poor of Portland, and finally the fiery train wreck and Buster's casket burning in the river.

Bette looked up at the dark steel girders just as the Max Blue Line train passed quietly over the river. She turned her gaze to the powerful Willamette surging through the blue flickering shadow cast by the train.

"Right here," said Wanda. "Under this very bridge, down there in the river."

"Why run away?" asked Bette, reaching for Wanda's hand.

Wanda squeezed Bette's hand in return, sighed through a weak smile. "I was so ashamed of what I allowed to happen that I never could have faced his family again. I mean, the tevee people was there, and the cops, and the fireboats was on the river... The fire like to never went out and they was afraid for the city for awhile. It looked like the second coming to some people, or the end of time big war, whatever. It was just about the biggest thing to happen in Portland for years, Portland not being a very exciting city back then. So I just run away, back to Fields, where I met you."

Bette looked up at Wanda and shook her head from side to side and smiled her crooked little smile. She still drooled just a bit. "I still can't remember... meet you... anything else for that day." Wanda wiped the drool from the corner of Bette's mouth with her thumb. "I wish I would."

"Doc said some things will come back, and other things won't. Don't you worry yourself about it."

"I remember from time before. Bad things. Bad people." She looked to Wanda. "Whore. I was a whore." She looked away to the river, eyes filling.

"Jaimiee, that detective that was a working on the kidnapping, she told me about that," said Wanda. She caressed Bette's arm where it lay on the wheelchair. "You don't worry about that. That was then. It's all over now. You got a brand new life, and we're a going to get you all fixed up."

"Why you help me?" She struggled to focus on Wanda's face.

"I don't rightly know. I just knew that I had to help out when you needed help. Maybe it was because Buster died so quick like. I didn't get a chance to say good-bye. I wish I would of had him around to take care of. But I didn't, and that was that." Wanda looked across the river. "Well, any-old-way, when you come along I just figured you was the one sent for me to take care of, so that's what I'm doing."

Wanda turned to light the Marlboro she'd been holding and looked at her fingers. "I don't like to get weird on you or nothing, but with having you around, it sometimes almost seems like Buster is back with me." She grinned. "I don't mean that you are Buster, or that he took over your body or nothing wacky like that. I just sort of feel more at peace than ever since he was gone. Like I got something more to do than cook for cowboys and smoke cigarettes and look out at the empty desert."

Bette grinned. "You call me Buster."



That sent Wanda into one of her laughing, coughing fits. Bette joined in as Wanda turned the wheelchair from the river and pushed out into the sunshine. "Let's go meet Magnolia, and Coyote too. You'll love him. Funniest man I ever knew."

## Chapter Thirty-Four

The beating Ben received his first night in Portland had almost killed him. At the hospital they wrapped his ribs and disinfected the scratches and abrasions. Three teeth were missing and a fourth was broken. They had to keep him several days to make sure the cracked eye socket would mend. There was nothing to be done for the eye, or so they told him, and they didn't do tests for brain damage.

He was sent to the social worker, went away with several pamphlets about local social services and was told to check in with the community services center on NW Glisan Street. Some kind soul at the hospital had found three twenties deep in his pocket and decided not to tell the bean counters about it, so he'd have a little something.

Out on the street, his ribs were painful and getting around with one eye proved difficult, particularly with the bad leg from the pit mine explosion. He hurt everywhere.

He crutched his way back to the Jack London Hotel to find Cliff and get his identification card. It was ready and looked good. It had his picture, with two working eyes. He was now Ben Tierney. So, he thought, a new name, a new me. Hah.

Once he finished the few codeine tablets they gave him at the hospital, he went in search of something to kill the pain. He was not the first, nor the last to tramp this way. They didn't call it skid road for nothing.

Over the next month he learned one painful lesson after another, until he knew the ropes, knew how to get around without too much trouble, knew where to get a meal and a place to sleep inside when it rained, learned how to beg well

enough for his nightly bottle of fortified. He got accustomed to being invisible to the people who gave him a quarter, or rarely a dollar, down on the transit mall. The crutch was a big help. He tried to take a shower at one of the missions every week, and took advantage of the used clothes they laid out. He noticed that a suit, no matter how ill fitting or worn, and a tie, no matter how outdated, seemed to get more out of the businessmen. They still didn't see him, but perhaps they saw themselves – there but for the grace of God, and a healthy sense of greed, go I.

His ribs healed. The leg healed some, but he still needed the cane he found in a second hand shop. His eye slowly clouded over. It began to look like an eye sculpted out of wax and slowly drifted to the right. He always appeared to be looking in two directions at once; over his shoulder with one eye, straight ahead with the other. A social worker offered him a patch, but he decided the blind eye was too good a begging tool to give up, and the price he'd paid for it too high.

One day as he rested with some of the other homeless men, he found himself following two women with his good eye. One was pushing the other in a wheelchair along the Willamette. Through a rheumy veil, for just a moment, he thought he could recognize the one in the wheelchair.

No, it couldn't be.

By the floodwall, close to Ben, stood a man with wild white hair and a white suit, finishing what had been a very large cigar. Beside him leaned a beautiful young man, dressed in white slacks, shoes and shirt; his hair was white and his beard gold. Ben thought he recognized him; the young man seemed to know his thoughts and turned his gentle eyes on him. Ben's mind went blank.

Both men glowed with the intensity of their raiment. The young man followed the two women with a beatific smile. The older man looked at Ben,

nodded and touched the brim of his hat. He turned, flicked his cigar butt into the river, watched it sputter out, swirl in umber roil, and sink under the Steel Bridge.

The two men walked north along the river, following the women at a distance, talking quietly.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

Magnolia and Bette hit it off right away, and having Wanda back was almost like having Buster back again. Wanda was family, and now Bette too.

She showed them how to get around Portland using the Max and the Northwest Trolley that would take them right to Good Samaritan Hospital and most of the other medical facilities Bette would need.

Wanda began making telephone calls about Bette's rehabilitation. The first thing was to make an appointment with a brain surgeon at Good Samaritan Hospital to evaluate Bette's original surgery. The scheduling office referred her to the Brain Injury Association of Oregon who promised to have the Portland chapter call her to help her coordinate Bette's rehabilitation.

At their suggestion, Wanda went to see Louise at the Oregon Brain Injury Resource Network; their mission is to aid the brain injured, and their families, in finding the information and resources they need.

"We're here to take the confusion out of the task of rehabilitation for TBI individuals," said Louise.

"Whoa," said Wanda. "Slow down now. If that's your job, then you got yourself a project here. All these strings of letters has got me real confused. It's all Greek to me."

"Okay," said Louise, she chewed on her glasses, dropped them on her desk and entwined her fingers. "We'll start with TBI. You'll be hearing that a lot. It is short for Traumatic Brain Injury. It's what Bette has."

"You mean TIBI," said Wanda.

"What?"

"Tire Iron Brain Injury. That's how she got her TBI, with a tire iron, you know, from a car."

"Oh. Violence."

"Yeah. I saw it. And I won't never forget it neither."

"Well," said Louise. "BISG, Brain Injury Support Group, can help you both then. They're people just like you and Bette, survivors of TBI and their caregivers. They've been where you've been, and where you are going. They understand."

"I can use all of that I can get."

Wanda was exhausted when she returned to Magnolia, and worried. After Bette went to sleep, she confided in Magnolia. "All this stuff just scares the crap out of me, Magnolia. I'm just a not-so-young-anymore girl from the high desert, and this is all over my head. And I got no idea how much it'll cost."

"Well, I don't know if I can help you with all the acronyms and the bureaucracy but I can help allay your fears about the financial end of the matter. Tomorrow we'll go visit with Sir Richard, the attorney I chose for the trust Buster left you."

"Sir Richard? That his name?"

"No, in truth it is Richard Vincent Forcier IV, but I've called him Sir Richard since he was a child, the son of our family attorney, gone now for nearly twenty years."

Wanda didn't want to leave Bette alone, but she seemed happy watching the boats on the Willamette River, and looking at snow-covered Mount Hood's spring brilliance. She was also having some success reading the newspaper. Periodically she would look down at the comics, furrow her brow, move her lips and then break into laughter.

Sir Richard's office was downtown. Coyote could have taken them, but Magnolia hated to use the Mercedes for such a short trip. She drove her cart expertly across the crosswalks and down sidewalks the dozen or so blocks into downtown with Wanda at her side.

The office was in one of the old stone buildings, cowering under the glass and chrome, sky-eclipsing boxes, that made up the new Portland skyline. The elevator was slow and made creaking noises under the weight of Magnolia's cart.

Sir Richard met them at the door with a soft smile and a gentle handshake for them both. "Welcome to my humble office ladies." He nodded to Magnolia, "Good to see you looking well Magnolia; a pleasure as always," and turning to Wanda, "and I admit I nearly gave up on ever meeting you, Wanda. Twenty years of managing your affairs appeared to me at times to be an exercise in futility, but I endeavored to do right by you with prudent investment."

"Well I reckon you wouldn't have ever seen me if it hadn't been for what happened to my friend Bette, but I sure appreciate your help."

Sir Richard seated himself behind a large desk, badly in need of varnish, backed by ten-foot windows with a peek-a-boo view of the Willamette River, distant Cascade Mountains and a pale blue sky. He was an imposing man in his mid fifties, portly in a solid looking way, with a glowing complexion that bespoke of health and a certain level of fitness. Magnolia had told Wanda that Sir Richard rode his bicycle in the Seattle to Portland mass event, covering 200 miles in two days. It made her lungs hurt just to think about it.

After a few minutes of getting-to-know-you talk that had Sir Richard shaking his head over her circumstances during the past 20 years, they turned to the state of Wanda's trust.

"Wanda, Buster's estate, after leaving a moderate amount to each of his nieces and nephews for their education, left the balance to you, his wife."

Wanda folded herself into the large red leather chair, hugged her knees, and began to cry. Her loss came back to her. Sir Richard left his chair, brought her a box of tissues and laid his large hand on her shoulder. Magnolia held her hand. No one spoke. Dust floated on sunbeams against the dark wood of the aging office. Soft metallic clicking sounds from a passing Max train took her back to that night on the dank sandy riverbank when he left her world forever, consumed by fire.

"All I ever wanted was Buster," she said, looking up to Sir Richard with red eyes, wet clot of tissue clutched in her hand. "I never wanted any of his money then, and I don't feel right about it now."

"It was all he had to leave you, Wanda. You would dishonor his memory if you were not to make use of it now that you have the need," said Sir Richard.

Wanda looked up at him, and blew her nose. "That's what my friend, Linda said down in Winnemucca." She turned to the window and shook her head, looking far away, into the future, Bette's future, and her future.

"Okay," she said with resolve, "I'll take what he left for me to help Bette. He would want that. And then I'm going to give the rest of it away, just like he was always doing."

Magnolia smiled at Wanda, and then grinned at Sir Richard, "Told you so."

He grimaced, "I owe you a Blazers game. You were right."

"What are you two a talking about?" Wanda smiled weakly.

"I bet Sir Richard that you would want to give away Buster's money rather than keep it for yourself. I just won tickets to a professional basketball game!"



Richard looked at Wanda, "Maybe you'll change your mind when you learn the details of your finances," he said. "Let's proceed."

Five minutes later Wanda sat stunned and silent. It's not every day a woman learns she's worth several million dollars.

"Me and Bette can live on twenty thousand a year easy, and her medical stuff won't cost more than that much again if she don't need that surgery. That's forty thousand."

"Your investments earn considerably more than that each and every month, Wanda," said Sir Richard, with a lift in his chest, a squaring of the shoulders and not a little hint of pride in his voice.

"Oh my goodness! How am I a going to give away that much money every month?"

"You will find a way, Wanda, you will find a way," said Magnolia.

Wanda thought a minute and then looked at Magnolia with resolute eyes. "I'll do it just the way Buster did. He had a good way with that. He always found a way for the one he gave money to pay it back by doing something for somebody else what needed help. It'll just take a little figuring."

"But your first priority should be to get Bette's health back in order and get a proper living situation for the two of you," said Magnolia with a gentle smile and a touch of her hand. "I love having you live with me, and I will miss you dearly when you are gone, but you two need a home of your own." They looked into each other's eyes for a long time, saying things they would speak of at length later.

"Well," said Sir Richard, feeling a bit left out of the women's communication, "I don't know where you want to live, but the trust has properties you might want to consider if you want to live close in.

"We'll need to be able to get to Good Samaritan and around to all the

doctors and therapists,” she looked at Magnolia, “and we’d want to be close to Magnolia.”

“That would please me very much!”

“Well, I’ve got a place you might find intriguing,” said Sir Richard. “It’s an old warehouse building on NW Fifth. Beautiful Victorian architecture, brick with tall windows and high ceilings like this building,” he waved his arm at his office, “and it has a freight elevator, basement to third floor, and a loading dock.”

“Four floors and an elevator! What would we do with all that space?”

“Wanda, if you are going to start a major charity in this city you will need space for management and operations infrastructure, and it should be close to the people who need it. This property is on the edge of Old Town, where many of the homeless are located,” said Magnolia.

“Management and operations infrastructure? What the hell is that? It can’t be that hard to give money away,” said Wanda.

Magnolia and Sir Richard looked at each other with a knowing look.

“Let’s not scare her Richard. Perhaps this is enough for one day.”

Wanda looked overwhelmed. “That’s a good idea! I’m about worn out from thinking. But maybe we could go look at this place one of these days. I been sleeping in a broom closet for twenty years. A big place with room for plants and lots of couches for people to sit on and a nice big kitchen, with a dishwasher,” she grinned, “would be just the ticket.”

“I like your thinking Wanda,” laughed Magnolia.

“I’ve done washed enough dishes at the Roadkill to do anybody a lifetime. But won’t a place that big be expensive?”

“You own it,” said Sir Richard. “It is a bit too close to Old Town for the comfort of the art galleries and home decorating showrooms; I haven’t been able

to find a suitable tenant for nearly a year. I suggest we meet there tomorrow and let you decide."

## Chapter Thirty-Six

Bette and Wanda loved the open spaces and high ceilings of the old brick warehouse. On the main floor they decided to strip down to bare brick walls on two sides, and add insulation and wallboard on the other two. In the center, they installed a small wood stove to gather around, and stave off the Northwest dampness. The rough sawed Douglas fir floors were painted gray. For a bit of warmth and color, Magnolia donated several oriental rugs she'd saved from her mansion. The main floor would be their home, with an eye to future expansion for the foundation offices on the upper floors.

For the construction of the interior spaces of their new home, Wanda had insisted on hiring people from Old Town, rather than letting out contracts to professionals. Wanda remembered Clawhammer, and was delighted to see him still going strong at age 70, and still on the wagon, mostly. He managed to pull together a motley crew of homeless men, and one woman, who claimed to have been in residential construction before falling on hard times. Sometimes it appeared as if there was more partying and supervising going on than work being accomplished, but what they lacked in professionalism they made up for in creativity. They dumpster dove for discarded lighting fixtures, snatched broken pallets for wood, and foam packing material for insulation.

Wanda was adamant about keeping the floor plan open, except for the large bathroom. Their bedroom would be a loft overlooking the seating/ dining area and a large, restaurant quality kitchen. There would be two other semi-private bedrooms and a large room for board meetings and envelope stuffing. The consensus was that the final decor should be practical and robust since all

envisioned it as a gathering place for the people involved in the foundation, and a party space, of course.

When the decidedly creative, don't-ask don't-tell, wiring and plumbing was finished, they went looking for furniture on trash day in the West Hills. Wanda wouldn't hear of buying new, when so much good, barely-used stuff, was to be found sitting curbside in the wealthy parts of town. They used Clawhammer's classic old Chevy truck, the same one that carried Buster's casket and flowers down Burnside and across the river to his wake. It was hard on Wanda at first, but she cheered to the memory of the parade of street people showing up by word of mouth, in the middle of the night, to pay their respects to her Buster.

One positive consequence of hiring from Old Town was that word got out about the two women who seemed to be planning something for the community. There were still some alive who remembered Buster and his creative charity. Others sneered at such ideas, long habituated to getting their meals and clothes from the missions, even if it did require listening to sermons and singing hymns, pretending to be contrite for their many sins.

The ones who had been helped by Buster remembered the part where they repaid the debt by helping someone else. For some the act of giving had offered purpose, if sometimes short-lived, to a life that was little more than the quest for the next high.

Rumors of the foundation wafted through the community of downtrodden like honeysuckle breath, fleeting, insubstantial, filled with a subtle sense of not-to-be-believed hope. Glass half-full, glass half-empty debates held sway over fishbowls of cheap beer. Could something good come of this, as yet undisclosed, unnamed new thing about which little was known? Optimism is the bane of rational men, said some. Pessimism is the death of the social order,

said others. All got drunk, as usual, but at least pondered the meaning of the unknown for a change.

One who paid attention to the rumors was Brother Jim, whose well-honed sense of survival detected at first a competitive threat, and then the opportunity he'd been waiting for. He was overjoyed to learn, after the bribe of a bottle of Thunderbird, that there was only one bed for the two women. Of course he knew exactly what that meant. He would wait for the right moment to expose the abomination of their ways. He could save the community from the spread of sin by the two women. This would be his breakthrough. He had already learned how fear could motivate country people in rural Virginia, and working people around Portland, to part with their hard earned cash to support his ministry of finger pointing at sinners.

These two women were his ticket to the big time. He would paint them as lesbians, hiding behind the cape of charity, intent on using their purchased popularity to force the homosexual agenda on the children of his ministry. With his fiery rhetoric, they could be made into the Devil incarnate, even the Anti-Christ, come to signal the last days of mankind. So far his radio audience had been willing to accept any spin he put on current affairs. He was confident he could mold the Bible to fit this opportunity.

Thank you Jesus. Thank you Jesus.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

Bette and Wanda were received enthusiastically at their first Brain Injury Support Group meeting. The other traumatic brain injury victims, their friends and caregivers were happy to offer advice and answer questions about Bette's rehabilitation.

The volunteer leader explained how traumatic head injury is as varied as it is frustrating. Someone with no physical damage to the skull might never recover from the behavioral anomalies that appeared after an innocuous bump to the head. Another person could have, like Bette, severe trauma and brain swelling leading to serious motor skill, language and behavioral problems; but with intensive therapy could possibly have a nearly full recovery.

The discussion drifted to the issue of caregiver burnout, and the frustrations inherent in the rehabilitation process. The road ahead would sometimes seem long and lonely, but the rewards would come with patience, and love.

In the social hour after the meeting, a slim elegant woman with wavy chestnut hair introduced herself. "I am Sonia Rosenberg, caregiver to my son Irvin," she nodded to a young man in a wheelchair. "He was injured in the 9-11 attacks on the World Trade Center."

Wanda sucked in her breath, "That was such an awful thing. How'd he get out alive?"

"He was an investment broker working in the lower floors of the first tower to fall, and made it outside just as the collapse occurred. He was buried for several hours. Irvin is making slow progress, but it has become a life long

commitment. His father was not up to the task and we divorced. Irvin and I came to Good Sam for rehab, and fell in love with Portland."

"Looks like we hit it lucky, coming here." She looked down at Bette. "We can't wait to get started on the rehab stuff, can we?" Bette smiled her still slightly crooked smile.

As Sonia began to push Irvin's chair, she beamed, "Call me. Anytime. We're all in this together."

Bette was cleared by the brain surgeon at Good Sam, and began regular appointments with a physical therapist and a speech therapist. She also got instruction on how to get around by herself in her wheelchair from an occupational therapist. He suggested that she continue to use a manual model to keep up her strength for the hoped-for day when she would make an attempt at walking. Sooner than anyone expected, she was gripping the handrails and grunting her way down the practice track and by the second month was using a walker. Her speech responded to the therapy. She and Wanda could finally communicate; now it was Bette's turn to talk.

Bette's memory began to improve in fits and starts. Many of the revelations of her past life were painful. "My mother. She stop give me food when I was girl. Told me to go around to carnies and offer to do it, and bring money back. If I want to eat." She looked at Wanda, pained brows, tears gathering. "And I did it Wanda, I did it, and I kept on even after I ran away."

Wanda held her and patted her back. "You're a good person Bette. It's not your fault you had a bad upbringing. All of that stuff is over now."

Bette looked at Wanda, doubtful.

"It'll just take a little time, that's all. Me and you, Bette, we'll do it together?"



Meanwhile, Wanda was busy getting acquainted with everyone in Old Town. She and Clawhammer made the rounds of the missions and bars, finding people who remembered Buster. She was able to find a few recipients of Buster's charity still alive. Cactus was dead, and Carl too, his pain finally ended. Coyote, B-Cup and D-Cup were still around and glad to see her back in town. Their reminiscences of Buster, and his wake, brought bittersweet memories. They had all heard the rumors of Wanda's sudden return to Portland with Bette, and that she was planning to begin some sort of charity.

She asked them how she could use Buster's money to help their friends. She made it clear that she wasn't going to dole out money indiscriminately; she knew too well that could do more harm than good when addiction was involved, as it so often was. They agreed that Buster's original formula was the way to go, since it had worked wonders in the past.

D-Cup was several sizes larger, had severe diabetes, circulation and heart problems, and had to use a walker though she was only 42. She offered her help as a bookkeeper, a job she'd held before falling off the wagon. She was a regular at most of the bars, and a favorite among the men for her soft motherly hugs when times were rough.

B-Cup had a better time of it. Not long after the wake, she decided to dry out for good and started attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. There she met an insurance broker who had almost lost his business to drink. A romance developed, they married and helped each other stay on the wagon. Twenty years of success in the insurance business and they were firmly ensconced in privileged Lake Oswego. They lived on a golf course lined with huge oaks, in an oversized version of a French provincial house and drove matching BMWs. They appreciated their good fortune and in early middle age, adopted two children

from Korea. The children attended public schools and all were active in their church.

B-Cup had a name, Kathy Jones, and preferred not to be called B-Cup anymore. But despite her new station in life, she hadn't forgotten her friends in Old Town, and was sufficiently in touch to become involved.

Kathy was part of a women's prayer group, and felt she could get her prayer partners involved in helping foundation recipients fulfill their pass-it-on obligations.

Kathy thought it might be a good thing for her privileged friends to have the opportunity to meet the less fortunate in Portland. She had shared her past with them and received their genuine support and understanding. Of course it is easy to understand the past of someone wearing the same tailored clothes, driving the same leather scented car as yourself, she thought, but she wondered if they would have been so helpful had she shown up at prayer meeting still smelling of beer and puke from a long hard night in Old Town. She didn't want to judge her friends, or to test them, but to help them to another level in their spiritual understanding of the Jesus they worshiped. Jesus hung out with those in greatest need and with the greatest weaknesses, taught by example, and gave them hope. She believed her friends deserved an opportunity to truly follow His teachings. At least they wouldn't have to worry about crucifixion; or so she thought.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

Sir Richard registered the foundation. It was simply named, Pass-It-On by acclimation of the board of directors: Wanda, Bette, Magnolia, D-cup, Kathy Jones, Sir Richard and Sonia Rosenberg.

Wanda was paid a stipend, just enough for she and Bette to live on. Magnolia announced that she would donate an amount equal to the monthly operating expenses of the foundation, so the entire earnings of the investments would be available for charity. Sonia had become a good friend, and a great help to Wanda and Bette; her Brandeis sophistication and New York connections would be invaluable in seeking further funding as needed. Kathy would manage the volunteers and D-cup would be the liaison with the needy.

Wanda didn't want to provide anyone with a living, believing that a little work never hurt anybody, and that having a commitment, a purpose, would help moderate addictive behavior. But she didn't want anybody to go without needed health care no matter how much they abused themselves.

Kathy and a few of her prayer group agreed to be case workers, figuring out where recipient's talents lay, and matching them with needs in and around Old Town.

Their first case was a request from Estel Clark, for train fare to return home to Kentucky where his mother was dying of cancer. The mainline of the railroad passed near his home in W-Hollow, with several Amtrak trains a week. He wanted to take the train because he was deathly afraid of flying. He had plenty of experience with riding in boxcars, but at nearly 60, the ravages of drink

and sleeping on concrete for 30 years had left him unable to jump into a rolling boxcar.

Edna Ridley from the prayer group picked Estel because she had grown up in the hills of Kentucky, not too far from W-Hollow. She, like so many of the beautiful Scotch/Irish young women of Appalachia, had gone away to a big city in the Midwest to find work as a secretary, married well and ended up in an upscale suburban neighborhood, first in Columbus, Ohio and then Portland, Oregon.

Edna remembered her roots, though she herself had long since moved up the socio-economic ladder to upper middle class. Still, the idea of walking the same streets as the bums scared her, but she'd decided maybe Kathy was right, and she could grow in Christ with this experience. She had once been an adventurous young woman, leaving country life for the big city; maybe it was time for a challenge again. And, having lost her own parents in recent years, she wanted to see Estel get back to his mother.

Their first meeting was a struggle for Edna. Estel preferred sleeping on the riverbank to the Bible reading and church going expected by most of the missions. His smell was exceedingly ripe, and his rotten teeth, wine-stained shirt, dirty fingernails and gray stubble didn't make him any easier to take.

In the beginning, she'd had reservations about Pass-It-On. It was the type of organization her husband railed against as ruining America. Her father had been a union miner in Kentucky and always voted a straight Democratic ticket. But, she hadn't even voted until her marriage, when her social economic status had suddenly been elevated to the conservative Republican level. Her husband was very firm in his expectation that she teach his ideals to their children.

Still, Pass-It-On's pay back requirement seemed to fit the conservative model of personal responsibility and work. She thought Jon would like that, and she would explain it, as soon as his busy schedule allowed.

Now her focus was to find a way for Estel to pay back his grant, and she was determined that he follow through. She asked what he thought he could do for someone in Old Town. "Well ma'am, I reckon I could pick up trash or worsh winders here at the foundation place."

"Well, Estel, that's not really what we had in mind. You need to do something for someone who needs your talents in the Old Town community. Do you know anyone like that?"

"Ma'am, I ain't got no talents. I ain't had me no job since I jumped on a coal train out of the state when I got fired from the coal mines fir a comin' to my shift drunkern' a skunk."

She cringed at such honesty. "Estel, you have to help me here. We have to find you something to do in order for you to pay back your train ticket, *if* you are to get a train ticket. Do you understand that?"

"I got no money, ma'am."

"We know that, Estel." But you must know someone who needs some kind of help you can offer in exchange?"

"Oh, there's all kind of people what needs help, ma'am. But I don't got no talent to speak of, fer ta offer. Hell, I can't hardly get my own disability check put in the bank and hang on to a little bit of it so's I can eat at the end a the month." He looked at the sidewalk between them. "I ain't worth nothin' A'tall, ma'am."

This was the first time she had ever been faced with such hopelessness. Her family had been of limited means, but they had always known that hard work and a bit of luck would lead to a better life, as it had for she and her three

siblings. But this man was without hope, without joy, and all he wanted was to get home to see his dying mother one more time, and then wait for his own death.

Of course he had brought it on himself, by drinking away his job, and then his life. Just when she was about to give up on him and tell him the foundation wouldn't be able to help him after all, she asked herself the question Kathy had suggested they all ask themselves when confronted with people so difficult, lazy and hopeless: "What would Jesus do?" Hard as it was to swallow, she didn't think Jesus would give up on Estel.

"All right Estel," she sighed, "let's take a walk around Old Town, and see what we can find for you to do."

She in tailored slacks, neat beige blouse and wool jacket with a hint of padding in the shoulders, understated jewelry, and erect posture; he, dirty, gray bearded, wrinkled, torn slacks and gray stained coat, hunched shoulders and downcast eyes. Both were not so young anymore, but she, with a healthy diet and lifestyle seemed less her 64 and he far older than his 58 after a life of self-abuse.

There were a few restaurants in Old Town; places where businessmen and women brought regular clients for a quick lunch when the best restaurants in the central business district were no longer required. Ties were undone, high heels kicked off, as business friends munched on pot stickers or plates of pasta, gourmet pizza and drank boutique beers.

What if one of Jon's friends sees me with this man?

She worried anew that Jon would disapprove of her becoming so involved with a group he considered liberal, an expletive in his vocabulary. He didn't believe in giving money to the poor because he felt they had proved repeatedly that they would just abuse it. Besides, he always reminded her,

people in their income bracket were bearing an unfair amount of taxes anyway, and he didn't see any reason to add to it with charity. Oh, he'd been the biggest donor to their church's \$600,000 organ fund and received many a pat on the back, and at least one building contract as reward. But that was different; it glorified God, *and* provided a good return. No, he probably wouldn't approve of this Pass-It-On thing, because "those kind of people" would never actually follow through. It was just another liberal gimmick to make the wealthy feel guilty.

Well, she didn't always agree with Jon, but she usually acquiesced. But this time she had decided to follow the strong calling she'd felt to participate in Pass-It-On with her prayer group. She knew she could be persuasive with Jon, when it was important to her. This was becoming important.

She and Estel walked past bars and missions competing for the men and women who gravitated to skid road, when life went bad and hope fled. The missions offered food and prayer to the more desperate, the bars, cheap beer to the workingmen, and the no-longer-working, on their way down.

"Dear God." Edna breathed out, her hand flew to cover her mouth. "Dear God."

A man in a wheelchair shuffled slowly toward them, his scuffed shoes pulling him along, his arms flailing uselessly at the wheels. His body was bent until his head was almost to his knees. He looked at the sidewalk just in front of his chair, mumbled and drooled.

"Who is that?" she asked Estel.

"I don't know, ma'am. Some guy been living around here for years. Acts like he's crazy the way he talks at the sidewalk. Don't seem to get no better, nor no worse neither."

"What's wrong with him?"

“Don’t know. Heard tell he’s not crazy; got some kind of sickness that makes it so he can’t talk right or move or nothing. He’s out here every day just a scootin’ around this one block. He tried to cross the street once and got knocked over.”

“Where does he live?”

“Around the corner there. I seen him dragging his wheelchair up the steps to his door once. See that little rope he’s dragging behind? That’s what he does it with. Somebody that was in there when he got hit by the car saw that he just had peanut butter and white bread to eat. Said where he lived was a pig sty.”

“Does anyone ever help him?”

“It gives everybody the creeps the way he looks and drools. I don’t know if he could understand nobody or not.”

She certainly understood why he gave people the creeps. She’d never seen anything like it; didn’t know there were people so sick and alone in America. People in her neighborhood who had some awful accident or disease, had the best help available, in their own home, or had appropriate transportation and assistance to get to the necessary medical facilities. And they didn’t have to worry about how to pay for treatment.

While Estel stood by uncomfortably, she thought about her options for a long minute, turned to look at Estel and said, “Estel. I think you can help this man. If you will.” She raised her eyebrows and stared into his eyes, not an easy thing for her to do, being from Appalachia. But it would send the message of womanly firmness that an Appalachian man would understand.

Estel looked at the man dragging his chair past them, wiped his face with his hand and looked away. “Aw now. Now, you’re not a going to make me...



No. Now I just don't figure..." He returned to find her eyes still asking for a decision.

She didn't want to ask him to do something she knew she couldn't do herself, or at least believed so, and yet, the Lord had led them to this man. The Lord wanted him helped.

"No one is going to make you do anything." She looked away from him, back. "The truth is I don't think I could do it, get past the way he looks and acts and probably smells, the enormity of his need, so I couldn't demand it of you, could I? I can only ask."

Estel shook his head. "Oh, I don't know, ma'am."

"I'll give you my telephone number and you can call me anytime you don't know what to do. I can help you get help from the right social worker. Maybe there is a fund somewhere for helping such people, and we could get you a ramp built to make the steps easier for the wheelchair. You'd still have to help him..."

"How long, ma'am?"

"For the cost of your train ticket I figure maybe three months or so..."

"Hmmm."

"Tell you what. You commit to a month when you get back and we'll get your ticket today. I know you want to get back to see your mother as soon as possible. Then we'll try a month soon as you get back, and go from there?"

"What if I can't go mor'n a month?"

"Don't worry, we'll find something else you can do, but I really do want you to try this. I think we can do it. And I do mean we. I'll help all I can."

He looked at the man, now scuffing his way around the corner and scratched his head. "I reckon I better go find out what his name is."

“Thank you Estel.” She reached out and squeezed his hand with hers. It reminded her of the feel of her father’s hand when she was a young woman. Rough and precious.

After Edna left Estel, she stopped in at Pass-It-On to arrange for his train tickets and see if she could find out more about the man. D-Cup was there and filled her in, “You’ve done well! We have him on the list for needing help. Lots of it. Geoffrey Windgarten is his name. I heard that he was once a real estate agent up in Seattle. Had a wife and kids. Middle class. But he wasn’t as successful as some. He apparently had really wanted to be a biologist, but he couldn’t afford college, so he took the real estate test and started selling. Did okay in the Boeing boom years, until the big recession. You know, the one where the billboard said for the last person to leave to turn out the lights. Well, he fell on hard times, and let his health insurance lapse. Then this awful disease hit him. Don’t know much about it. Started going downhill fast. Wife took the kids and left when she heard what he had. Can’t get any treatment for it. There might not be any for all I know. Gets a little government disability to live on is all.

“They say he’s smart as a tack. Had an interest in butterflies I hear; has quite a collection, and that the case is the only clean thing in the whole place. I don’t know if you want to go in there. Don’t think I could from what people say.

This coming from a woman with significant body odor, made Edna wonder what she’d gotten herself into. Estel would be doing the day to day, but she would have to go check on them. Now that she had committed to the path of service, the Lord apparently wasn’t about to make it easy. Well, she’d come from common stock, and she would call on that strength. She wasn’t about to quit now.

Estel was back in Old Town at his appointed time, a slight surprise to everybody at Pass-It-On and Edna herself, who expected him to stretch his stay out another week or so. "Well, Mommy wasn't as happy to see me as I'd a thought, but she was in a real bad way, what with all the tubes going down her nose and drips in her arm and all. I hadn't done much of a job a keeping her up on my whereabouts neither these past few years, and she'd about give up on me. But we had a good long talk the second day I was there, about the old days when Daddy was still alive and we was all together. Then she got the pains, and they had to up the morphine and she was a sleeping for the rest of my time there."

"I'm sorry the visit didn't meet with your expectations, Estel."

"Oh, it ain't nothing ma'am. It turned out all right I reckon. I got to see my brothers and sisters, the ones that hadn't died of cancer yet. They was all glad to see me, said I looked real good in my traveling clothes. I sure do thank you for the money you give me yourself for to buy some new clothes. I spend my little money on drink, and I'd done forgot how good a new suit of clothes can make a body feel."

"It wasn't much Estel. You had to buy your suit at the second hand store didn't you?"

"Yes, ma'am, but it was real good second hand. Sometimes it sure surprises me what these businessmen in this town gives away to the Goodwill. Why law, that suit didn't hardly have more than two or three shiny spots on it!"

"Well, now it's time to go see the gentleman you promised to help," with just enough firmness in her voice to establish his responsibility.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm ready. You know any more about this feller?"

"His name is Geoffrey Windgarten. He's had a difficult life. He lost his wife and children when the disease took his ability to make a living away. He

gets social security disability and lives in his small apartment with his butterfly collection.”

“Butterfly collection?”

“Yes, he apparently has an interest in butterflies and has quite a good collection, well preserved, I’m told.”

“I always liked the butterflies that come to our holler. Sometimes in the fall we’d have them big pretty ones just a hanging in the trees. Then they’d all fly off, and we wouldn’t see them until the next fall. I always wondered what kind they was and where they went for all that time.”

“Maybe Mister Windgarten can tell you.”

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

Edna worried about Geoffrey and Estel all weekend. On Monday she received a call from Pass-It-On, saying Estel had been in asking for help with Geoffrey. D-Cup said Estel didn't want to bother Edna, but they didn't have anyone to help. She wondered if Edna could go to Geoffrey's apartment the next morning?

Oh, Lord, don't test me like this. But she was quick to answer. "I'll be there. Do you know what it is?"

"No, he wouldn't really say, but if I were you I'd go with lots of Lysol and some throw away sponges," said D-Cup.

"Oh."

"Better you than me!" laughed D-Cup.

It was with a steady hand and trembling insides that she knocked on the graffiti sprayed door of Geoffrey's apartment. Estel opened the door with a surprised look.

"Oh, ma'am, I didn't mean for them to..."

"It's okay Estel. I got you into this. If you need help, it's me who needs to come. Now what is the trouble?"

Estel was quiet for a moment, then shook his head, "I reckon you better come in."

The moment she stepped through the door she was assaulted by a wall of moist, pungent scent; the air was heavy with stale life; smells she had never experienced. Her mother had taught the liberal use of Lysol, Pine Sol, and elbow grease; all Edna's living abodes bore that unmistakable scent of harshly clean

living. Geoffrey slumped in his chair in one corner of the room, the weight of the room pushing him down. Estel stood among a collection of cracked plastic pails filled with water, holding a box of laundry detergent. The helpless look on his face elicited in her a tender feeling she hadn't felt since her children were small, and showed in a small smile on her thin lips.

"Estel, what are you trying to do?"

"Well, ma'am, me and Jeff here was figuring to clean the place up a bit. First was to just make room for him to move around a little easier in that chair of his. We throwed out a bunch of stuff that he hadn't been able to get out to the curb for the garbage men. Then there was the rats I seen, some of 'em dead, and I figured there was some need for a little soap, but that's where I got stuck. My mommy done all that at our house, what there was done, and I been either sleeping on the river bank or shelters pert near since I left Kentucky, so I never had to clean nothing."

"So you called the foundation to get a woman's advice, didn't you?"

"Yes, ma'am. But I never figured them to call you."

"And what is wrong with me?"

"I never figured you done housework."

"Well, you figured wrong, Mister Clark. Give me that!" She grabbed the laundry soap from his hand. "This will do for the first go around. You heat some water, and I'll go to the supermarket for some proper cleaning supplies," she said looking firmly at Estel as she walked past to Geoffrey. "Mr. Windgarten, I'm sorry Estel and I have ignored you." She kneeled on one knee before him and offered her hand. "I'm Edna, Estel's friend." His eyes lifted from his lap and he nodded to her. "We're going to be doing some cleaning. We'll try not to disturb you."

"Mufterfyz," he said.

“What?”

“Mufferfyz,” he said again in a quiet even voice.

Edna looked helplessly at Estel.

“I make it out to be butterflies. They appears to be real important to him.”

“Maybe he’s concerned we’ll damage his collection.” She laid her hand on his arm. “We’ll be very careful with your butterflies, Geoffrey.”

She stood up and asked Estel to show her the collection. He pulled a cloth from a table to reveal a glass case filled with a hundred or more specimens of beautifully colored butterflies, each carefully pinned to black velvet. Estel turned on an adjustable table lamp and the colors leaped out at her; glorious brilliant colors, soft pastel colors and every shade in between.

“Oh!” she gasped. “I’ve never seen such lovely specimens, so well preserved and mounted.”

“Sometimes Jeff spends hours just looking at them. I done it too a couple of times. Just looked and looked and realized the whole day done got away from me.”

She looked at Geoffrey. “You must be very proud of such a collection, Geoffrey?”

“Nuu.” he said. “Sssare.”

Estel translated. “Says he’s sorry ma’am. Believe he’s sorry now he killed them. Don’t know why he would be.”

Edna looked at Geoffrey and then at Estel, and back. “I think this disease taught him how precious life is,” she looked back at Estel, “and how capricious, unfair.” She looked at the butterflies. “These are the things that challenge my faith. I want to know why God allows such suffering. Why I have been so blessed, and others so burdened. I don’t find the answers in the Bible. I just keep praying, waiting.”

She stamped the heel of her fashionable yet sensible shoes on the linoleum, and clapped her hands together. "Enough of that! Okay, Estel, I'll get the supplies while you heat water. I'll be back soon."

She returned laden with two new plastic pails, a mop, three kinds of cleaning products, three boxes of bicarbonate of soda, a liter of vinegar, a bag of sponges and a box of disposable gloves. A large pot of water boiled on the two-burner stove. "You can turn off the stove, Estel. I need hot water, not boiling. Here take these." She handed him gloves and a sponge. "We'll work from the top down, ceiling, walls, everything. You've done a good job clearing the apartment of rubbish, so we can get in every corner."

Estel looked around the room bewildered.

"Don't look so helpless, Estel, it's not as bad as it looks. Get some cold water and add the hot to it until it's comfortable to your hand, add the Pine Sol and start on the ceiling."

He followed her lead as she prepared her bucket. He stood on a kitchen chair and began around the bare light bulb in the center of the room, and she stood on another chair to do walls. Soon elbows were flying and years of grime were being transferred to the buckets and the floor. Edna's hair was soon a tangled mess, her tailored skirt askew, her blouse tail hanging out, her makeup smudged with black. Estel was sweating out last night's bottle of Thunderbird. And, for someone who'd spent most of his life avoiding hard work, found he was enjoying himself. The interchange between he and Edna was an easy, and unexpected pleasure, and he reveled in the expanse of ceiling now shining white. No wonder it was so dark in Jeff's apartment, the grime had sucked up all the light.

They worked for hours scrubbing walls, ceiling and floor. When Estel balked at cleaning the disgusting bathroom, she put him to cleaning the oven



and dove into the job. Never had she experienced such filth, but she bore ahead, her innate stubbornness overcoming her disgust.

By late afternoon, they were mostly done, and Edna gave Estel the money to go out and buy them something at Burger King. As they sat among the cleaning supplies, eating burgers and fries, Estel fed Geoffrey. "Jeff can eat by himself, but it's quicker this way, and I think he enjoys it more and don't lose half of it in his lap." Edna was pleased to see there was a degree of intimacy between the men. Estel could understand most of the things Geoffrey tried to say, and was patient and attentive to his needs. "He don't have no trouble eating none ma'am, but it's the other end we have some trouble with." She was surprised that Estel would even take it upon himself to help Geoffrey with such personal problems as constipation. She told herself she would see to it that they started getting a better diet. Maybe this was something she could pursue through Pass-It-On; a nutrition program, planned by she and her friends, who knew about such things, and PIO clients who could deliver the food and help cook when appropriate.

She gave Estel her cell phone number and told him to call her directly the next time he needed help. She gave him some money and directions to buy bran cereal, fruit and juice for them. When she said good-bye to the men, they both seemed sorry to see her leave.

Jon was in the garage, waiting for her, tapping his foot. When he saw her disheveled clothing, mussed hair and streaked makeup, he was shocked. "What happened to you? Did you have an accident!"

"No, I didn't have an accident, Jon. I stopped by to check on my clients, and got into some cleaning."

"What did you do, mop the floor with yourself!"

"Very funny, Jon."

"I've never seen you so filthy. You don't get nearly so dirty gardening."

"You couldn't imagine how dirty that apartment was, Jon. It hadn't been cleaned in years. Poor Geoffrey is not able to do any more than survive. Estel has been living outside or in shelters for so long he doesn't know how to clean, so I pitched in to help. Geoffrey should have it easier now, and I'm hoping Estel will help him keep it clean."

"I'm starving, Edna."

"Poor baby." She reached to pat his cheek and he backed away.

"Maybe you could bathe before you cook?"

She put her hand on her hip and looked at him with a sarcastic smile. "I have a better idea. You cook our dinner, while I get cleaned up."

"Me. Cook."

"Um hmm."

"But you always have my dinner on the table when I get home?"

"Poor baby. Time you learned. I've been working today too. Doing the work of the Lord. And I'm dirty and tired and need a few minutes to myself. So you can cook. For once."

"But?"

"There are leftovers in containers in the refrigerator."

"How do I heat them?"

"Put them in the microwave."

"How do I work it?"

"Stop pretending to be helpless. You work with computers all day. You can figure out a microwave." And with that she disappeared into her personal bathroom to enjoy a long bubble bath, and await with anticipation the disaster that would be their dinner.

## Chapter Forty

Estel didn't call for more than a week, and Edna decided it was time for her to check on her charges. What she found was not trouble, but a pleasant surprise. Estel had been using the cleaning supplies to keep the apartment clean; Geoffrey was feeling better and stronger with the semi-regular diet Estel was providing for them. And Estel cheerfully told her of the plans he had for making Geoffrey more comfortable in their home.

"Our home?" asked Edna.

"Yes, ma'am. Geoffrey invited me to stay here with him. We'll, I'm getting too old to be sleeping on the ground, so I took him up on it."

"Well, that's wonderful, Estel. That will be good for both of you." She looked at Geoffrey, who looked up and smiled, something she didn't think he could do.

Estel pointed at a mattress in the corner, with his tattered stained sleeping bag laying on it. "There's my little place. Nice'n warm and dry. Lot better'n under the Burnside Bridge."

She looked at his bed and had a suggestion. "How about I get you some sheets, a nice pillow?"

"Now ma'am, I thank you and all, but you got to stop spending your own personal money on us. We manage all right."

"I can see you do very well, Estel. But I do have boxes of household goods my children had in college and brought home to abandon, and it would certainly be a help to me if you could take them off my hands."

"Well, if you put it that way, ma'am."

"What could you use? I've got curtains that might work on those windows, and some nice chairs, although I don't think you have room. The one bed we have in storage is a king-size." She looked around the small efficiency. "There's no room for that."

"I seen a bed made out a pallets one time. I'm a going to make one a them." said Estel with pride. Then, delivered straight with just a hint of mischievous grin, "Something for the dust bunnies to hide under."

She pointed at him and glowered. "No dust bunnies!"

"No ma'am. Never." He grinned.

Edna looked around the room again. "How about a television? My daughter brought home a nice little color set and it's been gathering dust for years."

"Well, Geoffrey likes to read and I wouldn't want to bother that. I been bringing him books from up at the library. They're mostly about butterflies and insects and stuff. I like the ones with the pretty pictures, since I can't hardly read myself. But I would like to see the sports and weather sometimes." He looked at Geoffrey who appeared to smile, pointed at an ear, and mumbled something Edna couldn't understand.

"You bet bud." Estel turned to Edna grinning. "Says I can get him them things you plug in your ears."

"Seems as if you two have worked out your living arrangements to mutual satisfaction, and have found appropriate ways of adapting to each other's needs."

Estel looked puzzled. "Uh, yes ma'am."

Edna went away happy that her charges were doing so well. She hoped things would continue as smoothly, but remembered Estel's drinking and

assumed there would a crisis surrounding that sooner or later. Still she was pleased with her first client's progress, and ready to take on a second.

## Chapter Forty-One

By the spring, nearly a year since Wanda and Bette's arrival in Portland, Pass-It-On began to attract wide attention. In their story on the work of the foundation, the Sunday Oregonian featured Wanda and Bette, the way they met, and how it had led Wanda to return to Portland in order to find help for Bette. Many people remembered the night the Willamette burned; the sensational events surrounding the Buster Parks wake, and how his wife, Wanda had disappeared for twenty years.

Some groups took notice of the women's close relationship, and hoped to involve them in their own causes. Westley Burkley, of the Portland Gay Alliance went to welcome them into the community of lesbian women, and came away confused at the polite dismissal she received. It appeared to her that these women would need a little help in making a decision to come out.

Brother Jim determined that the time was right, and began a series of sermons on the evils of homosexuality, and used thinly veiled references to the increasingly well-known leaders of Pass-It-On.

In the mainstream spiritual community, the foundation continued to attract attention for its good works. Kathy's church prayer group became ever more closely involved in working with the foundation's recipients. Edna, Kathy and two others had found clients and others were actively looking for someone to help.

In an interview on the Oregonian's religion page, Kathy said, "Lives are being changed. The light of Christ's love is being revealed in ways none of us imagined when we offered to help Pass-It-On. We are receiving far more than we are giving."

Brother Jim couldn't let that kind of talk take hold. It was time. That night in his broadcast sermon:

“Brothers and Sisters in Jesus. I am saddened to tell you of the apparent corruption of one of our local churches by the forces of Satan. A women’s prayer group at Epiphany Episcopal has been working with the Pass-It-On people here in Old Town. Now, I’ve preached on this before. I’ve got nothing against Christian charity. The missions here in Old Town do a good job of offering the homeless a bite of food, a place to sleep and a chance to worship instead of sinning. That most of them go right back out on the street to sinning just as soon as their belly is full is a slap in the face of Jesus. But, I can’t condone this Pass-It-On bunch. I’ve told you all about those two women. They are known to sleep in the same bed, and you know what that means.”

There were murmurs from the amen corner.

“These women are using this alleged charitable organization to finagle their way into the hearts of our city to spread their abominable ways. They pretend to be doing good works, but abominations can’t be doing the work of Jesus.”

“Amen!” said Tig Johansen. “Praise the Lord. Tell ‘em Brother Jim!”

“Those who would aid Satan will suffer eternal damnation. The righteous will watch them writhe in agony for eternity unless they see the error of their ways and come to Jesus.”

“Amen.”

“But they won’t do that brothers and sisters, because they are the handmaidens of Satan. They cast the seed of sin upon the fertile fields of this liberal society and they reap for us all a bitter harvest!”

He pounded his breast and looked heavenward, “It pains me brothers and sisters in Christ, to see the good women of that mainline church helping

promote the work of these abominations. They have been deceived, brothers and sisters, deceived, deceived, deceived! The poor don't need charity; the poor need salvation!" His face was red, and he pounded the lectern with his white fist, new gold cufflinks flashing.

"Salvation is the only thing that will save those bums from a life of drink and drugs."

"Amen Brother!"

He had a good sweat going and used his white hanky to wipe his brow and wave in the air. He paused for breath, slumped his shoulders, shook his head and went on.

"Brothers and sisters, you defenders of the true religion, last bastion of good in America, have to make a stand right here and now." He paused to dramatically wipe his brow and neck, and raise his eyes to heaven. "You are the last line of defense for good in a world of evil.

"The Lord is calling you, calling you to stand up for Him."

He leaned forward, paused, and pointed with his quivering hanky, sweeping across the congregation.

"God commands it of you!" he bellowed.

"If we don't draw the line in the sand, right here, and right now, we will have denied our Lord."

He paused and scanned the faithful with his sweat glistening brows. "You will be far more to blame than Pontius Pilot, brothers and sisters, because you know the Lord, and you know what he demands." He pointed at them. "You will have squandered the victory he gave us on the cross!"

"A'man, a'man, a'man," said a large man in coveralls, shaking in righteous anger, tears streaming down his face. Other men came to him and laid large hands on his shoulder. One, made so angry by his friends distress, shook



his fist in the air and called out, "Lord, we're gonna stomp out these witches!" Another man jumped up and whispered into his ear. He sat down and looked at the floor, shaking his head.

Jim took a long pause and the hall went silent. "If not us brothers and sisters, then who? If not now, brothers and sisters, when?" And he dropped his head dramatically onto his chest and raised his two arms to Heaven.

The amens spread throughout the hall, and working people for hundreds of miles around sat closer to their radios. What could they do?

In a calm and measured voice, "Brothers and sisters, here's what God calls us to do. Next Saturday night we will march from this hall over to the Pass-It-On offices, the home of those evil women, and speak out for God. We will carry the righteous wrath of Jesus to the sinners' doorstep."

"Amen brother!" "Praise the Lord!"

"We will condemn the abominations, those defilers of the precious special place God reserved for women and mothers!"

The hall stood as one and cried, ""!" and "praise God!"

And his voice rose with the crowd's passion, "We will march each and every Saturday until they leave this town."

He paused to wipe his brow.

"We will march like Christian soldiers of old. We are Crusaders without fear, and without mercy. Because God is our staff and our banner is Jesus, we will prevail! We will drive the abominations from our midst and save America for the God-fearing, for the saved in Jesus! "

"Amen, Brother Jim. We're with you!"

He glowed with victory.

He hung his head and walked to his high-backed, red velveteen chair and slumped in righteous exhaustion while the choir sang verse upon verse of

Onward Christian Soldiers. Outside in the streets of Old Town, the downtrodden, the dispossessed turned their heads to the uproar.

Brother Jim looked up, through the open door, and was confronted by the fearful apparition he had seen once before: the young man with the golden beard and white robes, stood on the sidewalk facing him, candles burning low, "Forgive them for they know not what they do." Jim read his lips, and for just a moment, victory turned to doubt and confusion. He suddenly turned wild-eyed to his organist and impulsively, inexplicably called for *Just As I Am*. When he turned back, the apparition was gone but the glow of his presence lingered.

Outside, on a nearby bench sat Sam, his white suit flooded with the warm light of a streetlight. He crossed his legs, bit the end off a cigar, spat it out and struck an old-fashioned kitchen match on the light post. Its bright flare lit his face until he sucked the flame into the cigar. He exhaled a string of smoke rings into the damp night air, pulled out his timepiece and smiled, "No. 44 has returned; things will turn interesting soon."

## Chapter Forty-Two

All over the Northwest, good people sat by their radios and took the pledge to follow Brother Jim into battle against the sinners.

All Sunday services featured announcements of the upcoming demonstrations. The few preachers who had reservations, kept them to themselves for fear of being labeled weak in the Lord.

Plans were made to drive in caravans from Hood River, McMinnville and St. Helens, from Burns and Bend, Wahkiacus and Willapah.

On that first Saturday, one large group met at the factory outlet stores in Centralia. Many women came early to shop, while their men and boys went to see the latest Terminator movie. Around noon, they gathered to pray in the parking lot and rolled out to meet the enemy. They drove at the minimum legal speed limit of forty miles per hour, and the resulting massive backup gained more publicity than anything they could have imagined. By the time they got to the Columbia River in mid-afternoon, news helicopters buzzed around them and followed them all the way into Portland. Caravans from all points of the compass heard of the tactics on Christian radio and adopted them.

Saturday sporting events on television were interrupted to report the protest, and the Oregonian tore up their Sunday front-page layout to make room for coverage of the traffic tie-up and protest. Hours before the first march, Brother Jim's war on sin was the biggest news in weeks.

The parking lots in Old Town and downtown soon filled to overflowing and hundreds of cars were double-parked, clogging everything from First Street to Couch Street.

They walked as families out for an outing, in church groups carrying flags and crosses, sometimes singing favorite hymns, and converged on Brother Jim's storefront church, filling the streets of Old Town. They were overwhelmed by their own numbers, humbled and overjoyed at this manifestation of the power of the Lord to bring together like-minded people in His service.

Brother Jim was overwhelmed too. He had never dreamed of such success. There must have been a thousand, and they were there because of him. They were his flock, and he was going to put them to good use.

He took his rented bullhorn to the rooftop of the church where all could see and hear him.

"Brothers and Sisters, I'm a going to keep this short because we have work to do. You, the righteous, are hereby sworn into the army of Christian Soldiers."

And a cheer went up from the crowd, "Praise the Lord!" and "We're with you, Brother Jim!"

"You are the new Crusaders. Together we will drive the infidels from our midst, and purify this city in His name."

And another cheer went up as he basked in the glory for a long minute, before scrambling down from the roof to take his place at the front of the masses.

Brother Jim had enlisted three drummers and two trumpet players from the Salvation Army band to march just behind him and play rousing hymns, mostly Onward Christian Soldiers. As they marched, several of the young people of his congregation circulated among the rows, passing out pledge envelopes to help Brother Jim's struggling ministry.

Bette and Wanda were just finishing cleaning up after a potluck and party the night before. They'd invited the board and all the volunteers of Pass-It-On to

celebrate their first year in operation. It was a great party and had lasted late into the night. After the churchwomen went home, a few extra bottles of wine were consumed along with conversations about how they were going to reach more of the needy. A few who'd had a bit too much wine stayed, sleeping on foam pads. Sunday morning, Wanda cooked up a huge omelet with potluck leftovers to feed the hungry and slightly hung-over. Everybody pitched in to help clean, before they went home or back to the streets.

Wanda was filling a box full of wine bottles for recycling, when she heard music in the distance.

"You hear that Bette?"

Bette stopped her dusting, leaned on her walker and listened. "Drums and trumpets. Parade, some kind, today?"

"Not that I know about."

"See parade!" exclaimed Bette, her eyes bright with joy. "Love parade!"

They moved to the floor to ceiling window looking out on Fifth Street just in time to see Brother Jim, his band, and throngs of people, singing and carrying signs round the corner to gather below them.

Wanda put down her box of empty wine bottles and stared. Bette dropped her dust cloth. Wanda dropped her jaw. There was a parade. And the end of the parade appeared to be their home, the object, them.

As the faithful sang yet another verse of Onward Christian Soldiers, a group of large loud men pushed forward and waved signs reading:  
Abominations Go Home, We'll Take Portland For Jesus, Godless Go Home,  
Satan's Witches Go Away, Charity Won't Save You, Burn In Hell.

Bette looked to the sky and saw two helicopters vying for the best camera angle: Bette leaning on her walker, Wanda gape-mouthed before the world, dressed in house dresses, fear and confusion on their faces.

"Who the...these people?" asked a wide-eyed Bette.

"I don't know," said Wanda. "But you can bet they don't like us one little bit."

Brother Jim jumped on the bus stop bench with his bullhorn to preach and exhort the crowd.

"Don't understand," said Bette, moving her walker closer to the window to better read one of the signs: Hell Fire And Damnation Are Yours. "What this about Hell?" Bette looked to Wanda, panicked. "Scared of these people. What they mean?"

Wanda put her arms around Bette, to comfort her. "I don't rightly know. But they can't really hate us like them signs says, because they don't even know us."

Kathy telephoned when she saw the live broadcast picture of them in their window and the crowd below. Wanda convinced Bette to go to bed and try not to worry. She kept an eye on the crowd while she answered the phone.

"Who are these people? Bette's scared to death. I had to put her to bed."

"Wanda, I hate to say it, but they are us, I mean not really us, but they are Christians, and..."

"You mean to tell me those hateful people are Christian people? I can't hardly believe that. Jesus never taught hate."

"I'm afraid they are, Wanda. This is big news, statewide, and it even got a notice on the early national news. It's not good."

"What's news about me and Bette? These people figure only good Christians ought to get charity, not these people who needs it, who just happen to be sinners?"

"Well maybe a little bit, they're having a hard time in the timber and fishing industries; and they might not like to see people who they don't think

ever worked, get something for nothing. They're losing their log trucks, fishing boats and homes."

"Well I reckon I could understand that. Maybe we ought to figure out a way we can get them some help too."

Kathy chuckled, "That's just like you, Wanda."

"What?"

"People doing hateful things to you, and you are ready to forgive them."

"Nothing so special about that."

"I know. It's the way Jesus meant us to be."

"Kathy, them signs was saying some very nasty things, things I didn't think Christians thought much about, let alone wrote on signs."

"They think you are lesbians."

"Oh." Wanda was silent for a moment. "That's some sort of political movement? Me and Bette's not political in no shape or form. We're best friends, partners in this charity, partners in life, and that's all there is to it."

"I know," said Kathy. "That's how we all understand your relationship. But, Brother Jim, he's a minister, and he's been preaching on his radio program, all about the fact that you and Bette sleep in the same bed."

"With all the troubles in this world, alls he can find to preach on is the fact that two women he's never met, happen to sleep in the same bed?" She sighed in frustration. "Not much of a preacher."

Kathy laughed softly. "I agree that he's not much of a preacher. He could be a charlatan, but he sure can stir folks up."

There was a long silence on Wanda's end.

"I was just wondering what you thought about what he was preaching?"

"What you are doing is Christian in the best meaning of the word. Personal matters are simply that, personal matters, and nobody's business. But,

I'm not so sure about some of the others in our prayer group. They are good women, who have been inspired by the work we're doing, but they also are very much creatures of society. If we encounter any criticism from our church, we might lose some, or all of them."

"Thank you for sticking with us Kathy. We're going to need all the friends we can get."

"I'll be praying for you."

"We could use some of that too, since there is so much of praying against us. You put in a good word."

The singing went on until nearly dark when Brother Jim called for prayer, and a thousand people knelt in the street and prayed for victory before dispersing for the long drive home.

When the street was quiet again, Wanda stole a last look. The young man with the candles had replaced the mob. His beatific face looked up at Wanda and his candles flickered a tranquil light. She nodded to him and closed the curtains.

Wanda unplugged the telephone, ignored the reporters knocking on their door and went to Bette. She was sleeping, but her face was stained with tears. Wanda rubbed her back and lay down beside her. You've had enough already with your head smashed in, and how hard you're having to work at your rehabilitation. If I'd a known trying to do something good with Buster's money would have brought all this on you, I'd a never come back here. She lay her face against Bette's arm, cried and finally slept.



## Chapter Forty-Three

Saturday afternoon a gaggle of hip young girls from the suburbs, power shopping downtown, had stopped to laugh at the half-blind crippled beggar by the Max stop at Pioneer Square. The one with the short bronze hair took digital photos of him with her cell phone. The increasingly competitive teasing culminated in a group shot of the girls hanging all over Ben. One pursed her scarlet lips at his ear, another tossed her red hair and wrapped a long thin thigh around his waist, the two tall ones leaned against him, elbows on his head, grinning for the camera. Ben tolerated them, almost happy to be the brunt of their youthful cruelty, just to be near their glowing clear complexions, to smell the sweet scent of youth and possibility.

In the few moments they lingered near him waiting for the Max, the bronze girl gathered money from the others, bent to him, patted him on the cheek and stuffed a wad of bills in his shirt, punctuated with a loud and expansive air kiss. They ran for the Max, she vigorously wiping her hands on her designer jeans. He watched them tumble up the steps in a cascade of laughter.

He followed the Max as it bore them out of his life, onward to the jumble of uncertainty that was their future. He would be remembered briefly, shared with others in cyberspace, laughed at, a symbol of their privilege, their good fortune. Their unthinking cruelty had at least affirmed his existence, not a small thing for a broken man, accustomed to being an inanimate part of the urban landscape.

The wad of bills was more than enough for a binge drunk. He bought two bottles of fortified and a loaf of white bread, and went to hide on the riverbank.

Since the beating he had always done his drinking alone, content to feel the buzz come and draw the shade over his eye in the quiet of some carefully selected covert.

In the first hour of his drinking, the brown river slowly became a thing of beauty, worthy of his intense concentration; the roiling, folding liquid flow, outside of time, intensely dimensional, became full of wordless significance, filling his mind with the only joy left to him. Slowly the veil descended, despite his determined resistance, and he rolled to his side in the moldy, broken glass stale piss dirt, and slept.

Sunday afternoon, and Ben leaned against a trash bin across from the Greyhound station. It was as far as he had been able to make it, a short way from the river. His leg hurt, and his side, his mouth was dry and his head pounded. He needed a cup of coffee, but couldn't summon the energy to go find one.

Nearby, a light wind rustled the pages of a discarded Sunday Oregonian. He decided to see what people with normal lives were thinking about this unusually sunny Sunday. What he read there, angered him, something he thought was beyond him.

He read of the surprising massive protest march the evening before against Bette and Wanda. He had been following the developments in their lives, and had taken hope that not only had he not killed Bette, but that she was getting the medical attention she needed, and had someone to take care of her. Now this.

He'd seen the preacher, heard his raving from his storefront church. He'd seen the farmers, fishermen and loggers file in to fill Brother Jim's collection plates. They looked through him, same as the rich businessmen he begged from downtown.

Ben had increasingly become aware that his yellow color and strange pains meant his time might be near. He was ready to see his suffering come to an end. Maybe he could pay Bette back for what he'd done to her. Maybe he could get Brother Jim off her back. It was probably a fantasy, but maybe he could find it in himself to do one useful thing with his life, to rid himself of the guilt that weighed down his every day.

A huge picture of banner-waving protesters occupied the top half of the front page, facing Bette and Wanda who stood just behind the glass, looking trapped and scared. The headline read: Charity Leaders Targeted By Church. The story said the crowd, estimated by Brother Jim to be more than a thousand, had brought the downtown and Old Town to a standstill, and the traffic tie-up on the interstates, caused by their slow-go protest, had not been cleared until after dark. Washington State Patrol said they had never experienced such a backup, he read. The governors of both states called for a meeting of all area law enforcement to plan for the following week when Brother Jim had promised twice as many people.

Ben knew he had to do something. And he knew what.

## Chapter Forty-Four

Across town, Edna Ridley was distraught. She and Jon had just returned from church where all the talk had been about the protest. The after church coffee klatch had appeared divided between support for Pass-It-On, if not for Bette and Wanda, or against them and the whole idea.

Those who supported Brother Jim felt the prayer group had betrayed the church by becoming involved with lesbians, and felt they should pray about it; get out of the charity business and away from those two women. After all, their church's good name was besmirched with the association, and steps had to be taken to ameliorate the damage as quickly as possible.

On the other side, there were those troublesome people who always brought up the tired old phrase; "What would Jesus do?" They seemed to think that the charity work Bette and Wanda were doing was much more important than whether or not they slept in the same bed.

From others, "But aren't you worried about your children? We can't allow these deviants to appear to be normal to our children, or they might just choose such a lifestyle." "I don't even want to think about my sweet Brittany having a female friend!"

Jon had appropriately stood behind his wife, if in a waffling sort of way that would allow him an escape later. But he brooded in the Mercedes on the way home, and as soon as they closed the heavy wood door behind them, "I told you there would be no good to come of this. Look at what you've done to our reputation in the church, and in this community. Now everybody knows my wife is associated with a bunch of lesbians." And the tirade went on, never loud

or threatening, but calculated to take the highest toll on Edna's self esteem, and convince her to stay home, and out of trouble.

Edna had heard it all before. One time too many.

"Are you finished Jon?" She threw her Gucci purse on the couch.

Surprised at her tone of voice, "I suppose."

"Now you sit down and listen to me for a change." Edna fixed him with her eyes until he sat. "You give \$25,000 to the organ fund but you won't give 25 cents to the poor." She turned to the expansive window looking out onto the immaculate lawn. She spun back toward him on her heel, hands on hips. "You wouldn't even look a beggar in the eye, and yet you take every chance possible to stand and pray loudly, publicly. You don't practice our faith, except when it's easy, and safe. You give your tithe and think that's enough."

"Now..."

"Oh, don't get me wrong. I'm no better than you are. We both need to rethink our commitment to Christ."

"Now Dear, I know you are distraught over this whole thing. I'm sure we can find a way to help these women and their cause, discreetly." He got up.

"And maybe I can make time for that South Pacific cruise you've..."

"Sit!" She glared at him.

He sat.

"You have not been listening to me. You pay no more attention to what I have to say than you pay to the meaning of the scripture passages we read to each other each night. It's all just a ritual."

"Now, Dear..."

"Now Dear nothing." She lay her hand on his knee. "This crisis was sent by the Lord to wake us up. We feel superior like somehow the Lord picked us to

love and protect, and make prosperous, and the poor, the sick and the lonely are paying some sort of penance for sin."

"Dear, you make it sound so harsh. But, there is some truth there. The alcoholics and drug addicts wouldn't be where they are except for the choices they made."

"I understand that, Jon. Does the Lord not love sinners too?"

"Well now, that's something of an over simplification. Of course the Lord loves sinners, but..."

"But what, Jon? The Lord expects us to live His message, to the best of our ability, every day, at every opportunity"

"Yes, but..."

"But what, Jon? We have life made. Yes, we do. I'm asking too much? Yes, but it's not me asking, it's the Lord, Jon."

"I can't have you supporting lesbians."

"Jon, do we condemn them on rumor alone? What happened to your core conservative values, the values of Barry Goldwater?"

"I know this is difficult, Jon," she sat beside him, held his hand. "You would rather let me redecorate the house..." He groaned. "Yes, I know how you suffered last time; but you'd do it again rather than support me in this. But you will." She leaned her head against his shoulder. "Won't you?"

"I'll try. I'll at least not get in your way."

"I want us to change our relationship to the Lord. I don't want to look back from my deathbed and see that He asked me to do His will, and I ignored Him."

"At least you're not asking me to join the Peace Corps."

"You never know where the Lord might lead us!" She laughed and he shook his head.

## Chapter Forty-Five

It was a subdued group that gathered on Tuesday at Pass-It-On. The Board of Directors were all there, except for Magnolia who was away at an early season pow wow with Coyote. Wanda had invited quite a few from Old Town who wanted to show their support. They were always glad to come for the snacks Bette laid out when there was a meeting.

The volunteer caseworkers had been invited, but only Kathy and Edna came, and that was a worry. If they lost their caseworkers, now up to fifteen, nobody knew how they could continue. There were lots of unemployed, but few would have the skills necessary, and Pass-It-On was committed to the volunteer concept rather than as employer of professionals. The point of the process was to bring people together for the common good, not start yet another bureaucracy of social workers.

There was a discussion of Brother Jim and his motives. Clawhammer, who had attended a couple of the services, felt Brother Jim was in the preaching business for the money. He hadn't made much until the march, when rumor had it he had taken in more than \$3,000 when the collection envelopes were circulated that day.

Kathy suggested they get a private detective to check into his background. If he was going to besmirch the reputations of Bette and Wanda, he had better be squeaky clean himself. Wanda didn't like the idea, but finally gave in to overwhelming consensus.

She remembered Jaimiee and called her in Seattle. Jaimiee had been surprised at the turn of events when it hit the Seattle news, and was happy to hear she could be of help. She promised to be in Portland as soon as she could.

On a muddy bank of the Willamette, Ben was struggling with child's scissors and paste, creating a threatening note to Brother Jim:

"leave tHem aLoNe OR die."

He cut the letters from a girlie magazine found under the Burnside Bridge, and pasted them on a sheet of fancy letterhead found outside an Old Town restaurant. The smell of the paste brought memories of a lost childhood, and tears. The pungent scent of paste represented bitterness and loss, the failure of his life, now nearly over, redeemable only by this last act.

He hoped the note would be sufficiently threatening to make Brother Jim ease off on Bette and Wanda. The remembrance of the awful thing he did to Bette had never faded: the sound of crushing skull, the feel of blood and hair on his face revolted him. But, if he had to kill Brother Jim, he could, he would. At least this time he wouldn't need, or want to run away.

He rode the Max to Beaverton and mailed the letter so it would have an out of city postmark. He should have realized that a crippled, one-eyed homeless man would attract attention in the suburbs. Since he barely had enough money for the stamp, he rode without a ticket. A transit cop was suspicious of his kind coming in from the suburbs, asked him several questions and threw him off at the Zoo station. It took him all afternoon to hobble back to Fareless Square where he caught No. 44 to Old Town. In a crowded shelter with 30 other men on creaking steel cots, cigarette coughs, sighs and moans, he imagined Brother Jim's death, and his own.



The death threat reached Brother Jim the next day. He didn't take it seriously, figuring it was some lesbian trying to scare him. He was about to throw it away, when the realization hit him that this was just the publicity he needed.

He called two local television stations and the Oregonian, and then the police. One station was there before the police arrived, recording Brother Jim reading the letter, brow furrowed.

"This is proof positive that Satan is trying to take over our city. His evildoers will stop at nothing to keep the faithful in Jesus from speaking the truth about sin. They think this threat will stop us from protesting the sin that has hold of Portland. Well, they got another think coming."

He sighed and looked steadily into the camera, "My life belongs to Jesus. He went to the cross for me. I'm willing to go to the cross for Him." He lowered his head, placed a gold ringed hand over his eyes, turned and walked from the room.

The interview was the lead story on the evening news, and featured on the front page of the morning paper. It played well in the countryside; the phone trees hummed all over the Northwest, gathering the faithful to rally behind Brother Jim.

Saturday's march promised to be many times the size of the first, and forced Police Chief William Clancy to use up two month's overtime. Most of his attention was dominated by how to deal with the disruptions caused by the first march. Now the death threat to Brother Jim had compounded his problems, and he was beginning to get short with subordinates.

It was in a quiet moment, in his darkened office, three aspirins and a tenth cup of sludge coffee down, in an attempt to ease his splitting headache,

when it dawned on him. The object of the marches was Wanda Parks, *The* Wanda Parks, perpetrator of the infamous Buster Parks wake, the one that ended up burning the river and nearly costing him his job. It had taken him years to live down the decision that night, when he was Sergeant Clancy, to let the wake proceed. And then he had needed to work twice as hard as any other candidate on each step up the ladder to Chief.

Now she was back: the city was in turmoil, traffic had never been worse, a death threat, everyone in his department was overworked, on edge. What next? Who was this woman who had returned after twenty some years to haunt him again? She seemed hell bent on destroying Portland, worse, his career, just a year before an honorable retirement.

His neck grew red, his headache throbbed anew, as he slammed his hand down on the intercom button, "Get me Detective Riepe. Now!"

## Chapter Forty-Six

Jaimiee read of the death threat to Brother Jim, and the ensuing dramatic growth expected for the second march, now named the Million Crusaders March. She immediately cancelled her remaining appointments, and drove to Portland.

Bette insisted on cooking dinner, to prove how well she was doing. Jaimiee chopped vegetables while they got to know each other for the first time, since Bette was still under sedation when Jaimiee left Winnemucca. The cooking was a two-hour process for Bette, her fine motor skills still a little shaky, but as usual her determination triumphed.

Bette had lots of questions for Jaimiee about her life before the brain damage. She didn't completely trust her slowly returning memory, and wanted confirmation of the disturbing images that came to her in quiet times, or in dreams.

Jaimiee touched Bette on the shoulder. "Are you sure you want to hear everything? Some of it might be very upsetting."

"Have to know," said Bette. "Need get this all figured my head so get on to do whatever it is I supposed to do now, with. Think I know what is." She glanced toward the loading dock where Wanda stood smoking. "To help Wanda."

"Okay, Bette. Here's what I could find out about you." Jaimiee began working on the carrots, taking long diagonal slices. "Your first arrest record was in Saint Louis when you were just a girl, when you first ran away from your mother I would guess. Prostitution. In those days they sent girls to jail. You

probably learned the ropes there, because you didn't get arrested again until you were nineteen, this time in Chicago."

"I don't rem..br... know, Chicago."

"You must have not liked it much, because your next arrest was in Seattle, and all your subsequent arrests were there. There weren't many though. I think Seattle is a little less focused on prostitution than the Midwest. You must not have been involved in drugs, or that would have surfaced. You showed up regularly on registers in certain hotels, probably where you took your Johns."

"Have remember of work some place. Real job. It was a funny rem...mber. W...was on ship, lot of women cut up fish. Froze, I think. Remember being cold all time." Bette paused to think. "And remember being seasick."

"You must have gone to Alaska to work on fish processing ships. It's hard miserable work, but the pay is good, if you can take being at sea for weeks at a time, cutting up fish. Yuck!"

"Better than take men to hotels." Bette frowned.

"I can imagine," said Jaimiee. "No, I take that back. I can't imagine having to have sex for money." She smiled at Bette. "I like sex. I just like it when I want it, and with somebody I really like, and trust."

"You lucky, Jaimiee."

They were both quiet. Tears began running down Bette's face; suddenly she laughed. Jaimiee was puzzled. And then she noticed Bette was chopping onions. They both laughed.

"You are taking this well, Bette. Wanda thinks you are ready for the big one," said Jaimiee. She paused to gather her thoughts. "There was a period of time in Seattle I couldn't account for. The stint on the fish processing ship might

explain it. I can tell you why you remember being so seasick." She paused again, looked at Bette. "You were pregnant."

Bette looked at first confused, then her eyes unfocused, faraway, her lip began to quiver, "I, I, I... remembr member now, I, I, I have baby, go to ship to stop taking men, for baby to keep..." Bette dropped her knife in the sink and stared at it. A welling flood of tears overflowed and washed down her cheek. Jaimiee beckoned to Wanda. The two women held Bette as she shook. Wanda wet Bette's shoulder with her own tears.

"I'm sorry," said Jaimiee, talking to Bette, but looking at Wanda, "Maybe you, weren't ready for that." Wanda shook her head, "Now's as good a time as any," looking into Bette's drying eyes. Bette nodded. "Think I had remembers. Just not sure. Where my baby now, Jaimiee? "

"Well, this is the hard part Bette. I don't know. Back in those days, agencies often took the babies of known prostitutes away at birth. The worst part is they sealed the records and there's no way for us to find out where your baby went. As a Caucasian baby it would surely have been adopted, with a good chance of getting a good family."

Bette nodded, resigned, "Hope so."

"It is possible that someday, your child will want to find you. It happens often. They will be told your name and last known location." said Jaimiee.

Bette shook her head. "Better not know mother's whore."

"Time you forgot about that," said Wanda. "You're a new woman now."

Bette smiled, "New woman!" She grabbed Wanda and gave her a crushing hug. "Maybe Ben did Bette favor."

Later, out on the loading dock, Wanda paced and smoked. What'll I do now? This is an awful mess. I can't figure nothing out. Bette is having to work

with her memory coming back and losing her baby and all. And these people hating us. I'm just trying to get shut of Buster's money and get Bette a little help with her getting better. Don't seem to me to be reason to hate somebody.

She realized she was smoking the filter, crushed it out on the concrete, bent to pick it up and deposit it in a coffee can overflowing with butts. Ohhhh. My back hurts. My head hurts. I'm tired all the time. She arched her back and sighed, pulled out another Marlboro, lit it, sighed with satisfaction. That's better. Took another quick drag, exhaled into the damp night air. She held the cigarette up and looked at the smoldering tip, took another drag, coughed and spit into the bushes.

Maybe I should call Linda down in Winnemucca. She always could figure things out. She remembered her friend, how they'd bought and painted Froggie, and how much they laughed. She missed Linda. Wonder if she'd think about coming here to work for Pass-It-On?

Sometimes Wanda felt alone, even with Bette getting better and Magnolia being family and all, and all the good people helping her with the foundation. She was always busy, always people around laughing and having a good time. Sometimes in the middle of it all, she'd feel...funny. Like she was standing in an expanse of Alvord desert, alone.

No use scaring nobody. But she couldn't shake the evidence: skin dry and thin, wrinkled, hair thinning, and her eyes, yellow and bloodshot, her nose now covered with a roadmap of blue veins, and her hands and feet were always cold.

She shook the thought off and took another drag. The gathering gloom brightened the soft glow of smoldering tobacco, the light blued the smoke, made the tendrils sinuous and alive; Medusa like, lovely and dangerous.

Waste of time. Got work to do. She snubbed the butt and went inside.

Over dinner Jaimiee got caught up on Brother Jim and the march. There was a vocal minority of large oafish men who'd pushed their way to the front of the march; they were the most disturbing. They used graphic language and held signs referring to the women's assumed sexual orientation. They appeared to be led by a large man wearing fisherman boots and hi-water overalls. He was red-faced and used the most offensive language.

"Some of these people really hate us, Jaimiee. I'm not used to somebody hating me. I never done nothing to them," said Wanda. "And it all upsets Bette to death. She don't need more worry. She's got enough to do to keep up with her therapy."

"Well, it looks like I've got two jobs to work on right away." Jaimiee pointed to her laptop computer. "I'll do an Internet search on Brother Jim, do you know his full name? Tomorrow I'll find out what the police know. The death threat could be a fake for the publicity, but that would be risky. Brother Jim isn't the brightest star in the sky, but he doesn't appear that stupid. He certainly knows how to make the most of it."

"Death note was cut from magazine," said Bette. "That tickles me my head. Don't know how say. Bother me."

"Bette, you might have something there. I'll check my notes, but I seem to remember that was the method Ben used to do the ransom notes faxed to Hunnycut High Tech Investments.

"You don't think...?" said Wanda.

"It's a long shot. We don't even know what happened to Ben. He could be anywhere, even here in Portland. But, I don't see a motive. He wouldn't want to be discovered and prosecuted for his crime against you, Bette."

"Don't remember Ben, much. Remember old man. How he?"

"He's back home, and Charlie, do you remember Charlie?"

"No."

"Or the Dalmatian, the dog?"

"Remember old man like spotted dog."

"They are living with Matthew now and he's doing well. He asked his nephew and that awful wife of his to leave. With Charlie's muscle backing him up, they left pretty quickly! I go out and visit them. I take my little tent, sleep on the bluff, and listen to the surf, watch the stars and the ships sailing for Port of Seattle."

Bette was transfixed. "I want go, Wanda. I want see Matthew, see where he live. I really want, Wanda. Can we do that?"

"Sure enough Bette, we can do whatever you want. We'll drive Froggie up and have us a visit with the old man and Charlie and the dog too. But, I figure we got to get this whole mess straightened out first. I don't like trouble, but this time I'm not a going to run away."

"What do you mean, this time, Wanda?" asked Jaimiee.

This was the opportunity Wanda needed to tell Jaimiee the story of Buster's wake, and why she had run away from Portland. "Any old way, the last I saw of my Buster was his casket a floating in the river, and the whole thing burning. Then the fire must of got to the embalming fluid, cause the whole thing flared up like the Fourth of July, and it wasn't no time before he wasn't hardly a cinder and he sunk."

Jaimiee whistled, as soon as she could close her mouth.

"Wasn't nothing left to do except tell Churchill and them goodbye and disappear."

"You certainly can be forgiven for running away," said Jaimiee.

"Thought I might kill myself, but I was too scared to try, and didn't hardly know how anyways. Finally found my way back to Fields where nobody



ever got the newspaper, didn't have satellite teevee then, so nobody knew what had happened."

"What did you do all those years?" asked Jaimiee.

"Cooked at the Roadkill was about all. Watched teevee. One or twice a year I'd go up to Burns to buy my underwear and polyester pants. Went to Boise once. Mrs. Fields wanted to show me the big LDS temple they got there. She didn't push it, bless her heart. That's about all I done."

Then she brightened. "One thing I enjoyed a whole lot. I sure did like to hang out in the grove across the road. Them serious bird people calls it the Fields Oasis, and they come from all over. The birders saw there's more than 200 different birds in that little bunch of trees. The cottonwoods is thick, it's full of bugs and worms and stuff. I'd just sit and listen to the birds."

She sighed. "It wasn't all bad, Fields. It's a pretty place. Quiet. And the cowboys was nice as could be. But, this is different now. I can't run away. Buster's favorite people is depending on Pass-It-On and I'm not going to let them down." She looked at Bette and smiled, "Are we Bette?"

"No. Not ever."

## Chapter Forty-Seven

The first thing Jaimiee found on Brother Jim was a cryptic mention on a website aimed at churches in the rural Southeast looking for a hell-fire-and-brimstone preacher for their summer revivals; a good performer could pull them in by the hundreds and mean thousands of dollars for the church coffers. The message read: "For those of you wanting to know the whereabouts of Brother Jim, we have no information at this time. We pray he has found redemption and is following the path of the Lord once more. He was last seen driving west on I-64."

Jaimiee used a search site and a map site to find towns with newspapers in southwest Virginia. Then she searched their online archives for the period immediately after Brother Jim's sudden departure.

"Bingo!" She found a story in a small weekly with the headline: "Conception Deemed Not Immaculate, Preacher Flees" The story gave Jaimiee the father's name of the girl who Jim had impregnated. Using a web-based national telephone listing, she found the number where she guessed she would find the girl and fatherless child.

But that would have to wait until she found out about the death threat to Brother Jim. She doubted the connection with Ben, but would keep it in mind. It might be the father of the girl in Virginia. She would need more information from the Portland Police.

Monday morning she arrived at Portland Police Headquarters and introduced herself as a security consultant working for the Pass-It-On foundation, requesting a meeting with the detectives working on the Brother Jim death threat case. That got her more attention than she expected, or wanted.

Moments after presenting her card, Chief Clancy stormed from his office and stood glowering at her.

“If you want help for that woman who is tearing this city in half, you came to the wrong place! Wanda Parks has been nothing but trouble. If you want to help and not hinder this investigation and this city, you can go back to your client and tell her to get out of town. Now. Tell her to just disappear, just like she did twenty years ago, and never ever come back!”

Jaimiee’s eyebrows raised. She took a deep breath, never taking her eyes from Chief Clancy’s. “With all due respect Chief Clancy, you are out of line with such a request. This is not the late 1800’s. This is not Tombstone, and you are not Wyatt Earp.” She folded her arms, and waited.

It didn’t seem possible to anyone in the room, but Chief Clancy got even redder in the face, his neck muscles twitched and he began to grind his teeth.

“You. You...”

“Be very careful Chief Clancy. Be very careful. Any reference to my sex or race could be viewed very negatively by a police review board, should I choose to report this conversation.”

He remembered hearing something like this before. From the shoe shiner riding in the car with the Parks woman when he first stopped them on the way to the wake, twenty years before when he was Sergeant Clancy.

Jaimiee could see him reconsidering. “Now I’m sure, even if you did say something inappropriate, that you wouldn’t mean it. I can see that all of this is putting you under a great deal of stress. Perhaps it would be best for you to pass me on to your chief detective.”

He exhaled through pursed lips and his color faded. He looked at the receptionist, “Get Riepe!” turned and walked briskly into his office.

Chief Detective Tom Riepe had heard the confrontation and come running.

Jaimiee breathed a sigh of relief. She turned to find the fit looking, forty something male with short clipped hair leaning against the doorframe, smiling and shaking his head.

"Good on ya," said Tom. "I've seen few men stand up to him, and I've never seen anyone defuse him that effectively."

This brought the smile that turned most men's knees to jelly. Had Jaimiee known the power of that smile, her lovely milk chocolate skin, blindingly white teeth and rich brown eyes, she would have used it more often than she already did.

"Well thank you very much, mister..?"

"Riepe, Chief Detective Tom Riepe."

"Thank you Chief Detective Riepe."

"Tom," extending his hand.

"Very well, then call me Jaimiee. Nice to meet you, Tom."

"How can I help, Jaimiee?"

"I suppose you overheard that my client is the Pass-It-On foundation. I met Wanda Parks a little over a year ago and found her to be an exceptional individual. When she asked my help in determining the motives of Brother Jim, I readily accepted. Then it was all made more imperative by this death threat..."

"You of course know your clients would be suspect."

"Yes, of course. I would expect you to follow that up first, and I am sure my clients will cooperate fully."

"I have a man on the way over there now."

"I suppose this means you can't offer me any help before you have evaluated his interview?"

"That's the usual procedure, but I'm just as sure as you are that these women are not responsible. Our interview is mostly a formality. Do you have any ideas?"

"Two not very good ones. First would be the father of a teenage girl the good minister impregnated three years ago in Virginia." Detective Riepe raised his eyebrows. "Brother Jim left the area under threat of tar and feathers according to a newspaper article." This was too much for Tom and he laughed heartily, and Jaimiee smiled. "I have a telephone number and intend to call after the man is likely to be home from work." "Smashing," said Tom shaking his head, "You are good, top-drawer and far ahead of me."

"Thank you for the compliment, sir," intoned Jaimiee with just the hint of a smile playing at the corner of her lips, "Just doing my job. By the way, was the postmark from Virginia, perchance?"

"No, it was from Beaverton, a western suburb."

"So if he is home later," she looked at her watch, "say in about an hour, that would clear him."

"Most likely. He'd still be here if he intended harm to Brother Jim. Let's go to the cafeteria for a cuppa while I hear your second idea? And, by the way, Clancy's a good bloke, and an excellent Chief. It's just that he has a history with Wanda Parks that goes way back." He explained how Clancy's career had suffered a major setback when he allowed Buster's wake to continue, and he never forgot Wanda's part in it.

"Wanda just told me about the wake. Amazing bit of bad luck I'd say. No wonder she ran away," said Jaimiee. She went on to tell him of the mistaken kidnapping case, and how one of the gang, Ben had used the same scissors and paste method used in the current threatening note.

"Is this Ben in Portland?"

"Don't know. His last known location was San Francisco. I'd like to find him because Wanda witnessed his assault on Bette."

"So Bette and Ben were involved with this mistaken kidnapping, together?"

"Yes. And when they discovered the mistake, the tensions apparently got out of hand. If not for Wanda, she would have died."

"And that is how Bette became Mrs. Parks' partner?"

"Friend." She smiled at Tom. "All that can be a bit complicated these days. They are private people."

"Well taken. Friend then."

"If Ben is in Portland, he's probably homeless. He was badly hurt in a mine explosion in Nevada."

"This is becoming interesting. Do you have a photo?"

"A mug shot of him when he was much younger. I found out his name was Ben Marconi, and that he was recently laid off from Boeing. His record indicated he had something of a problem with women. I'll have the file on him sent down from Seattle."

"He would have changed his name. The homeless can't get in a cheap hotel, or into some shelters, without identification. They often keep their first names. There are a couple of men who do a good business in false identities. We let them operate in exchange for information when it's important. I'll go out this afternoon and call in a few debts. They probably won't help me with his real last name, but they'll give me some Bens to check out."

"Do you have a database where I can search for homeless men that might fit his description?"

"Sure, I can let you use it here. You can work on that in my office while I do the street work. Then we'll make that telephone call to Virginia."

"Sounds like a plan," smiled Jaimiee.

"And then maybe I can shout you a pint?" His turn to smile.

"Maybe. Maybe." Her eyebrows raised in surprise, then lowered in challenge. "If you can find me a Tusker, from East Africa."

He grinned. "Can do. We'll stop off at Belmont Station. That's where I get my Fiji Bitter."

"I'm willing to bet there's a story goes with your favorite beer too?"

"Well and truly," he laughed. "Well and truly."

Jaimiee's search for homeless men meeting Ben's description was fruitless. Too many of them were in their 50's or 60's and damaged in one way or another, and none of them were named Ben.

On a faint hunch, she went over the blotter for the past few days. She found one item of interest. A transit officer had thrown a homeless man off the Max at the Zoo, and he thought he had gotten on at Beaverton. Maybe they could get a description from the officer.

Tom had found two Bens who had changed identity in the last two years. One of them died before Ben could have been in Portland. The other was unknown to the department. "If this is your Ben, he must be staying clean. We haven't had so much as a drunk and disorderly by that name."

"I couldn't find anything either. I found something on the blotter I'd like you to check on later. Could we call that father in Virginia now?"

Tom handed her the telephone. While she dialed, "Might not want to tell him too much about Brother Jim. He might still want to do him in."

"Good idea," said Jaimiee, "Could I speak to Mister Atkins, please. Hello Mister Atkins... No this is not a telemarketing call, but I do hope you can help me, and I can help you." She went on to explain who she was and that she had

found Brother Jim. Tom smiled when she held the phone away from her ear and grimaced, while Gene Atkins expressed his opinion of Brother Jim loudly in graphic terms. This was a man who had been hurt, whose family had been changed, but who was also a decent sort, not dangerous.

Jaimiee asked to speak to the daughter, and when he lay the telephone down, she could hear a young child laughing in the background.

She told Jaimiee that her name was Roxanne Atkins, "but most people call me Honey." Honey Atkins was now nearly 20 years old, her child, Jimmy was two and three months. "I named him after his daddy. My daddy like to never forgive that. But he loves little Jimmy; just spoils him to death."

"How do you feel about Jimmy's father?"

"Oh, I know'd Jim was not made for settling down, but I loved him anyway. The way he preached just about made my toes curl and there was no way I was going to say no to him. He told me the Lord must a meant for us to be a doing the things we was a doing, or the Lord wouldn't have made us feel thataway. I believed him. I wanted to believe him. And I reckon I still do. I've got my beautiful Jimmy. I can't help but think Jim might be missing seeing his child. I wouldn't ever want to force him to come back here, or even to support his baby, but I can't help but believe that if he ever seen his Jimmy, he'd change. And I know he loved me. In his own way I mean. You know. Mens' way. I know he left, but I think it was hard on him. I figure he's just real ambitious in the Lord and feels the call to be a big successful preacher. He couldn't settle down here in the sticks."

"So, you've forgiven him?" asked Jaimiee.

"Well, that's what the Lord teaches. My daddy hadn't got to that yet, but yes, I forgive Brother Jim. And I still love him."



Jaimiee looked over at Tom, "Would you be willing to come to Portland, with little Jimmy, to show Brother Jim his son."

"I would in a minute. It would hurt to see him again and go through remembering being set aside by him. But, I'd want him to see his son. I sometimes think I might be able to talk him into taking us up, but that's probably just foolishness." Jaimiee could hear her father say something in the background. "It don't matter though. I ain't got no money and could never get way out there."

"If you'll come, I'll send you round trip airline tickets."

"What?! You would? But why would you do a thing like that for me? You don't even know me."

Jaimiee told her an abbreviated story of how Brother Jim was preaching and leading marches against her friends, and how somebody had threatened his life. "There's a possibility he might need you now, and little Jimmy. I can't make any promises," she glanced at Tom and smiled. "Men are very unpredictable animals."

"Oh, my God, I can't believe anybody would want to kill Jim."

"We don't know if it's serious or not, but we have to treat it as if it were."

"I'll do it," said Honey. "I'll come. I'll have to talk real sweet to Daddy to get him to let me go, but I know I can do it." Jaimiee put Detective Riepe on the phone to talk to her father and ease his concerns.

They worked out when Honey would fly to Portland. Jaimiee said she would order tickets from a travel agent in Roanoke, and all she would have to do was pick them up, and catch the plane.

"I sure do want to thank you Miss Jaimiee. I never would have thought that I would ever find Jim ever again, and you done found him for me. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

"No, thank you," said Jaimiee. "I'll do my best to make this experience pleasant for you."

"Well, I never been on an airplane, for one thing, and won't that be something, me Honey Atkins, flying all across the country with my son to see his daddy."

When Jaimiee hung up, "I hope this is the right thing to do," she sighed. "I don't want to be a part of her being hurt more."

"Sometimes in public safety, you do have to use people in order to achieve a higher goal. You have to help your clients. I have to find Brother Jim's potential killer. At least we can take Mister Atkins off the list."

Tom continued, "We came up with an unusual possibility today; a young bearded guy who dresses up in white robes, sort of like Jesus, carries several candles and sometimes pickets with bible verses in front of Brother Jim's storefront church. He gives some people the creeps; they say he seems to appear and disappear at will. I don't know. We have somebody on him."

"Wow," said Jaimiee. "I'd love to follow up on him, but I think Ben is more pressing. How are you covering Brother Jim?"

"We have an officer with him all day and the community policing station is just down the street from the church. Brother Jim lives in an apartment on the second floor and has promised to stay inside after dark."

"Well," said Jaimiee, looking at her watch. "I can taste that Tusker. Where's this Belmont Station?"

Tom smiled. "We're off. As long as we don't have to talk about the unpredictability of men."

"Fair enough. If you'll tell me what brought you from Australia to Portland? I finally ruled out Kiwi."

"Good ear. It's a long story. Might take a couple of shouts."

“And naturally, the second shout is mine,” winked Jaimiee.

## Chapter Forty-Eight

In his apartment, Brother Jim was reading his Bible. He laid it down and sighed, looked through the rain-streaked window. His bible was open to Matthew 23:12 "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

Why am I so miserable? Everything is going just like I want. Better even than I ever could wish for. My preaching is inspired. It's moving people like I never moved people before. Scary. My power. Never thought it would catch on like it did. Got to ride it out. See it through. It's my time.

Wind swirled between the buildings and threw rhythmic cascades of rain against the window. He was attracted to the onslaught. He looked at the street below. At first he thought he saw the apparition he'd seen twice from his pulpit, but this young man wore no robe, held no candles, though he did have the red beard and was dressed in white. Somebody else, thought Jim, until the red eyes found him, sent a chill through him.

He hurriedly retreated to his bible: "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." He laid the Bible down. He always went to the scriptures when troubled, just let the pages fall open to see what his eyes fell on.

Lately his eyes fell on things that made no sense to him. Things that didn't apply: "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." What's that have to do with me? He was finally achieving a following in the Lord. But it was the work of the Lord. I'm going to rid this city of sin. If it makes me famous, fills the collection plate, so much the better. He closed the bible firmly, returned to the rain assaulting his

window. It thrummed in his temples; he kept his distance from the window and the apparition he knew still stood there.

He paced the room. Ragged patterned rug, worn couch, dust bunnies, a kitchen that needed new linoleum, leaking faucets, stained sink and creaking floor. He drew water from the kitchen sink, emptied the glass, set it down. Would you deny me more Lord? At a recent regional church leader conference, he'd seen the BMWs' and Lexus'. Why not me Lord? Those preachers, sorry Lord, pastors, from the rich churches don't live like this.

*It's not about riches.*

He jerked his gaze to the rain washed window, felt a chill.

And what about my loneliness, Lord. How come I don't have the pretty wife and well-behaved children like those pastors you dote on?

*What about the girl, the child?*

This time he didn't look to the window. His shoulders slumped. I don't want to hear this.

He turned his thoughts to his recent success. Everyone wanted to get close to him. He looked at his gold plated rings. It would be the thousands of the pastors' followers he would steal, that would make them take notice.

*They are not your flock.*

A voice, or a thought? A thought; he could control his thoughts. He got his suit coat for the deepening chill. He thought about the women who surrounded him, touched his sleeve, eyes flirting, beseeching. One tore the Song of Solomon from her bible and wrote a love note in the margins. He touched it in his pocket.

And then the window called.

*Come and know your sin.*

He stood facing the window, so close the pounding pitiless drops and rivulets lost focus and blurred the white figure and red eyes; the rain swirled and filled his soul, tested his deepest beliefs.

Jim wept. He shook like the wind and the rain.

Exhausted, he slept on the dusty couch. After dark he awoke to the flashing of the Budweiser sign across the street. The rain still assaulted the window, breaking the flashes of pure red light into patterns. Comprehensible patterns.

*Let me in.*

Noooo, Jim moaned. Noooo. He buried his face in the stale beer and pizza couch.

And then the white light washed away the red, and found him, took him.

## Chapter Forty-Nine

It was a tough week for the prayer group. Kathy and Edna worked the telephones trying to gather a meeting to pray about Pass-It-On. Some appeared to be avoiding calls. When Kathy called Susan Wilberforce, there was a message saying they had gone to their beach house for the week, not something the security conscious wealthy do. Then she ran into Susan at Trader Joe's:

Looking in Susan's basket, Kathy said, "I know you use a lot of TJ's sun dried tomato pesto, and those lovely Australian wines, but driving back from Seaside is a bit excessive, isn't it?" She raised her eyebrows and waited for Susan's answer.

Susan lowered her gaze. "I'm sorry Kathy." She looked pleadingly at her friend. "Chester forbade me."

"You are not a child, Susan," said Kathy. "No one can forbid you to do anything." She looked sadly at Susan, who shrugged.

As she left Trader Joe's, not a little discouraged, a man in a white suit tipped his white hat and handed her a tract: *Corn Pone Opinions*. He smiled under a truly impressive mustache. Doesn't look like he belongs here. Strange title. She put it with her fresh basil and penne. I'll read it later.

Edna had better luck with Joanna Erickson and Jennifer Johnson. Their husbands had been difficult, and it had weakened their resolve. When they heard Edna's experience with Jon, they both agreed they could probably win over their husbands. Joanna said she would go shopping for new bedroom lingerie. "This could be fun!"

Since her husband had recently undergone heart bypass surgery, Jennifer thought his favorite dinner might be safer. Both called back the next day and reported success; they would come to the regular prayer group meeting.

By the mid-week meeting they had rounded up a dozen women who agreed to pray about whether or not they could support the work of Pass-It-On. Six of them already had clients, and some of the others had been considering it until the uproar.

Without the basic format of prayer to hold emotions in check, it could have been a contentious meeting. There was a group of older women, led by Gryndl Reighnhalter, who had been adamant from the beginning against any involvement with Pass-It-On, even before the charges of lesbianism by Brother Jim. Since then, they had met separately before the regular prayer meeting to share prayers that hinted loudly about some members supporting the work of Satan. This regular meeting was the time to pray these prayers openly.

It was the custom of the prayer group to begin with a round-robin prayer. Mostly these prayers consisted of petitions for the health and well-being of loved ones, peace for the country, and that their church prosper and grow. Most usually asked to continue to grow in Christ, but recently had been leaving that part out. Edna confided in Kathy that she had been praying about growing in Christ for years, but now that she was experiencing it, she was more than a little afraid.

Gryndl Reighnhalter took the lead in prayer, "Heavenly Father, we have gathered together in Jesus' name to glorify your kingdom. We are your foot soldiers in this world of inequity. We are to glorify you through your church. Lord, we ask your guidance as we go forth. We ask that you protect us from the evil that lurks in this vile city. We ask that you give us the judgment to shun the evil ones, that you give us the strength to resist the siren call of Satan, and of his



handmaidens. We are sometimes weak to the ways of the world. We succumb to associations that are not to the glory of your kingdom. For that we ask your forgiveness. All praise and glory be to your name. Amen.”

Kathy glanced at Edna who was looking back grimly.

Isabelle Chargeur began, “Dearest Father in Heaven, who protects and guides us in your ways, we would ask that you give special guidance to this group of believers today as we struggle with your will. We would have you guide us all away from the insidious influence of Satan. Guide us in the ways of righteousness, protect us from all evil influences and lead us in the footsteps of Christ.”

It was Kathy’s turn next. Two can play this game. She waited a full minute, until the tension in the room became palpable. She knew the time was ripe, when Gryndl and Isabelle snuck looks at each other.

“Father in Heaven. Be with us today. We face a crisis of faith that reaches to the very depths of our core beliefs. Are we to only worship you and your son on Sunday morning, or are we to follow your commandments, as given us through the teachings of Jesus? Are you the angry judgmental God of the Old Testament, or are you the loving compassionate God you showed us through Jesus? Your humble servants await your direction in this matter, and all others. Amen”

This exchange seemed to overwhelm an already confused Julie Singleton, who never seemed to know where she stood on anything. But, when she said the Lord’s Prayer, it seemed just right to bring things back to center.

Then it was Edna’s turn. Her long thin fingers twitched in her lap, and her mind roared. The old, class-based fear of disapproval threatened her resolve. Isabelle and Gryndl were older. Their husbands were far wealthier, and gave more generously to the church. How could she go against them? Suddenly she

was back in Kentucky, looking longingly at the shiny new cars of the wealthy as they took their reserved parking spots at church. Surely they must be better people, or God would not have made them rich, and her family poor.

Just as suddenly as her resolve had fled her, it returned in the image of Wanda helping Bette up the stairs at Pass-It-On. She remembered Bette struggling to prepare snacks for the Board while they worked. She saw gentle caring ways between two middle-aged women, helping the poor together. How could this be sin?

She sighed, and began. "God help us. God help us. We have lost our way." She paused to reach in her purse for a tissue to collect the tears that were beginning to stream down her face.

Gryndl's look bordered on a sneer. Edna was well respected by both sides of the issue, and she would bring the group back to praying for grandchildren instead of sinners and strangers.

Gryndl's gloat was premature.

"We have been so caught up in our personal desires to protect our own, that we have forgotten the price Jesus paid to bring us your message. He gave his life that we might have life, and have it more abundantly. Before Pass-It-On, I thought that meant, by being faithful, we would be more comfortable, our families safe and secure. I now know that is not enough. Since I've been involved with Pass-It-On, I have come to understand better what abundant life means to me. It means taking risks, like Jesus did. It means associating with people different than us, weaker perhaps, in need of friendship, sometimes guidance. It means spending less effort worshipping your son, and more effort trying to follow his teachings."

Isabelle went white and she raised her head, her mouth open. Gryndl pursed her lips and turned red.

“Until now I did not understand what you required of me. Growing in Christ means seeking out those in greatest need, and shining my light into the dark places I fear most.”

Kathy and several of the other women were now crying. Edna was praying the prayer they had been afraid to pray.

“I respect and love this group of women Lord. They have been my strength through many a family issue. But now, I know you require more of me, and I must follow where you lead, alone. Thy will be done. Amen.”

## Chapter Fifty

Tig Johansen and other regulars in Brother Jim's amen corner had taken to meeting regularly at Tig's house to drink beer and listen to tapes of several radio preachers. They were interested in sermons that documented the breakdown of society as a result of the homosexual agenda. Some were focused on male homosexuals and the hints that the lifestyle might be so attractive as to turn their sons away from the straight and narrow.

Others, Tig in particular, were focused on lesbians. After he sent a friend to try to get a date with his former wife Joann, and she'd rebuffed him, Tig became more convinced that she was lesbian. It didn't seem to matter that this friend was usually drunk, and always smelled of gasoline, motor oil and fish. He obsessed constantly about Joann and her housemate Lilly. He hated them both, and had graphic fantasies about punishing them. All that kept him from it was the trauma it would bring his daughter Sofie.

At the end of one meeting, he pulled aside Tom Wayne. After hearing his confession, he was sure Tom would be willing to join him in doing something more than protest.

"Now you two be good," one of the departing men aimed a limp wrist at them. "Don't want all this fag talk giving you two ideas!"

"That's not funny," said Tom.

Tom was a big man, hardened by a quarter century in the woods, now laid off by a lawsuit to create a study area for the spotted owl.

The thing that hurt him most was when his daughter Jenny came home from college in her senior year and announced that she was a lesbian. She had even become a leader in a lesbian group. He ordered her out of the house, and

told her never to come home again. He failed to soften on the ban, and after a year, his wife of 30 years left him to live with Jenny in Portland.

The hate and fear that all this had produced in him ruined his health. High blood pressure, exacerbated by constant anger and a steady diet of fast food, left him with a permanently red face. His minister had tried to counsel him to read what Jesus had to say about forgiveness, and he left that church to follow Brother Jim. He didn't want to forgive. He wanted justice.

"I got to do something, Tom," said Tig. "I can't stand to let this thing keep eating at me."

"Me too, Tig." Tom leaned back and took another drink of his beer. "I got no work, I got no wife, I got no daughter, and I sure as hell ain't never going to have no grandchildren. Life ain't much worth living anymore."

Tig shook his head. "Me, I figure I might as well go out doing something worthwhile. We got to stop this thing."

"You said it."

"Brother Jim's marches is doing a lot of good, but them witches is still there, and they'll still be there next year. People will get tired of giving up their every Saturday, and all the expense of driving to Portland. It'll all fade out, and won't nothing be different."

"Unless we do something," said Tom.

"I figure."

"You reckon the man upstairs is banking on us, Tig?"

"Looks like we been chose, Tom."

They determined that killing Bette and Wanda was the only way to achieve their goal. The full reality of what they were considering gave Tig brief pause, but Tom's faith and determination fired him up again. They decided it

would be best if they operated independently, to assure that at least one of them got through.

They pushed aside the beer cans, knelt at Tig's kitchen table and prayed to Jesus for his help in ridding the world of the evil ones who had made their lives so miserable, and who would bring God's kingdom down if allowed to live. They shook hands, promised to never speak of their plans, even to each other, and parted determined.

Tig's plan was simple enough. Next morning, when his hangover had eased, he sighted in his deer rifle at 40 yards, the distance from the warehouse across the street to the women's large front window. After referring to a Field and Stream article on comparative destructive effects of bullet shape on flesh and bone, he hand picked a dozen hollow nose cartridges.

Tig hoped that when the two women died in front of the marchers, that the resulting panic would allow him to escape. His Christian brothers and sisters would see the wrath of Jesus brought down on the abominations, once and for all. He would be a hero, whether the authorities caught and persecuted him or not. If he escaped, he knew there would be true Christians willing to hide him forever.

Tom's plans became darker the more he ruminated on his daughter and wife, and the deed he had committed to. He became more convinced, by constant prayer, that what he was doing was right. When he died he would be assured a place in Heaven, beside his mother and father and Jesus, if not his wife and daughter, who were certain to be with Satan.

Tom didn't see any point in trying to get away. He would be caught sooner or later and be put on trial in Caesar's unlawful court, just as Jesus had been. He remembered one hero who had killed an abortion doctor. He was abandoned by mainstream Christians when apprehended. After many years of

appeals, he was executed. Tom didn't want to wait that long to die. No, he intended to become a martyr. He wanted to die saving children from a future where lesbians ruled and men were relegated to submissive roles rather than their rightful place at the head of the family and society. It was already happening. It had happened to him. He wanted to die to save other men from his humiliation.

He would use a method that would kill him at the same time as he killed the women. The phrase suicide bombing came to mind; he dismissed the thought; Moslem terrorists carried out suicide attacks, Christian martyrs went to the cross with Jesus. But, he embraced the method; as a logger, he knew that two sticks of dynamite could gut the building, kill the women, and not cause too much damage on the street.

He would feel no pain. One second he would stand here, burdened by this veil-of-tears and the next, stand before a proud and welcoming Jesus.

## Chapter Fifty-One

The second march-Saturday dawned with caravans of hundreds of slow moving vehicles backing up traffic outbound from Seattle and Boise. Hundreds more joined at each junction along the way.

By noon, Portland was at a standstill; I-5 and I-84 were crawling, and by mid-afternoon, nothing was moving at more than 40 miles an hour within a hundred miles of Portland. At this rate, some of the faithful would not make it to Old Town in time for the march, but they could follow it on one of the Christian radio stations, which were all broadcasting what the news media had dubbed the Million Crusaders March. In a divinely inspired stroke of organization, church busses emptied out in Old Town; they then shuttled marchers from vehicles parked at malls for miles around.

Old Town was a sea of protest signs. Christians ate packed lunches, made new friends, and were generally having a good time. The mood was light. Most were not there to be threatening. They were mostly expressing their disappointment in the rapid change in American life. Their teen girls were demanding pants once considered obscene on a plumber; boys stuffed their cars with huge sound systems and played music filled with disrespect for authority and women. Celebrity culture dominated the media, shopping became the new spirituality and malls, the new churches.

Many of these people had never heard of homosexuals until after high school. Now their children and grandchildren were talking about favorite television and movie stars announcing their sexual orientation. It was all too much. They feared for their children and the array of marketing and technology aimed at seducing them into the ways of the world, and away from their faith.



Few really meant to drive Bette and Wanda from Portland, a few even thought Pass-It-On was not a bad idea. But they all needed to express their frustrations and hadn't known how, until Brother Jim showed them.

Just across the Broadway Bridge, at Memorial Coliseum, the biggest pow wow of the season had been underway since Friday. Opening ceremonies were planned for late afternoon, followed by a full evening of dancing and drumming and singing. Saturday was the big day for non-Indians to come see their Indian neighbors perform in costume and sample their food and crafts. But there were few around this day. Something was amiss.

Coyote and Magnolia told everyone about what was happening across the river in Old Town. Word spread like prairie fire through the throngs of dancers, drummers and their families, that Coyote and Magnolia's friends were under siege. They'd seen the traffic building since early morning, from teepees circling the dance grounds or trailers and tent campers in the parking lot.

There were hundreds of Indians, most in full Plains Indian attire: feathered headdresses, leather leggings, beaded shirts with bones and seashells. The men carried rattles and drums, they jingled and rattled as they walked across the infield dirt in leather moccasins.

Tribes traveled from California, British Columbia, from Utah to Saskatchewan: Shoshone, Klamath, Umatilla, and Kootenay; Blood and Blackfoot, Crow and Ute. For the flag march they had invited the usual Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman on his magnificent black stallion. There was even a troop of U.S. Cavalry Indian War reenactors. It had been a bit of a struggle in the Native American community when the idea was first proposed. Cool heads finally pointed out that it was all a show anyway. It had after all, been well over

a hundred years since the end of the Indian Wars; maybe it was time to bury the tomahawk.

By mid-afternoon the opening ceremonies practice run was complete. The preliminary dance and drum contests, and the very popular, and often humorous, women's teepee building contest, was finished. Usually by this time the grounds would be filled with visitors looking for traditional Indian fry bread, that wonderful deep-fried sugar coated delicacy that was about as far from historic Indian food as possible, but was prized by all, particularly cardiac surgeons.

The grounds were empty of the usual visitors browsing the jewelry and moccasins spread out on blankets. The consensus was that the protest march was the cause of this lost revenue. Runners were sent from each group of teepees to find out what was going on. Soon, the pow wow grounds were buzzing with the news. Groups gathered to debate the wisdom of religious people being so focused on one of the lesser sins. Besides, if these women were friends of Coyote and Magnolia, they must be good people.

Several of the elders called a meeting and invited Coyote and Magnolia. Coyote was widely revered as the best and most traditional heart-beat drummer in all the Northwest, and Magnolia had become the sweetheart of everyone with her wholehearted support of the pow wow movement.

"How can we help?" asked Chief Mourning Raven, known for his directness. He was the oldest of the Chiefs at the pow wow, and as such it was proper that he set the tone of leadership.

"Well," said Coyote, rubbing his chin. "Here we all are, all dressed up and nowhere to go. No crowd to see us dance. No one to hear our drums." He paused dramatically, arms up palms out. "Why don't we take our opening ceremony across that bridge and show those people a real parade?"

Magnolia's eyes lit up, and the gathered elders nodded in agreement.

Coyote looked at Magnolia. "I been in on one other parade here in Portland, except it was a wake, Buster's wake, and we didn't have a permit for that one neither. Look how good it turned out?" He looked to the sky and clasped his hands together. "Churchill. You up there, now you listen up, and look down, my man. Remember Sergeant Clancy? Well, he's Chief Clancy now, and we are a going to give him another parade."

Magnolia was reminded of Coyote's water balloon attack on her so many years before, and her retribution. That glorious mischievous glint was back in his eye. Trouble was coming. Outrageous trouble. Glorious trouble. This was her chance to take part in Buster's wake, if 20 some years late, and to help Wanda. She wasn't about to miss out, if her cart batteries held up.

## Chapter Fifty-Two

Jaimiee saw that driving to the Portland International Airport would be impossible given the traffic situation. She took the Northwest Trolley to the Max station and the Max to the airport. Most of the out-of-town protesters didn't know where the Max went, and it wasn't crowded.

She met Honey and little Jimmy in baggage claim, bought them some lunch and caught Honey up on the situation with the march.

"Jim is going to be really busy today, and we might not even be able to get close to him, what with the massive size of the crowd, and his police protection."

"They got the police protecting him?"

"Yes, but don't you worry, I've talked to Detective Riepe who's in charge of the investigation. There will be a dozen uniformed police, and as many plain-clothes officers mingling with the crowd. Brother Jim should be the safest man in town today."

The Max train was quite a revelation to Honey and a source of much joy to little Jimmy. They gawked at the blue/green glass towers of the Oregon Convention Center, and then the tall skyscrapers flashing through the girders of the Steel Bridge as the Max glided quietly into the city center. But it was the shiny new Northwest Trolley that really captured the boy. He could never have imagined a thing like a train running in the streets, right alongside the cars and all the unusual people on the sidewalks.

This was a new world for Honey too. Before this trip, she had hardly been out of the oak hollows of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It was exciting, and more than a little scary too. They met a variety of interesting people on the walk down

Everett Street to Pass-It-On: city sophisticates, pressed slacks and blouses, cell phones to their ears, shopping in art galleries; spike-haired youth out to see and be seen, and a few homeless wandering aimlessly, pushing shopping carts, sometimes with a bottle in a paper bag.

At Pass-It-On the staff made a big fuss over them. Bette took Jimmy up to their loft to meet her collection of stuffed animals, and play with the toys she'd bought for him at the second hand store. Wanda, Jaimiee and Honey had coffee and talked about Brother Jim and the troubles he was causing them. Honey told Wanda how much she loved Jim and how she'd long ago forgiven him for abandoning her. She just knew he must have had a good reason at the time, but she hoped he might change his mind, once he saw their Jimmy.

"Well, any-old-way," said Wanda. "I figure just about everybody has a lot of good deep down, and I'm sure that's the case with Brother Jim." She looked at Honey with a wry smile. "His is just a mite deeper than most."

"Well, he sure enough has give me a lot of grief." Honey looked toward the loft where Jimmy and Bette were laughing. "But he's give me that bundle of happiness too."

Jaimiee listened to the two and shook her head. "Okay you two Pollyannas. Just how do you propose to get this sweet man to stop destroying the work of this essential charity, and get him to accept responsibility for his family, so we can all live happily ever after?"

"Don't you be so hard on him!" said Honey. "He's just a man, and men are just likely to do anything that takes their fancy, until one of us women comes along to straighten them out. Well, I'm that woman for Brother Jim, even if he don't know it yet. Whatever he does is in the hands of the Lord."

"Yeah," Wanda chimed in. "I've seen worse men in my day." She paused. "I've seen a lot better too, but I have seen some worse. We just got to find a way

to help the Lord to get at his better side. And then drag it kicking and screaming out into the sunshine.”

“And just how are you going to do that?” said Jaimiee. “I agree it’s what we have to do, or I wouldn’t have brought Honey here. But exactly how? Time is running short.” She looked at her watch. “It’s two o’clock. If previous marches are any gauge, Brother Jim and his Crusaders should be here in about an hour.”

“We’ll think of something.” Wanda and Honey said almost in unison, and they laughed and laughed until Jimmy and Bette came to the loft banister to see what was the matter.

Jaimiee shook her head as she dialed Tom Riepe’s cellular number to check out the progress of the march. “Can’t talk long. These things are too easy to intercept. It’s crazy down here. There must be 5,000 people between Glisan and Burnside south of Fourth, and they just keep coming. We’ve got Brother Jim covered, so far.”

“I bet he’s soaking up the attention,” said Jaimiee.

“He’s only put in a couple of appearances at his apartment window. The media and his followers are calling on him to come out, but he’s not showing himself.”

“That’s not like him, is it?”

“No. He’s the biggest news hound this town has ever seen. It seems out of character. We’ve got two officers with him, and they say he’s subdued, not worried for his safety, just subdued. Oh, and one other thing. We got word that somebody sold a sawed off shotgun to a homeless man yesterday.”

“Oh no. I’ll be inside Pass-It-On. I’ll help watch.”

“Thanks Jaimiee. Gotta go.”

“Take care, Tom.”

### Chapter Fifty-Three

As Ben moved through the throngs gathering for the march, he was invisible, like most homeless men. People moved out of his way when they saw his cane. They didn't look into his one desperate eye.

He was angry and afraid, and determined. His death threat had not made Brother Jim leave Bette alone. He had used it to hurt her more, to hint that she, or her friends, had made the threat. Jim had made himself into a martyr.

Ben was in constant pain now with his bad leg. The community health nurse practitioner wanted to do tests for bone cancer. His jaundice had alarmed her too and she had taken more blood and urine samples. He didn't return for the results. He knew he couldn't afford treatment anyway. No, it was his time. He had the one thing to do, and then he could die. Check out. Leave this awful place behind. He was enduring the pain, and saving up the morphine she'd given him. Maybe he could get the police to do the job for him.

People are accustomed to seeing the homeless wearing long heavy coats, even in moderate weather. Ben was able to hide the sawed off shotgun under his coat. It made him awkward, but the cane and his limp explained that away.

When the march began to move, he would bide his time, stay close, but not close enough to be seen by the police. He had his eye on several men in trench coats with short haircuts.

The masses of marchers tried to get in close to Brother Jim, hoping for some preaching, but he was quiet and seemed to be in no hurry to begin.

They packed around buildings over a several block area, waiting. But, the sun was shining on a fine June Saturday. God must be pleased.

Directly behind Brother Jim, two police officers appeared to be escorting the one they had taken to calling the Jesus man, who was carrying a large sign: Mark 5:8 “Come out of this man, you evil spirit!”

Members of the Brain Injury Support Group met at the offices of the Brain Injury Association of Oregon offices on NW Overton. Many of them had physical disabilities as a result of their injured brains, and the long march would be a challenge, but they were determined to help Bette and Wanda in their time of need.

As they turned east, a man wearing a blinding white suit and impressive mustache, stood, thumbs hooked in his vest pockets, looking through the pressroom window of the Glass and Dahlstrom Print Shop, lost in memory. He pulled out a gold pocket watch on a gold chain, flipped open the cover, closed it quickly and hurried toward Burnside.

As the group neared Old Town, they could hear the singing of the Christians, and to the northeast, a loud sound that perplexed them; drums of some sort; powerful drums, and evocative chanting. Then, a few blocks to the south, they heard the roar of motorcycles, and began to wonder what they had gotten themselves in the middle of. But they struggled toward their friends, nervous and excited about what they would find.

Gay and lesbian activists, after much debate at the various gay bars around town, had decided they couldn't let the marches go unchallenged, even though the most famous female couple in town had rejected them. They would support Bette and Wanda whether they wanted support or not.

At The Roxy, in the early hours of the previous Sunday, they'd agreed to stage their own march. All week, the emails and text messages flew back and



forth across town, and even to the few gays who somehow survived in the countryside.

They would march to Pass-It-On and out them in front of the news media covering the Christian protest march. Someone suggested that was using Bette and Wanda in the worst sort of way, but Tom Wayne's daughter Jenny, most radical in the lesbian community, dissed that wimpy stance. "They owe us, man!"

By popular acclaim, the march was led by the Pink Pistols, many proudly displaying National Rifle Association patches on their pink coveralls. Flanking the Pink Pistols rode a quickly assembled approximation of Dykes on Bikes on everything from Hogs to Vespas. These choices were meant to send the unmistakable message to those who opposed them, that they were ready willing and able to defend themselves if necessary. No wimps in this group. Wrists were twisted, blat-blat-blatting their message to make way for Portland's queers.

They turned south on Burnside, filling all four lanes, scattering confused motorists. They could see the rear guard of Brother Jim's crusaders, who must have thought the End Times were beginning; that they were being descended upon by the hordes of Hell.

The Dykes on Bikes made a fearful roar as they escorted hundreds of queers of various inclinations dressed in colorful Mardi Gras costumes. There was a drum major, and a drum majorette in switched roles, many punk costumes and spiked pink and purple dyed hair, many scantily clad individuals of indeterminate gender, and the cast of legendary Darcelle XV's drag revue.

In the middle marched a white suited figure, wearing a top hat and puffing on a huge phallic cigar. He, or she or it, attracted much attention for authenticity of period costume, a truly masculine stride and impressive white hair and mustache. He, or she or it, smiled and nodded with expansive waves of

the cigar. In the other hand he or she or it, carried a small sign on which was painted the numeral 44 and a question mark.

Some people carried signs expressing support for Bette and Wanda and a few angrily demanded they come out of the closet. A photographer for Just Out newspaper fumbled for a second memory card after filling the first with photos. Jimmy, the editor scurried alongside, planning just how he was going to manage to get out a special edition and beat the Portland Mercury, and Willamette Week to the streets.

On the other side of Old Town, at the Dirty Duck shelter, D-cup was lecturing homeless men and women about showing some gumption. She had spent the week talking up a counter march on Saturday. She hoped for a hundred to meet her at the Greyhound station, and only a handful showed. She remembered the Dirty Duck was serving pork chops for lunch and figured that was where she would find the most homeless, and she was right. "You lousy bunch of bums. That's what you are, bums. You don't deserve the dignity of being called homeless. You're bums. Here Wanda and Bette have sacrificed everything to give you guys a little tiny bit of hope, and you're willing to stand by and let them get attacked by that two-bit preacher and his holier-than-thou bunch."

She pointed to the back door of the shelter where Estel stood smoking. "Look at you, Estel Clark! Why aren't you out there blocking the streets, after what Pass-It-On did for you! Sent you all the way back to Kentucky to see your dying mother, and now you got a nice warm place to sleep, and you're hiding in here when you're needed. Shame on you!"

She slowly pushed her walker around the room, her eyes sweeping the men, and a few women, who were now silently studying the ceiling, examining

pork chop bones, carefully shredding paper napkins, anything to avoid the hard questioning gaze of D-cup.

She was one of them, asking them to do the thing they feared most; stand up for themselves and their kind, stand up and risk notice. She was asking them to do the one thing, the fear of which had sent them on the slide to this low point, where nobody expected it of them anymore. She was asking them to hope, to embed it in action, to defy their inertia, put one foot in front of the other, and risk being slapped down one more time.

She was asking too much for most of them.

She caught the eye of Willie, of no last name, new to skid road. He'd made the mistake of looking toward the front door, and her piercing gaze intercepted him.

"What about you Willie? You're young. What are you afraid of?"

"Awww, man. I... uh." He looked down at his hands clasped on the table. "Well. You know. Uh. There's cops. You know. Over there. I. See. There's this woman. She's lookin' for me. Uh. You know. Kid support, an' stuff."

A small smile tilted in the middle of D-cup's round face. Men. "You think the cops is interested in slackers like you, with all the shit coming down today?"

"Well. I. No, maybe not."

She pointed over to the front door. "Over there. You will go." She looked into his eyes, and knew he would. She's caught him in time. Young enough to still have a bit of backbone, a bit of the boy risk taker still hanging on for dear life, there behind his breast bone, deep deep.

"And, Estel, you're next." She pointed at Estel and he walked slowly to join Willie. Around the room she went, passing over the more disabled or demented, where extreme fear bled from rheumy eyes, showed in shaky hands.

Before long she had twenty-two of the bravest, and most curious, and she led them, hobbling on her walker, back to the bus station to pick up a few more, then south on Fifth to meet the multitudes of the God-fearing, the mostly employed.

The radio room buzzed with calls at the police mobile station, a motorhome parked on Burnside at the Skidmore Fountain, where Chief Clancy had temporary headquarters: Detective Riepe called to report the bizarre Indian march drumming its way off the Broadway Bridge. The lead flag bearers had just turned south on Broadway closely followed by the US Army cavalry reenactors on their horses and a Sergeant Preston look-alike on his black stallion. They were followed by hundreds of Indians, all in authentic costume. The drumming intensified to thunder as they passed the Central Post Office and Federal Building.

Riepe also noted that Brother Jim's crusaders were still stationary because brother Jim had gone into the Chinese Gardens to pray. This puzzled even his most ardent followers, thinking it the time for action, the time for prayer long past. Some murmured that he should not be praying in a place where there were probably graven images of The Buddha.

Just as he was finished with Riepe, Chief Clancy heard the first roar of motorcycle engines as the Dykes on Bikes bore down on him from up the hill on Burnside. "What the...? Oh, no." He immediately sent three bicycle patrolmen to intercept the unauthorized parade, and find out who they were and what they wanted.

About the same time another bicycle cop reported the small gathering of Brain Injury Support Group people on Flanders Street between Broadway and Sixth.

The officers Clancy had sent to intercept called in to report they had decided not to stop the Dykes on Bikes, being unsure if the Pink Pistols were armed, and not wanting to provoke violence, or get shot. When they described the more exotic members of the parade, he knew what he was dealing with and began to piece together the catastrophe that was overtaking him. Déjà vu. Buster's wake all over again. His head throbbed. "Disengage. Shadow. Report if they change course." And he knew they would change course. He knew they would plan to intercept Brother Jim's march before they reached Pass-It-On. Now to find out what the damn Indians were up to.

"Have bicycle unit three intercept the Indians, read them the statutes and find out what the... Disengage if threatened. And, get the copter to meet me in Waterfront Park. Now!" And he was off on foot through Saturday Market toward the park; once outside, the mixed sounds of the groups echoed off downtown buildings and filled him with foreboding.

## Chapter Fifty-Four

Jim wanted to be alone to pray. He asked his followers to wait and entered the deserted Classical Chinese Gardens. He walked the serene paths to a pavilion built over a pond of water lilies. He knelt at an ornate bench.

Just as he silently began the Lord's Prayer, he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder, looked up and saw the beautiful young man, dressed again in his robe and golden sash, "It is too late for the Lord's Prayer. The die is cast."

"Who... who are you?" Jim's voice quavered.

"Not the one you think. Jesus' teachings have a role in this; you and I have our own to play."

"What is my role?"

"I can not tell you that. But, there will be consequences."

"I don't know what to do. So many people..."

"A surprise awaits. Perhaps you will respond well, perhaps not."

"And the consequences?"

"They fall upon the innocent and guilty in equal measure."

"But, who are you?"

"I am No. 44. You can think of me as an angel or a dream, it is your choice."

"How did I come to this?"

"You applied the Moral Sense to your own ends. It is what humans do."

"You don't seem like an angel."

"Perhaps I am but a fiction, or perhaps you have been looking in the wrong places. Come. It is time."

## Chapter Fifty-Five

Kathy and Edna, and the six women in the prayer group who'd found the courage to go with them, were on their way to meet other Christian women who supported Pass-It-On. They had attempted to carpool into town in two SUVs, but were stopped by traffic long before reaching downtown. They parked next to the guardrail and walked in their sensible, low-heeled shoes to the Skyline off ramp where they hailed a cab.

The Pakistani driver pointed out the sign limiting his load to five, but relented when faced with the pleading faces and earnest begging of the eight women. By artfully negotiating the back streets of West Hills neighborhoods, he managed to get them to The Old Church where they met women from First Unitarian Church, Grace Bible Church and First Baptist Church. Being in downtown congregations, the women had the opportunity to see first hand the work of Pass-It-On, and several of them had become involved. They shared similar experiences of feeling the call to support the charity's work, despite the resistance of some of their churches, and often the men in their lives.

"When I told my Henry what I was doing, he just about came unglued," said blue haired Ester. "I'm afraid he's turned into a paranoid hateful old man. Stays up half the night listening to weird preachers on the radio!"

Several women nodded commiseration.

The diverse group of women walked to Pioneer Courthouse Square, where they met several women from Eastside churches, and a large group of Hispanic women from Hillsboro. The combined groups paused to pray by the fountain, where the dancing waters sparkled in the sunshine and filled them with resolve. They caught bus No. 44 northbound, filling it to capacity.

An old man in a white suit sat in the back of the bus. Kathy stood near him. He looked at the group she led and smiled up at her, patting the seat beside him, "Sit down. Keep your head. There's no hurry. Things are working; I think we can have a good time."

As No. 44 crossed Burnside Street, they saw the gay parade just ahead of them, heard the Dykes on Bikes rev their motorcycle engines, heard Coyote's heart-beat drum echoing, and the unmistakable strains of Onward Christian Soldiers wafting up Everett Street.

Finisia Red, veteran Tri-Met driver didn't like what she saw. The gay march was blocking her route, and she had been 30 seconds behind schedule at the Burnside stoplight. Finisia, better known as Red, didn't like being late. She didn't like it at all. She'd had the No. 44 run for five years, and had it down to a science. She was never late. Nothing stopped Red from her appointed route, her appointed schedule. Her requirement was perfection.

A couple of soft beeps on the bus horn attracted the irritated gaze of a rather muscular ballet dancer bringing up the rear, his tutu bouncing in time with his pliés, but no one else took notice. Red looked at the quartz digital timer clipped to her visor. One minute late already. As they approached Davis Street, she could see the head of the parade turning onto Everett; she would be five minutes late if she waited for the tail to follow.

Her face now mirrored her name. She laid on the horn and alternately goosed the accelerator and applied the brakes. Black smoke poured from the diesel stacks and the big bus rumbled, squeaked and bounced wildly. Panicked faces turned to face the menacing beast and immediately made for the curb, including the Dykes on Bikes. They understood the power of an angry woman in possession of a large phallic vehicle. The march split and Red roared No. 44 down the middle of 4th Street.



The churchwomen had planned to exit the bus at Everett Street, just one block south of Pass-It-On, but Everett was filled with the gay march, and Red didn't even slow. As she accelerated across Everett, she reached out and slapped her timer. Red was still one minute late, had no intention of stopping at *any* bus stop; she intended to get back on schedule, no-matter-what.

No-matter-what appeared when she turned west onto Glisan Street. The Indian grand march bore down on them, led by a small gray haired lady, driving a handicap cart. She towed a Radio Flyer wagon carrying a huge drum, followed by a grinning Indian, who assailed it with enthusiasm. It rumbled rhythmic thunder in the canyons of the city.

Red saw that Magnolia and her friends completely blocked her route to Broadway, and freedom. She desperately turned south on 5th – although it was completely off route – where she ran smack into anarchy. Every street in all directions from Pass-It-On was filled with people. They carried signs warning of the end of time, signs proclaiming gay pride and determination, and signs with numerous scriptures. Red's face went from red to white. Kathy rang the stop request bell, but needn't have bothered, No. 44 was not going anywhere.

Chaos filled the summer air. Coyote's drum thundered, motorcycle engines roared, helicopters thrummed overhead and the Crusaders sang ever louder. Three television crews from competing stations were on hand with shoulder-mounted cameras linked to satellite trucks nearby. Two stations had helicopters vying for eye-in-the-sky position overhead with the Portland police chopper. A red-faced Chief Clancy bellowed orders to disperse over the radio, and they pretended not to hear. The wild scene unfolding was beamed live into most of the homes in Oregon, Washington and Idaho. Indians, Christians, gays and homeless, all waved when a camera was pointed at them. They were witness to history. They were making history.

No. 44, and its load of prayer group women was completely surrounded in front of Pass-It-On. Red looked at her digital timer and banged her head on the steering wheel. Kathy and Edna went to comfort her, and to make sure she set the emergency brake and turned the engine off. Gays and Indians climbed on the bus roof, sharing the elevated stage with excellent views of the chaos, and more importantly, each other's spectacular costumes.

## Chapter Fifty-Six

Brother Jim was escorted to the head of the crowd, surrounded by uniformed and plain-clothes police. He faced the half-story-elevated, sliding glass doors of Pass-It-On where Bette and Wanda stood. Jaimiee, cell phone and concealed weapon at the ready, backed them up.

Across the street, in a dark and empty warehouse, Tig Johansen placed the crosshairs of his scope first on Wanda, then Bette. Which one first, Jesus? Which one first?

Tom Wayne, disguised as a homeless man, quietly entered through the loading dock and found his way to a position directly behind the women at the back of the room. He glanced around at the people who would unfortunately have to die with the women. Several typical Old Town residents stood around talking. One drank from a fortified wine bottle. He sneered at them. Sinners. Lesbian supporters. Then his eyes fell on Honey and little Jimmy. His heart jumped. How could this be? What was a woman with a child doing with these abominations? He would have to kill a child. He steeled himself. Civilian casualties are fact of war. That mother shouldn't expose her boy to deviants.

As Brother Jim began to speak through a bullhorn, Wanda opened the sliding glass door. Much better, thought Tig, his scope crosshairs now on Bette.

The noise and confusion from outside filled the room. Got to be strong, Tom thought; time for me to follow Jesus to the cross.

Ben's leg was killing him and the shotgun was a heavy burden. His face was twisted with pain. He worked his way along the wall of the Pass-It-On building. Brother Jim was just ahead, facing the same building, preaching at Bette and Wanda. It won't be long now, he thought. Not long now.

The women on No. 44 gathered at the windows. Kathy noticed Brother Jim's uninspired delivery and wondered if he was ill. Half the population of the Northwest was following the most important sermon of his life on live television, and he seemed to wish to be somewhere else. Edna suggested they pray about what they should do to make their feelings known. Sandra Winslow, the Unitarian piped up, "You pray. I'm going to share the words of Jesus with these reactionaries!" She began passing out poster boards with scriptures painted in bold red letters: John 8:7 "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Luke 6:31 "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Luke 6:46 "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" Matthew 23:3 "...But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach." Matthew 7:15 "Watch out for false prophets." Soon they were hanging out the bus windows, enthusiastically sharing their own sermon.

Something's not right here. Sergeant Riepe scanned the crowd through a sea of waving signs. The recently arrived bus had reduced the available space. Despite his officers pushing back, Brother Jim was forced ever closer to Pass-It-On and was nearly below where Bette and Wanda stood holding hands, listening.

The man in the white suit raised his own sign to the crowd: "Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand." His gaze raked the crowd. He shook his head and rotated the sign. "Heaven for the climate, Hell for society." His heavy gray mustache twitched above a bitter smile.

Brother Jim's words of condemnation were uninspired, flaccid. The bile was gone from his message. The crowd, accustomed to his powerful vitriolic preaching was puzzled. There were murmurs of confusion. Sergeant Riepe was concerned. A confused crowd was more dangerous than an angry crowd.

The man police call the Jesus man was pressed against Brother Jim's back. His sign, now turned toward the crowd, read: Luke 12:57 "Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right?" From time to time, during pauses in Jim's sermon, he spoke quietly to him over his shoulder.

What could that nut be saying, wondered Tom Riepe. It seems to be having an effect on Brother Jim's sermon. He noticed that the man's sign had suddenly and mysteriously changed: Matthew 25:44 "...the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."

Wanda and Bette also noticed Brother Jim's weak preaching, and stole a look at one another. "What'dya think," said Wanda. "Time to invite our guests of honor to share the podium?"

Bette looked adoringly at Wanda, squeezed her hand and laughed. "Time's a wasting," she mimicked one of Wanda's favorite phrases.

Wanda turned to Honey who stood toward the back of the room holding little Jimmy's hand. She waved him forward. At first Honey was afraid, but then she remembered why she had come all the way across the country. She bent and whispered something to Jimmy and then led him forward.

Tom Wayne used the opportunity to move closer to Bette and Wanda. He wished the kid wasn't there, but it couldn't be helped. He was committed. Jesus was calling him home.

Bette and Wanda parted to let Honey and Jimmy stand in front of the crowd.

Brother Jim stood in stunned silence. The crowd murmurs grew louder.

Across the street in the abandoned warehouse, Tig's finger felt the cold smooth steel of the trigger imprint his finger; he prepared to squeeze off the first round. Bette was in his sights. The movement of the woman and boy caused him to wait until they settled down. Then he saw Tom Wayne move forward,

wondered what his friend had planned. He released the pressure on the trigger and waited.

Jaimiee appeared holding her cell phone toward Sergeant Riepe, just as his rang. "Mind if I borrow your bullhorn?" He could see her talking into her phone, and he could see that smile. "Not a good idea," he said. "Very good idea," she said. "Like the ideas I have for you later." "Is that a bribe?" "Maybe." He shook his head, smiled and threw her the bullhorn. She immediately handed it to Wanda.

Wanda held her hand into the air. The Indian drummers and chanters stopped, the Crusaders murmured. A dozen or so homeless men and women and Bette's brain injury support group clapped rhythmically and cheered her. Coyote's heartbeat drum kept time. Edna and the churchwomen banged on the side of No. 44. Kathy blew the horn and they all waved their scripture signs.

The crowd quieted, except for Jenny Wayne who was standing on the back of her motorcycle, screaming, "Come out you cowards! Come out like the rest of us. You owe us!" Finally, two Pink Pistols pulled her off and others surrounded her and attempted to calm her. The attempt failed, with two loosened teeth and a bloody nose the result. She jumped on her Harley, started the engine and roared at the crowd; they parted for her and she waddled the beast forward, glaring at all in her path. She was determined to reach Wanda and Bette, grab the bullhorn, and out them, in front of the God-fearing Christians, and the world.

The core group of men from Brother Jim's amen corner turned and yelled in unison, "Rot in Hell faggots!"

The small brain injury support group huddled together not far from Wanda. All around them were Brother Jim supporters grumbling about "those women." The beat of helicopter rotors echoed off brick buildings of the narrow

street, thrumbed in time with the fear their chests. Sonia Rosenberg took the lead, calmed and focused the group. "Stick close together so Bette can see us," she yelled. "Wave!" She tossed her wavy brown hair, thrust her fist into the air, clapped and led the group in a cheer for Bette, who heard them, leaned forward, grinned and waved to her friends. A nearby Crusader frowned and backed away from them. His sign promoted a web site for a Midwestern Baptist church, "godhatesfags.com." A small boy beside him held another sign, "God Hates the U.S.A."

As Jenny Wayne neared the building, she abandoned the Harley and elbowed her way toward Wanda. An unfortunate reserve officer, McDuff, attempted to slow her and received a kick in the groin. Jenny forged ever closer, elbows wide, fists clenched. Tom Riepe saw her coming, saw no weapons, dismissed her and went back to scanning the crowd for more dangerous individuals.

Wanda raised the bullhorn to her mouth. "Well I declare, I never seen such a crowd. I thank you all for coming here this special day. Now I know lots of you who are followers of Brother Jim. You are here to protest me and Bette, and Pass-It-On. I think you're wrong on Pass-It-On, but it's a free country. Any-old-way, what I really got to say has got to do with Brother Jim here." She gestured toward him. "You see, when he first come here from back in Virginia, he left something behind. These two precious people: Honey here," she lay her free hand on Honey's arm, then moved it to little Jimmy's head, "and their son, little Jimmy."

A collective gasp rolled through the assembled like a wave through water, steepening, threatening to break, dissipating in the distance. The Christians looked at each other gape-mouthed, seeking denial of what they had heard. Not their hero, Brother Jim, defender of the righteous, enemy of Satan.

"Now I know he feels like the Lord drew him here and caused him to leave these two behind. Could be that Satan had a hand in it too. But, I don't know nothing about that. Any-old-way, now these two are here and a looking to make a family together with Brother Jim. If he'll do the right thing." She looked at Brother Jim, who was staring at Jimmy. "What'dya say preacher?"

Tig lowered his 30-06. Brother Jim? A fornicator? Abandoned that girl with a baby? I don't believe it. Lying witches. He raised the gun, released the safety and sighted in on Wanda. Keep talking lady. They'll be your last.

Brother Jim closed his jaw and nodded in the affirmative. Tig saw it, and realized it was true. Behind the women and little Jimmy, he saw Tom Wayne open his coat and grasp the wires running from a battery to the dynamite cap. He saw the two huge sticks of dynamite. Oh my God, what have we done.

Jenny Wayne got past Tom Riepe and scrambled up onto a corner of the balcony, eyes focused on Wanda.

Tom Wayne paused and looked across the crowd. He wanted his last vision to be of Brother Jim preaching to the sinners. Instead, he saw the Jesus man, and the scripture, "Let he who is without sin throw the first stone at her." A flood of emotion filled his eyes with tears and his soul with terror. He struggled to control himself so he could carry out his mission; his hands shook as he gripped the wires. He sought out Brother Jim for reassurance, and saw the Jesus man staring at him, his eyes burning red.

Just after Jenny Wayne passed him, Ben stepped from behind a garbage can shaking violently. Sonia saw him open his overcoat. She screamed, "He's got a gun!"

Tom Riepe turned just in time to see Ben raise the sawed-off shotgun. He threw himself at Ben and got a hand on the gun barrel. The blast shattered the sidewalk at Jim's feet.



The crowd panicked. They pushed, they fell and ran over each other in a mad rush to safety, pummeling each other in the process. Jaimiee jumped down to help Tom.

The shotgun blast behind her caused Jenny to run through the door, knocking Wanda and Honey down, only to be confronted by the familiar figure of her father, his coat open, shaking hands holding the wires of his bomb. She ran at him.

A second shot rang out over the crowd's screams as they fled. Jaimiee saw Tig first and drew down on him. He put down his rifle, cupped his hands and yelled, "He's got dynamite!" Officers moved in on both Ben and Tig, while Tom held his hands for Jaimiee and vaulted her to the main floor. There she found Jenny and Tom Wayne lying in blood, two sticks of dynamite, a blasting cap and batteries lying nearby.

"EMT's and bomb squad, Tom!" He reached for his radio while she checked for a pulse on both. "Woman's been shot. The man is unconscious." Tom looked at the bomb parts and quickly disabled the blasting cap. Jaimiee cut away Jenny's leather jacket and used her thumb on a pressure point to stem the flow of blood from the large wound. "Entry at the shoulder blade. Exit breaking the collarbone."

Tom kept his service revolver pointed at Tom Wayne in case he regained consciousness. "I don't know what hit him, but he's out for awhile. Big man."

"I think it was this woman. She got in front of that bullet. Hope she makes it."

"No worries; looks strong enough to hold a bull out to piss."

Jaimiee shot him a quizzical look and laughed, "Aussie humor I reckon?"

## Chapter Fifty-Seven

Outside, No. 44 lowered his sign and held the shoulders of a shaking, sobbing Jim. "Have no fear, for I am here," he said. The street was eerily quiet. The churchwomen left their bus and went to comfort and pray with the many Crusaders, gays, Indians and homeless injured.

All the commotion caused Red to look up from her steering wheel, then at her digital clock—only ten minutes late. She started the engine. The man in the white suit dropped his sign in the gutter and slowly climbed the stairs. He breathed heavily and clutched at his vest. He sat wearily in the disabled seats and sighed. He looked at his pocket watch. "Take me to Stormfield. My comet is due." Red ignored yet another Mysterious Stranger, put her bus into gear, and wove her way through the carnage. With a little luck, she could be back on schedule before her shift ended.

When Wanda regained her composure, she and Bette took Honey and a sniffling Jimmy to Brother Jim. "You ready to do the right thing Jim?"

Jim looked into the eyes of No. 44, and then turned to Honey who came to him, little Jimmy holding on to her skirts. "If you can forgive me," he said.

"You know what Jesus said about that." Honey laid her head on his shoulder. Jim looked again at the beautiful young man, now bending over Ben who was convulsing. "Somewhere along the way, I lost sight of that Jesus."

No. 44 spoke quietly to Ben and he relaxed; he moved on, kneeling often to comfort others with quiet words and a gentle touch. Then he turned back to the small group around Honey and Brother Jim. His eyes were on Bette.

Bette felt his presence and turned from the others. He stood before her, looked into her eyes, and she knew.

"Mother."

THE END