

# URSUS

DAVID DVORKIN

## ONE

### June

Davis slowed and then spun the steering wheel to the left, swinging north past the hospital from South Street onto Kennedy Drive. The stoplight blinked to red just as he completed the turn, and Davis grinned with pleasure at his timing. This late, fortunately, downtown streets were completely empty.

The centrifugal force of the turn pushed Mary against the door, awakening her. “Joe? Where are we?”

“Back in Piketon, honey. Almost home. Check the kids.”

Mary reached toward the backseat and touched the two children gently. She spoke in a low voice. “They’re still asleep. This isn’t South Street, is it?”

Davis shook his head. “Kennedy. The streets are empty at night. I’m heading up to Central. It’s much faster.”

“Joe! I don’t like driving through North Hill after dark.”

He snorted. “This late, even the greasers have turned in. Go back to sleep. We’ll be home in no time.”

She stared at his profile as it showed strong and determined against the long, lighted windows of a discount furniture store. She knew it would be pointless to argue with his choice of a route. She had argued against combining Joe’s business with what was to have been a pure pleasure trip this weekend, and her arguments had had no effect on him. Mary repositioned the small pillow behind her head and tried to get back to sleep, managing only to fall into an uneasy doze.

Davis reached Central Avenue, nine blocks further north, and turned to the right, gently and slowly this time so that he wouldn’t wake Mary again. Or the kids, God forbid. At least the specimens in the cages in the back were sedated. *Ought to try that stuff on the kids sometime*, he thought. Now he was headed east along Central, slipping through downtown. With Mary asleep, he went through two red lights, slowing only slightly to check for cross-traffic, adrenaline pumping as he watched the mirrors for the flashing red lights of a police car. They didn’t come: even the police had abandoned the dark, silent downtown streets in the quiet hours before summer dawn. It was like another city, not the Piketon he knew in the daytime.

Roosevelt Drive passed by. Then Washington Boulevard at last, eastern boundary of downtown. *Why isn’t it a Drive, like the rest of them?* Joe wondered for perhaps the hundredth time. Central curved slightly to the left and headed steeply uphill. North Hill lay directly ahead: lily-white social, cultural, and commercial center of Piketon in the nineteenth century; rotting tenements, soaring crime, and unrelieved brown faces in the twentieth. The well kept businesses west of Washington Boulevard had changed suddenly and startlingly to a war zone. *Fifteen minutes to home. Twenty, at most.*

Central Avenue ran over the very top of North Hill, where it intersected Lincoln Drive. The stoplight at that intersection caused endless misery in winter for uphill traffic in all four directions. Cold though this year had been—Joe had all the windows up and the heat on—ice at least had not been a problem. Right now, however, the stoplight up ahead at Lincoln was red. “Damn it,” Joe muttered. He’d coasted through red lights at Eisenhower and Madison without seeing a hint of a cop, though. *Sure.* He pressed the accelerator down.

When he was in the middle of the intersection, Joe saw from the corner of his eye a police cruiser moving slowly north on Lincoln, headed toward the hilltop. “Oh, Jesus,” he groaned just as the red and blue lights sprang to life atop the cruiser and it shot toward him. Panicked beyond thought, he stamped the gas pedal to the floor.

The station wagon leapt across Lincoln. The police car overshot the intersection and had to stop and back up hastily. Joe saw its lights flash by in the rearview mirror, and panic turned to triumph. Halfway down the block, an alley beckoned on his left. He glanced in the mirror quickly. No flashing lights on

Central Avenue yet. He slowed quickly, but avoiding any squealing of tires, and swung the car sharply left into the alley. Mary mumbled something, half awakened by the motion.

Joe cut the lights and stepped on the brakes sharply, then released them, using the hand brake so that he could stop the car in the alley without showing even the bright red of brake lights. The police car roared past on Central, siren howling, and Joe let his breath out. There was a low, muffled growl from the cages in the back.

Terror struck Joe suddenly, irrational fear, the unreasoning need to escape from that sound. He shoved his foot down on the accelerator and twisted the wheel. The car surged forward and smashed into a brick wall. His chest slammed into the steering wheel, and he fell back, chest crushed, more surprised at that instant than hurt. *Mary? Mary? I can't breathe.*

But Mary had gone through the windshield, head first into the wall. She lay limp upon the hood. The children, miraculously, were unhurt, but they were dazed by the sudden jerk against their restraining straps. Still half asleep, confused and frightened, they whimpered in the back seat.

Davis had not understood or allowed for the specimens' extraordinarily high metabolisms and strength. Both the sedatives and the cages were inadequate. The specimens were now fully awake. The cages had been thrown forward and slightly damaged by the impact. Now their weakened sides exploded outward. The children's whimpering changed to screams and then to silence. Davis, still conscious, heard the sounds, felt himself being jerked in two directions simultaneously, felt teeth and claws, then nothing. Mary had suffered the least.

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A couple of weeks from now, it would be the longest day of the year. Small comfort that was to Carla Montez. She picked her way along the cracked and littered sidewalk and worried about looming night. Some of the graffiti spray painted on the walls facing the street were in semiliterate English, but most were in semiliterate Spanish. Carla could read the latter, but she chose not to. The neighborhood had changed in the last forty years, and not for the better.

She left the lights and traffic of Lincoln Boulevard behind her and turned onto Daisy Street. "Daisy Street!" she muttered. Flower names all over North Hill, but she had seen precious few real flowers growing on the east side of North Hill—her side—in recent years. Not a single streetlight was left unsmashed on this street. She still had one full block to go before she reached her building. And there was that alley halfway down the block, an inky hole between two faceless walls.

Paco, Terry, and Frank were waiting in the alley. They favored bright colors during the day, but now they wore dark clothing for night work. They were successful hunters.

"Bad time of year," Terry whispered, shaking his head.

Paco and Frank grunted in agreement, but then Paco caught the sound of Carla Montez's hesitant footsteps and signaled for silence. They did much better in spring and fall, these three, and especially in Indian summer, when the weather would still be pleasant enough to tempt North Hill residents out right after supper, but dark came early. Tonight old Mrs. Montez might be the best they could hope for before their own kind took over the dark streets.

Soon she came into sight. The terror on her face would have been comic to them at another time, but Frank mouthed a curse. They knew her: a few dollars in her purse, maybe some food stamps. Not much compensation for waiting out here in the cold. Had it at least been her granddaughter instead, there would have been other pleasures to be taken. Paco shrugged in resignation and gently, lovingly drew his knife from the sheath inside his jacket.

Carla could sense more than darkness waiting and watching in the alley. She stopped for a moment, then stepped forward again, more resigned than determined, one hand squeezing the brown paper grocery bag to her side, the other holding her thin coat closed at the throat. A low *woof* came from the alley, something like the bark of a dog, but not quite. Mrs. Montez stopped in surprise. There was a shout in the alley, screams, then only a low growling and a crunching. Her heart hammering in her chest, she rushed past the alley's mouth and down the block toward home.

Behind her, a trickle of blood emerged from the alley and slowly found its way across the sidewalk to the gutter. Eyes watched her hungrily, but the light beyond the alley's shelter was still too bright. They returned to their feast.

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Ernie liked to cut through the alley from Central Avenue to Daisy Street every day on his way home from school despite his father's repeated warnings that he should not do so. By three-thirty, even in summer, the alley was already in shadow because of its narrowness and the height of the buildings on either side. The walls were windowless—eyeless, Ernie liked to call it. He liked the anonymity and the way the roar of the traffic on Central seemed to fade away as soon as he entered the alley—although he also liked the traffic itself, rushing through North Hill from east and west, making the street a gateway to the saner, cleaner, wealthier world beyond.

Sometimes, when he went home this way, Ernie would meet Sophia Montez walking home from high school. She lived with her grandmother across the hallway from Ernie's family. Seventeen and beautiful, Sophia was four years older than Ernie, and she treated him with a mixture of sisterly affection and a kind of condescending, sly teasing. Ernie adored her. He knew she considered him only a kid, but he kept reminding himself that he was growing fast. "Some day," he told himself confidently, "I'll catch up with her."

Sophia had told him that next year she intended to have her name legally changed to Sophie Montescue. The kids her age would have laughed at that, but she didn't tell them about her plan. She had only shared it with Ernie. Some day, Ernie knew, they'd both escape from North Hill. Maybe together.

Ernie stopped suddenly. There was a car in the alley, a late-model station wagon, crumpled up against one wall, almost blocking the narrow way. Ernie approached it cautiously, wondering. The door had been torn off on the driver's side and lay on the ground beside the car. The back window was gone, as was the windshield. A few splinters of bone lay on the hood. Ernie glanced inside, then backed away hastily, gagging. He ran blindly down the alley toward Daisy, once bouncing off the alley wall but not even noticing. He wanted only to get away from the horror inside that car.

At the Daisy Street exit of the alley, Ernie stopped, breathing heavily, looking down in bewilderment. A black leather jacket lay on the ground, a perfectly good jacket. His panic subsided. He bent down and lifted up a corner, then the whole jacket. Underneath was a human head staring up at him with one eye. He shrieked and dropped the jacket and raced onto Daisy Street and toward home, legs pumping as fast as they could. Ruined though the head had been, he had known that face.

And all the time, at the back of his mind, were the knowledge that he couldn't tell anyone about any of this because they'd never believe him and the certainty that he would never take the alley shortcut again.

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Mark Adler closed the door of the conference room behind him and then sighed deeply. "What an ass!" "Hole," McGary finished for him. "You wanted exposure to practical politics, and you're getting it." "All I'm getting is sick of Nicholson. What's Archuleta got on him?" They walked down the hallway together toward their cramped, adjoining offices.

"Votes. He brings them in. You weren't here last November, so you probably don't know much about that election. It was close, really close. Gerety, the DA, ran against him, and he almost made it. It seemed to me that the only reason Nicholson got back in at all was because of the North Hill vote, and that was courtesy of Archie Archuleta. Now Nicholson figures he needs at least one more term before he's got enough stashed away to retire, so he'll need Archuleta again, for sure, in another year and a half. Each hand—"

"I know. The mayor with the morals of an alley cat."

McGary chuckled. "You said *practical* politics. This is it. Only the air is clean out here." He turned into his office. "Happy hunting."

Mark grunted. He entered his office, slammed the door shut, sat down behind his desk, and stared at the wall. This job was not turning out as he'd expected. After two months, he was bored, frustrated, filled with contempt for Mack Nicholson, and convinced he had for once made a very wrong decision.

It had all seemed so straightforward and well planned: get his academic credentials in the East, move out here to the booming Rocky Mountain West and slide into a sinecure secured for him by a relative, get the exposure and experience for a year or two, and then go into either law or politics himself, making his name with the New West as his base. Instead, he was constantly being loaded down with junk assignments like this one, and Nicholson was truly an asshole. Mark liked to think he had no illusions about politics and the electoral system, but he was astonished that even Picketon's crooked politics could produce nothing of more substance than Mayor Mack Nicholson. And even the air wasn't really clean, or wouldn't be for long,

despite what McGary had said. With all the energy companies prospecting like mad all over Arapahoe and Nicholson doing everything he could to encourage them to build their new office buildings in downtown Picketon, traffic density had increased noticeably even in the two months since Mark had moved to town.

Yet this wasn't really a junk assignment. It just wasn't properly the duty of the mayor's office to handle it. It was a police matter, and it would have remained one if not for the political weight of Councilman Archuleta.

There was a knock on his door; it opened before he had a chance to say anything, and Ken McGary stuck his head in. "Tell you what, Mark. I'll handle the missing animals. You take care of the missing people." He stepped all the way into the room and shut the door behind him. "Not that there's much difference between the two on North Hill."

It was the sort of remark that easily penetrated Mark's college-acquired layer of cynicism and touched his liberal core, but he let it pass. "The police could handle this much better than either of us. What's the point?"

"Hell, we're not really expected to *do* anything. It's all cosmetic. Just generate a pile of paper for Nicholson to show to Archuleta so that he can then prove to his constituents on North Hill that *he's* done something about it. Then we'll get back to our other work. Business as usual. Bet most of yours turn out to be missing husbands."

Mark said dreamily, "You know, I drive through North Hill sometimes to and from work. The girls you see walking along the street up there—some of them are amazingly beautiful. I've come close to hitting the car in front of me sometimes, or running a red light. If I were married to one of them, *I* sure wouldn't become a missing husband."

"Married to one of *them!* Jesus!" McGary stared at Mark, his face reddening. "Before she's nineteen, Chiquita turns into *mamacita*, fat and ugly. If you were a greaser married to one of those, you'd be off somewhere looking for a white woman, too, before long."

"You talk like you hate them. What do you have against them?"

"Hate them? I don't hate anyone. I'm just telling you the truth about them. Wait till you've lived here for a few years." He left, slamming the door behind him.

*Touched a nerve. Everyone out here seems to have that nerve exposed.* Mark reached for the telephone. *The police are going to love having me stick my nose in.*

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After Mark Adler and Ken McGary had left his office and he was sure the door had closed all the way behind them, Mack Nicholson said softly, "Young turd." He liked the sound and repeated it a bit louder, imagining he was talking to a whole roomful of smart-assed, sharp-faced, cunning East Coast Jewboys: "You're a bunch of young turds." *That's what I'll say to a press-conference room filed with reporters on the last day of my last term.* It was a fantasy he often entertained.

Nicholson picked up the telephone and dialed an outside number with the absentminded ease of long familiarity. When his call was answered, he said, "This is Nicholson. Tell O'Hair I'm coming over now." He listened for a moment to the protest from the other end, then said, "Fuck his meeting. If he wants the Village to open on schedule, he'd better be available when I get there." He dropped the phone back onto its cradle, his expression one of fury. Then his face relaxed, and he grinned. His father had been a preacher, and he loved being able to bully O'Hair regularly. That alone was reason to stay in office, to keep running for reelection.

He stepped into the bathroom adjoining his office—"the Mayoral John," as he liked to call it—and brushed his thick shock of white hair briskly. His hair had turned gray in his twenties, white before he was forty. At the time, it had distressed him. Now he thought it was such a political asset, especially when his opponents were inexperienced young turds like Gerety, that if it hadn't been white by nature, he would have had to dye it. He was tall, heavy jowled, maybe a bit beefy, but with his white hair and vigor, his physical size gave him just the right imposing presence on a lecture platform or in his office receiving a delegation. "Yes, sir, Mack," he told himself, snapping a salute, "you can have this office for as long as you damned well want it."

It was little more than a fifteen-minute drive from the city parking garage to the Lifeway Center at this time of day. Fortunately, both were south of the downtown business district. Even in the middle of the morning he hated the occasional necessity of driving through downtown. People recognized him, or recognized the mayoral limousine. That appealed to his pride, but at the same time it annoyed him and even

frightened him somewhat, made him feel too exposed. Some day, maybe soon, he'd have the city buy a helicopter for the mayor's use so he could fly around the city, high above traffic and people, where he belonged. Armor plated on the bottom, of course.

Nicholson was driving his own car. He had fallen into the habit recently of driving his own car rather than the chauffeured limousine when visiting O'Hair at Lifeway. Partly, he liked to pretend to himself that no one would recognize him in this car and know about his visit. Even more, though, it satisfied his conscience: He might be on his way to what some, especially Gerety, would call a payoff, or to arrange for one, but he wasn't using a city-owned car to do so. Private car for private business.

He took Interstate 72 far east until it intersected East Drive, then headed back toward Lifeway so that he would seem to an observer to be a driver coming in from out of town. This was yet another subterfuge that Nicholson considered completely convincing.

Lifeway Center was located in Redland Heights, an old, exclusive residential area southeast of Piketon. The money that had once spread itself lavishly over North Hill had moved south and east during the first twenty years of the new century; the wealthiest of those gilded refugees had founded Redland Heights. It had remained, despite depression and war and ballooning Piketon suburbs, an area of winding, quiet streets, rolling lawns, and enormous houses. There was none of the tall, old elms of the oldest parts of the city. Tree planting had been unfashionable when Redland Heights was founded. Later, when fashions had changed again in the 1900s and 1970s, most of the residents had chosen to preserve the Heights' old appearance, both because of innate conservatism and because trees would have spoiled the view of imposing homes.

A major part of the view, visible from most of Redland Heights, was Reverend Carol O'Hair's Lifeway Temple. It rose in the middle of acres of close-cropped lawn on the highest part of the Heights. Its core was a turn-of-the-century Presbyterian church that predated most other buildings on the Heights; but under Carol O'Hair, the original, modest building had been swallowed up in something quite different. Now a dramatic, upsweeping brick, stone, and steel tent reached confidently toward Heaven. Scattered across the acres, though well away from the Temple so as not to intrude upon its serenity, were the smaller, simpler buildings of Lifeway Center, world headquarters of Lifeway Enterprises.

"Christ," Nicholson said aloud as he swung in from the street and rolled up the broad, quiet driveway toward the building housing O'Hair's office, "what a gold mine that little son of a bitch has here. I'm in the wrong business." He had had the same conversation with himself on previous visits.

The central administration building of the O'Hair evangelical empire was the least imposing building on the grounds. Intellectually, Nicholson could appreciate the value of not drawing overmuch attention to oneself. Emotionally, though, he detested O'Hair's attitude. Flamboyance was more than a political tactic to Mack Nicholson; he enjoyed it. He had to admit, though, and did so readily, that O'Hair was no shy rabbit on the pulpit. In that environment, he showed power and skill that Nicholson admired and even envied.

Nicholson's car was a white, three-year-old Chevette. He felt it blended into the traffic nicely, anonymously. O'Hair obviously didn't feel the same need to blend when driving, whatever his philosophy about office buildings. The car Nicholson parked next to, which bore personalized plates reading PASTOR, was a very new tan Mercedes with red leather upholstery and residual gummed paper from the dealer's price sticker still on the side window. Nicholson looked inside it, grinned, shook his head, and strode toward the building. *The Lord sure does work in wondrous ways.* He laughed aloud.

There was no sign on the building, not so much as a small metal plate on the plain, wooden door. Inside, there were no beautiful, young women to dazzle the visitor. The receptionist was O'Hair's mother, a thin, acid woman of indeterminate age. Nicholson knew O'Hair to be close to sixty. His mother, therefore, must surely have been in her mid- to late seventies. Yet she could have passed for her own daughter—or her son's wife, except for his celibacy being common knowledge. "Dedicated solely to the Lord's work," the pamphlets all said. Perhaps, Nicholson thought, Evelyn O'Hair's physical youthfulness was somehow due to her having managed to be born without either soul or heart.

She came forward to meet—or perhaps block—him as he entered. Nicholson affected a cheerful grin and boomed out, "Hi, Evelyn! How's the arthritis?" It probably would have helped if she wasn't as tall as he. As it was, he was used to looking down on, and intimidating, both men and women, but Evelyn O'Hair's eyes were on a level with his.

"I don't have arthritis," she said, each word clipped and poisonous.

"Too bad. Where's your bouncing boy?"

"Nicholson, why don't you leave him alone? He has important work to do. The—"

“Yeah, I know, the Lord’s work. That’s sweet. You need a testimonial about what a good mother you are? Call my office and I’ll see they send you one. Now, where is he?”

Wordlessly, she turned and led the way to an inner office, and Nicholson followed with the surprised feeling that, for once, he had scored more points than she had.

Carol O’Hair was a slender man of medium height with thin, blond hair and silver-framed glasses. On the pulpit, he was one of the greatest orators of the age. Off it, he was quiet, retiring, and wore an anxious, harried expression. As a child, he had detested his first name, no matter how often his mother had lectured him that it wasn’t a girl’s name at all but rather a derivation of *Carolus*, the Latin for Charles, and therefore a very proud and noble name. As he grew up and watched his childhood tormentors slide off the path to success into the ditches of immorality, corruption, perversion, and, worst of all, poverty, he had realized that his name mattered not at all, and he had come to see where his true calling lay. The world was full of insecure, guilty men and women; some preachers made careers of playing on that, of inserting verbal knives into their parishioners’ chinks and weak spots and twisting. Carol O’Hair, however, from the first followed a different path. He reassured his flock, told them how much better, purer, holier they were than the rest of the world. They loved it, and the sheep and goats together crowded into Lifeway Temple for the fleecing and for the moral massage they knew they’d get nowhere else. On these grounds, and indeed throughout much of the United States, he was “the Pastor,” and everyone knew who that was.

O’Hair looked up as they entered, and momentary distaste showed on his face. Then he schooled his features to their normal smiling calmness again. “Please leave us, Mother.”

Evelyn opened her mouth to protest, changed her mind, and left.

“Please sit down, Mayor.” Despite the smile, O’Hair was stiff and tense.

Nicholson drew a chair near the desk and sat, shaking his head. “Mayor, you always call me. Don’t you know about first names? They were invented a real long time ago . . . Carol.”

Again the flicker of distaste, followed quickly by the smile. “I’m a busy man, and so are you. Why did you want to see me?”

“Don’t be coy, Carol. Let’s be frank, Carol.” Nicholson leaned forward and lifted a decorative piece from the desk. It was a rectangular slab of clear plastic, perhaps seven inches by three inches by three inches, containing a neat stack of new hundred-dollar bills. Nicholson toyed with it. “Did you know that my daughter’s getting married next week?”

“You don’t have a daughter.”

“Well, granddaughter, then. Niece. Nephew. We’ll just say it’s something like that. I’d like to give the rotten kid a really nice present.” He looked meaningfully at the bills enclosed in plastic.

For an instant, O’Hair cracked. “Damn you, Nicholson, you’re bleeding me white!”

Nicholson grinned happily. “I doubt that. I really doubt that. I bet I represent a tiny, tiny fraction of your assets.”

“It’s the Lord’s money, Mayor, and I have a responsibility to Him to administer its use wisely and in the furtherance of His work.”

Nicholson looked around. “And He’s pretty generous with it, too, isn’t He?” Suddenly, he lost his temper. “God damn it, O’Hair, you can come off the act with me! Let’s talk turkey here. I need money from you, and something else, and you’ve got I don’t know how many millions sunk into that Lifeway Village of yours, all set to open before winter, and you need all kinds of permits from the city if it’s going to open on time.”

O’Hair’s face showed fatigue and resignation. “How much do you want this time?”

“*This* time, thirty thousand ought to do it. Deliver it the usual way.”

“You said you wanted something else?”

“Yeah, a sermon. Mainly, the right kind of sermon. Have you heard anything about these disappearances on North Hill?”

“Yes, I saw something about it on the local newscast yesterday evening. And the *News* had a short article this morning. They’re calling it a rash of murders, though.”

“Yeah, I know. The bastards. Well, here’s the point. Archie Archuleta is making noises about not supporting me anymore if I don’t get something done about it, and I’m afraid the press is going to start doing more and more with the story if he eggs them on. That could hurt me. I want you to make all of it the subject of your sermon this weekend. Tell everyone something to make them calm down. Like maybe it’s a judgment from Heaven for their evil. Theirs, not mine.”

“What a wonderful idea, Mayor. I could take as my text ‘Woe to the people who hath an evil king.’”

Nicholson snarled, “Don’t play games with me, O’Hair!”

“You’re asking me to pervert something I believe in, to misuse my trust.”

“Am I? Well, just be sure you do it right.” He rose to leave.

“Nicholson, how long can this go on? When will you give up?”

Nicholson laughed. “I guess when you’re out of blood, O’Hair.” He left the office, slamming the door behind him. O’Hair could hear him whistling happily all the way to the front door of the building.

As the sound died away, a side door opened and a young man came into the room, conservatively dressed like O’Hair, blond and bland. “Well?” O’Hair asked him.

“We got it all, Pastor, every word. That loud voice of his records beautifully.”

O’Hair smiled, and for a change it was a genuine smile. “Date it and put it in the safe. Get the money delivery under way.”

The younger man was nonplussed. “You are going to pay him, then, after all?”

“Oh, of course. I’ll want him to come back for more a few times before I’m ready to act against him.”

“Whatever you say, Pastor.”

Dinner that evening was only half for sustenance and half for policy discussion between the two O’Hairs. They sat across from each other, speaking across the gold centerpiece. The servants knew that they were to disappear once the food had been served and the Pastor and his mother were ready to talk to one another.

He summed up for her the mayor’s visit. “Money!” she said scornfully. “That’s all such a man is interested in. The higher life means nothing to him.”

“Probably not,” Carol agreed. “For the moment, however, I have little choice but to give it to him.”

“These killings among *those* people,” Evelyn said, spearing a small piece of curried duck. “It could hurt the Village.”

Carol nodded, busying himself with his boeuf Wellington. Mouth full, he mumbled, “Pity I had to build it so close to North Hill. I *will* give the sermon he wants me to.” He swallowed his huge mouthful of meat. “Calm in that area would help the project. And it may be necessary, after all, to let a few old Hispanics into the Village just to keep the local press on our side.”

“Oh, Carol!”

“Now, Mother.”

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The reports of missing residents on North Hill continued to trickle in, a steady stream averaging perhaps one or two a day. It was the very steadiness of that stream that made it so easy to ignore. Mark Adler, however, didn’t ignore it. On the contrary, as the number of missing husbands, wives, children, parents, and friends kept mounting, he found that his assignment was taking on proportions both mythic and nightmarish, destroying his sleep and his daytime peace of mind. The mayor continued to route it all to Mark’s desk, and more and more Mark was taking the problem home with him at night.

He stopped McGary in the hall outside his office one day. “Ken, what’s the latest with the missing pets?”

“Missing . . . ? Oh, that greaser stuff. They’re still missing, far as I know.”

“Are the reports still coming in?”

“Not as much as before. Maybe they’re running out of animals, finally. Speaking of which, I gotta go. Gotta take my dog to the vet. He’s not eating lately. Oh, say, that reminds me. Cissy and I are going up to the Trading Post for dinner tomorrow night, and we were hoping you could join us.”

“Uh.” *Tomorrow night. What excuse can I make?* He couldn’t think of one in time and agreed to meet McGary and his wife at the restaurant.

“I’ll draw you a map tomorrow, if you remind me,” McGary said.

Afterward, Mark cursed himself for not thinking of a convincing reason for not joining the McGarys. He had managed already to extricate himself from a few such enforced socializings with colleagues, but this one had caught him off guard. He could only hope it wouldn’t be too dreary.

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But it was. The restaurant itself fascinated him. The Trading Post was in fact a precise reproduction of Bretnor’s Fort, a famous trading post of the early nineteenth century in what was now the state of Arapahoe. Kit Carson had been among the mountain men and buffalo hunters frequenting the original



building a century and a half ago to trade furs, tall stories, and dirty jokes. The Trading Post, built all of adobe and supposedly the largest adobe building in the state, was packed with the overweight and overfed descendants of those lean and rangy trailblazers. High-denomination bills and plastic money changed hands in the place of furs.

But the steaks were delicious, the decor was exotic to a newcomer, the view was stunning, and the drink menu was amusing. “Look at this one,” Cissy said, leaning unnecessarily close to Mark to point a drink out on his menu. “The Grizzly Adams, that’s the one. It says, ‘We’ll only serve you this one—’”

“If you’re riding a horse who knows his own way home,” Mark finished for her. “I read about Grizzly Adams once. He used to ride bears sometimes, if I remember. They should say, ‘A bear who knows his own way home.’”

Cissy, who had experimented with a couple of drinks of comparable potency before leaving home, stared at him and said blankly, “I thought that was a TV show.”

The McGarys decided to try a few rounds of Grizzly Adamses before the food arrived, and their conversation, dull to begin with, grew rambling and tedious in the extreme. Mark pasted a pleasant smile on his face and stared out the floor-to-ceiling windows along the far wall. The Trading Post stood upon a high ridge of the foothills of the Rockies, with empty valleys before it, then a final line of low hills, and then the vast spread of the lights of Piketon stretching out of sight to north, south, and east. The sky darkened, and the hills blocking off part of the lights faded into silhouettes as he watched.

In a booth next to theirs, a young couple was arguing. Mark tried at first not to listen, but then he decided that the conversation he could hear coming over the partition was far more interesting than that of his dinner companions.

The girl was saying, “But even if I do get my own apartment, that won’t fool my parents. They’ll know we’re sleeping together. It will just upset them all the more.”

“But this way,” her companion said urgently, “you won’t have to make up some awkward excuse every time you want to spend the night with me. And it can be *all* of the night, not just part of it.”

“Yes,” the girl said softly, “I’d like that.” Mark wondered how she’d react if she were to realize how easily their conversation could be heard.

“Besides,” the man said, “why should they care? We’re practically engaged, aren’t we?”

“Are we? Really, I mean?”

“Of *course* we are! I’m not just saying that. I’ve offered to buy you a ring already.”

Her voice sang with happiness. “Oh, no, no ring. You know I don’t like them. That doesn’t matter, anyway, darling. What you just said—that’s what matters.”

Mark realized that he was grinning broadly with a kind of vicarious pleasure. Fortunately, the food arrived at that moment, and he was thus spared the need to explain himself to Cissy McGary, who was staring at him suspiciously. Now all he had to do was get through the rest of the evening without seeming either to encourage or to insult her, and then get himself home. *Thank God I’m driving my own car, not with them!*

The courtyard outside held a fire in a stone pit surrounded by wooden benches, a cheerful sight on this unseasonably cold night. One end of the courtyard was a high, metal fence, which, with the cliff face behind and a few other man-made barriers, formed an outdoor cage for Missy, a huge bear. In the cage with Missy, who was fast asleep, was the restaurant’s collie dog, the bear’s close friend.

The three of them drifted over to the fence to ponder the bear and the dog. The latter came up to the fence to wag his tail at them before he vanished out of sight, headed for the exit he could maneuver but the bear could not. “Gee,” Cissy said, “I wouldn’t go in there if I was a dog. I bet that grizzly’s not so tame.”

“Black bear,” her husband said.

“Grizzly,” Cissy repeated. Mark forgotten, the McGarys staggered away in the general direction of their car. “Good luck,” Mark called after them, but all he heard in reply was their squabbling voices retreating into the dark, fading away. He returned his attention to the bear.

Something wet and live and breathing thrust itself against his hand, and he jumped a foot in the air. It was the collie, tail wagging insanely and whole posture begging for attention. Mark laughed and crouched down to pet it. The dog licked his hand, sniffed at the steak smell on his breath, and then bounded away into the dark. Within moments, it reappeared on the other side of the fence. It flopped down against the bear, settling comfortably against the soft warmth of its gargantuan friend. The bear opened one eye halfway, *woofed* a soft and very doglike bark at the collie, and went back to sleep.

Mark rose to his feet and stood watching them for a minute or two, amazed. Perhaps, he wondered, all his childhood ideas about fierce, murderous bears were wrong, after all.

After he had strolled away, the couple whose conversation he had overheard earlier emerged from the restaurant hand in hand and took their place in front of the cage. “Look at those two, Phyl,” the man said. “Sleeping together so happily. Gives you ideas, doesn’t it?”

She laughed, stood on tiptoe to give him a quick kiss, and then grasped his hand again and pulled him along in the direction of the parking lot.

\*

Pastor O’Hair’s Sunday sermons were usually of a general nature, homilies about the nation and the world rather than Piketon and its problems. This was so because O’Hair was a practical man, a frugal man, a strong believer in the killing of as many birds with as few stones as possible, and his Sunday sermon was taped at Lifeway Temple and became the centerpiece of the Lifeway Hour of Power, distributed to radio stations throughout the United States and Canada and not a few in Europe. Since November, his favorite topic had been the renewed glory awaiting America as a result of the stunning electoral victory of the Syndicalists and their current drive to return the nation to the ways of untrammelled capitalism. This, apparently, was the economic system preferred by Heaven, and the Pastor was wont to quote endless verses from the Testaments, both Old and New, to prove it. Not by coincidence, it was certainly the economic philosophy to which most of his flock owed their wealth.

On the last Sunday in June, however, the sermon delivered at Lifeway Temple was a very special one, designed for local ears only and not taped. (The sermon intended for use in the Hour of Power was taped later that afternoon, in a special studio on the Center grounds, with special echo effects and audience sounds added to mislead the electronic faithful.)

The Pastor stood on the raised podium at the front of the vast hall, his white robes glowing in the spotlights, a counterpoint to the soaring majesty of the window behind him, and counted the house. The rising sun shone through the colored glass, giving the ludicrous motif of the artwork both dimension and life. O’Hair filled his lungs with the sweet air of his temple and spoke to his flock; he grew visibly, expanded, this bland, insignificant figure, until he dominated the sight and thoughts of every worshiper in the packed hall.

“My dear friends,” his voice boomed out, electronically amplified and carried to utterly every nook and cranny of the hall, matching his sudden physical presence, “this is the best day of your life, because *Jesus loves you!*” It was the usual beginning. The crowd relaxed, the initial excitement as O’Hair prepared to speak subsiding with the appearance of the usual comfort. Now, surely, would come some pleasant words about God’s approval of them and their way of life. “My friends, I want to talk to you today about something very close to home, something shocking, something which is surely the work of the Devil Himself!” Ah, it was to be massage parlors again. That was usually good for some titillation. “There is an area in Piketon known as North Hill, and as you may already know, there have been many mysterious disappearances there during recent months.” Members of the audience looked at each other with surprise and, in many cases, open displeasure.

“Yes, my friends, that is a poor neighborhood, a disadvantaged part of our lovely city, in places even . . . a slum. But many of those who live there are good Christians, just as you are, and they have suffered the heartbreak of losing loved ones. Now, it’s not for me to speculate on the nature of those disappearances. The police believe it to be due to packs of wild dogs. That may be, or it may be through the agency of human beings. That is not my proper concern. What *is* my concern, and yours, too, is the reason God has allowed this thing to happen at all.

“Now, you might say that it’s not our place to question God’s reasons or actions but simply to accept them. Yes, that may be, but I believe that when God allows something so awful as these disappearances, and the discovery of parts of those missing, to happen, he *wants* us to take notice, he *wants* us to think about the deeper meaning. I believe that God has deliberately allowed the Old Adversary to get a foothold in that sad part of our lovely city to teach *us* a lesson. Yes, my friends, the Lord is much in evidence in Redland Heights, but we need only look to the northwest to see what can happen to a people whom God deserts for even a moment. We must *redouble* our devotion and our donations.

“The evil now happening upon North Hill—that we can leave to the police to handle. Why did our Lord caution us to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s? Because Caesar, too, is merely one of the Father’s instruments! No mortal power can stand in opposition to God’s work. Caesar is in the hands and power of the Father no less than we are! We can, we should, we must, trust the police, the city government, the mayor, to cope with the material side of the problem. We can do our part by even more fervent prayer,

by spending more time with our families, by rendering even more to the house of worship which is the Lord's.

"The Lord has been good to this city and this state and this nation. He is now warning us not to forget to be thankful to Him for His blessings. The Devil is confined to North Hill, and while He is there, He cannot also be in other parts of Picketon, such as Redland Heights. Your prayers will keep Him where He is and perhaps, eventually, so soften God's heart that He will send the Devil back where he belongs again.

"The choir will now lead us in the beautiful hymn 'My Trust Is in the Lord / And the Lord, He Trusts in Me.'"

It was certainly more than Nicholson could have reasonably expected from his captive pastor, but his hopes that it would significantly or for long calm the rising fear in the city were to be disappointed.



## TWO

### July

“Where did they say?”

“In the alley between Lincoln and First. Just off Central.” Henderson reached over and turned on lights and siren.

Phyllis executed a sharp U-turn as traffic stopped on Central, and she headed the cruiser back east. “I used to play in that alley,” she told him.

Henderson grinned. “They play a different kinda game these days.”

“We used to hide in there whenever a police car went by on Central,” she remembered. “Look at me now.”

“Yeah, well, I was probably the young cop in some of those cars when you were hiding. Christ, I’m glad *I* didn’t grow up in this neighborhood. There it is!”

Phyllis slowed, then made a right turn into the alley. It was noon, just about the only time of day when the sun lit up the alley fully. She came to a stop close to the smashed station wagon. “Sam, that car looks familiar.” She reported in briefly, and they both got out of the car.

Henderson zipped his jacket up. “Cold as Hell this summer. More like October than July. My old bones can’t take it. It *is* familiar.” He snapped his fingers. “I know. It’s the one we chased and lost a couple of weeks ago after it ran the light at Lincoln. Now we know where they went.”

“Not very far. Smells terrible.” She had reached the gaping driver’s side and leaned forward to look inside. The remnants of the driver were scattered across the front seat, fragments hardly recognizable as human. A hand was left unharmed, incongruously still gripping the steering wheel and ending at the wrist.

Henderson hadn’t looked inside with her. He had instead returned to the cruiser to report on the car’s license plate and his identification of it as the one he and Phyllis Ortiveda had chased unsuccessfully the previous month. He saw Phyllis turn away from the wrecked station wagon, face a pasty color, and throw up violently onto the cracked cement floor of the alley. Henderson dropped the mike and ran forward, filled more with fatherly concern than any thought that there might be danger. “Phyllis! What the Hell—” Then he saw the hand on the steering wheel and the rotting gobbets of flesh and shreds of clothing on the front seat. “Oh.” He glanced sympathetically at his partner, who was leaning against the nearby wall, pale and shaking. *A few more years*, he thought, *and this kind of thing won’t bother her anymore*.

Then Henderson noticed something on the back seat of the station wagon. At first, he thought it was a store dummy’s leg, perhaps from a mannequin of a child, although oddly plump. He opened the rear door cautiously, not sure what he feared, and touched the leg. “Jesus! It’s real!” He jerked his hand back and moved backward hurriedly, bumping his head painfully on the top of the doorway. “Damn it.” He rubbed the back of his head vigorously. “Christ, what’s happened here?”

It took almost half an hour for the men from the morgue to show up. A couple of plainclothesmen arrived soon after. Sam and Phyllis repeated for them what little they knew and went to the mouth of the alley, breathing in the air of Central Avenue as though it were fresh and clean.

Phyllis said, “I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“Get used to it. There’ll be more. They said a kid phoned in the report about the car in the alley. Wonder why it took so long for someone to see it? I’d guess that dead meat’s been in there for a week or more. Maybe even since the night we chased that car.”

“It probably *was* seen before, probably by the kid who phoned in. It takes a lot for someone on North Hill to call the cops.”

“Two weeks to build up his courage? Jeez.”

She said defensively, “You didn’t grow up here. You said there’s a kid’s body in the back?”

“Yeah. Parts, anyway.” He grimaced and changed the subject quickly. “You gonna try to get yourself assigned to another district?”

She straightened, visibly getting herself under control. “No. I wanted to be here in the first place. I still want to. I can do more good here than anywhere else.”

Gentry, one of the plainclothesmen, strolled up. “You guys hit a real bonanza here. There’s at least two adults and a kid in and around the car. Maybe two kids—they aren’t sure yet. Also, Lee found some more down at the other end of the alley, near Daisy. Pieces, ripped up, just like in the car. Come on and have a look.”

Sam hesitated, but Phyllis forced herself to walk firmly ahead. She passed the station wagon and the two white-suited men with their plastic bags without looking at them or their work and went to the other end of the alley. Gentry and Henderson followed her. Lee Cribbens was crouching over, back to them, looking at the ground. At the sound of their footsteps he straightened and turned around and nodded at them. “Sam. Ortiveda, right?” In his mid-forties, he was Sam Henderson’s contemporary, but unlike Henderson, Cribbens was unmarried, and also unlike Henderson, he considered himself a ladies’ man. Phyllis was new on the job, but he had made it a point to learn her name on her first day; pretending not to know it, however, was one of his favored techniques. “You’ve got to put them on the defensive from the start,” he liked to say. Now he said, “Either of you recognize this?”

On the ground was a leather jacket, humped in the middle. Cribbens bent over and picked it up gently. Phyllis drew in her breath, and Sam felt his stomach lurch. A head lay faceup on the cement, the neck only a bloody stump. The left side of the face was crushed, and blood and fly encrusted. The uncrushed right eye socket was empty, a black hole.

“Franco Tienza,” Phyllis said quietly, her voice steady.

“A street hood,” Sam added. “Member of one of the local gangs.”

Cribbens dropped the jacket over Frankie’s head and nodded. “That simplifies things, then. He got his in a gang fight, and the people in the car were killed when they crashed while you were chasing them. A pack of dogs found the bodies and had a feast.”

“Dogs?” Sam said, confused.

“Sure. They’re all over this place. The damned grea—” He stopped suddenly, staring at Phyllis. “Uh, these people around here, they don’t care. They let their dogs run loose all the time, and the dogs turn feral and hunt in packs. Just like their kids.”

Sam gripped Phyllis’ upper arm hard and said, “We’ve got reports to fill out. Come on, Phyllis.” Once they were out of earshot, near their cruiser, he told her, “Ignore him. Some day you’ll be his boss, and *then* you get even.”

She smiled at him. “Thanks, Sam.”

Cribbens watched them get into the cruiser, Henderson driving this time. *Damned good looking, greaser or not. Wonder if Sam ‘s getting anything off her? Old enough to be her father. I’ll have to be nicer to her.*

Gentry was staring into space with an expression of concentration on his face. “That’s strange.”

“Huh? What is?”

“Dogs. I can’t hear any dogs at all. You’re right, what you said about so many wild ones. You can usually hear ‘em barking. Listen.”

Cribbens listened for a moment, then shivered. “You’re a fool. There’s too much traffic noise to hear anything else. Jesus, it’s cold. Come on. Let’s get on with this sbit.”

\*

“Sly! Telephone!”

Whitman grumbled something only his assistant could hear and pulled himself out from under the mountain lion. “Coming!” He stood up carefully, afraid that any sudden movement might knock the cougar over again, and dusted himself off. “Julie, you try it. I can’t get the damned thing fastened.”

Julie, who was nineteen and worked in the museum part time as part of her course work at Foothills Community College and as a way of staying near Slipper, stared adoringly up at him. Slipper grinned at her and strode across the echoing workroom to take the telephone, his good mood restored. Women had adored Slipper Whitman almost since his birth thirty years before, but he never grew tired of it. He was six feet three inches tall, brilliant, with curly blond hair and the face and body of a young Greek god. Female adoration was both his due and his addiction.

Carlos held the receiver out to him. He was only a year younger than Slipher, but in his presence Carlos felt prepubescent. For all the attention Julie or any of the other women on the staff paid him when Sly Whitman was around, he might as well have been.

"Phyllis! Hi," Slipher said, breaking into a pleased grin. He said no more, and as he listened, his grin faded. The color drained from his cheeks. Finally, he mumbled a good-bye and hung up. He turned to Carlos, looking ill. "Now we know why Joe Davis hasn't shown up for work for a couple of weeks. The police found his car up on North Hill, wrecked. Joe and—" He swallowed. "Joe and his family were in it, torn to pieces by a pack of dogs."

Carlos stared at him speechlessly.

"You'll have to find someone else to work on the diorama."

"The dio—Uh, yes. Sure. Dogs . . . The kids, too?"

Slipher swallowed again. "They think so. Apparently it's hard to tell for sure from . . . from what's left. Phyllis was the one who found them. She said there were cages in the back. You know Joe. I mean, you know how he . . . was."

"Always bringing specimens back from the mountains," Carlos said.

"Yeah. Well, apparently the dogs even broke into the cages and killed and ate whatever he had in there."

"My God. I've heard about North Hill, but—" Carlos shook his head. "My God."

Slipher walked slowly back to the mountain lion, which was now leaning perilously. Julie's shapely legs protruded from under it, her skirt hiked up above her knees. She had taken some care to optimize the effect. "Julie?" At his voice, she pulled herself out, but she didn't readjust her skirt. She lay on her back, looking up at him invitingly.

Slipher looked down at her thoughtfully for a moment before saying anything. The impact of the news about the Davis family was already fading. "Uh, Julie, I'm going to leave early. Like, right now. I, er, I have a date."

Julie's face fell. "Oh. Okay, Sly."

"Look, maybe tomorrow we can have supper after work?"

Her smile was radiant, transforming prettiness to beauty. "Sure. Supper would be great." *And breakfast, she added silently, will be even better.*

\*

Phyllis Ortiveda had a small apartment near the corner of South Street and Washington Boulevard. When they'd first met, Phyllis had been living on North Hill, on her own but near her family. Slipher hadn't yet persuaded her to move in with him, or even near him, but at least he'd got her to move away from North Hill. And her queen-sized bed was big enough for now, he thought smugly as he rang the doorbell.

Phyllis looked beautiful when she answered the door, delectable. But she always did, he reminded himself. Her dress was white, simple, with soft folds that emphasized her slender, firm body. The color and simplicity of the dress contrasted strikingly with her dark skin, her tightly drawn back, shoulder-length black hair, her beautiful face. She was short by any standard, but especially so in contrast with Slipher, who looked down at her possessively. As much as he liked to look at her, he liked even more to anticipate the contrast they made in bed: her dark skin and hair against his light, her slenderness against his heavy musculature. "Let's get going, Phyl. The reservation's for six."

"I'm not hungry. I'm really not. Could we just drive around for a while?"

He shrugged. "Sure." He called first and canceled the dinner reservation, trying to hide his annoyance. The Île de France was not an easy place to get a reservation at such short notice. And Slipher was hungry, in more than one sense. He had looked forward to a leisurely, early dinner, leaving them time for long, slow lovemaking. Time and a light lunch had whetted one appetite; the legs and willingness Julie Ernst had displayed an hour earlier had whetted the other. At the moment, though, the need for food was paramount. Slipher didn't fancy one of those long, wordless drives along the river while Phyllis stared soulfully out the window at the lights reflecting on the water.

They got into his car, and he drove slowly east along the side street, hoping she'd suddenly start feeling hungry herself, in either sense. At the least, he hoped she'd talk. "It's awful about the Davises," he said. *Mary was a cute little piece. Damned shame.*

"Yes," Phyllis said shortly, staring out the window on her side.

As he approached Lincoln Drive, he put on his right-turn signal, intending to head south toward the river. Phyllis said quickly “No, Sly, turn left. I want to go through North Hill.”

Slipher glanced over at her in surprise. “North Hill! Well, all right.” At least it wouldn’t be dark for two or three hours yet. *God, I hope she doesn’t want me to visit her parents again!* He’d been subjected to that once, two weeks before, right after their “engagement,” as Phyllis preferred to call it, and he’d told her firmly then that he would never repeat that ghastly experience.

Phyllis said sharply. “We don’t bite, you know.”

*Since I’m not a taco, fortunately.* “I don’t think you’re making a real effort to cut yourself free of all that.”

“I don’t *want* to be free, damn it! To cut myself off. That’s my world, Sly.”

He said gently, “It doesn’t have to be. There’s a lot more outside the, um, *barrio* than in it. With all you’ve got going for you, you could live a very different life from your parents.”

She smiled slightly. “Where my parents live isn’t quite a *barrio*.” Her face filled suddenly with pain before she could control her expression. *I’ve already cut myself off. Halfway. More than halfway.*

Lincoln began the sharp uphill grade that signaled the beginning of North Hill. As if Slipher had driven across some sort of invisible national boundary between a rich nation and a poor one, the buildings suddenly changed from prosperous, well-lighted businesses to a succession of boarded-up windows and burned-out warehouses. Trash littered the sidewalk. Slipher hid his distaste and drove on without expression or any further attempt at conversation.

The intersection with Central was ahead. A left turn would head them toward the older Ortivedas’ cramped, depressing house. Fortunately, the light was green. Slipher drove on steadily, hoping that Phyllis, absorbed in her thoughts, wouldn’t notice where they were until quite a few more minutes had passed.

She said suddenly, “Turn right on Central.”

“Right? Okay.” *Maybe she’s coming out of it at last.* He turned right, but halfway down the block, Phyllis told him to pull over.

Slipher did so, nervously eyeing the half-dozen colorfully dressed young men leaning against a nearby wall and watching his car with interest. *Help! I’m trapped inside a brown hole!* “Phyllis, this is a Hell of a place for huggy bear and kissy face.”

She glared at him, then pointed out the window on his side, her hand in front of his face. Her hand was trembling, and her voice shook, too. “Across the street—that alley. That’s where I found Joe Davis and his family. Only I didn’t know who it was, then. I couldn’t recognize them from what was left. You could hardly even tell it had been human. I only found out today that they’d traced the car and whose it was.”

“Jesus H.” Slipher stared at the dark alley mouth for a moment, trying to visualize the man he’d worked with for three years being torn to pieces by feral dogs within it, and failing. He shivered and looked around quickly. The group of young men had disappeared, and the street seemed deserted. Thankfully, there wasn’t a dog in sight.

“We can go now,” Phyllis said calmly, quietly.

“Thank God,” Slipher muttered. He started the car, pulled away from the curb, and continued east on Central.

“Where are you going?” Her voice was still calm, but with an undercurrent of strength that was both new and disturbing to him.

“Uh, over to River Drive. I thought we’d go along it for a while.”

“And then?”

“What? What do you mean?”

“And then we’d just sort of go over to your place?”

For the first time since he’d met her, Slipher felt on the defensive with her. “Listen, Phyl, I think it might do you good to come over for a while. Stay the night with me. Forget about your job, North Hill, Joe Davis.”

“No.” Flat and irrevocable. “No, Sly. Take me home. To my parents’ house. I want to spend the night at home.”

“But—What about me?”

She looked at him with open scorn and didn’t reply.

Slipher spun the car around in a squealing U-turn. “Gee, Officer. Good thing none of your buddies were around.” Immediately he cursed himself for having said anything so childish. Phyllis didn’t rise to the taunt, and they drove the rest of the way in silence.



Slipher pulled up in front of the Ortiveda house, and as Phyllis opened her door, he was suddenly attacked by the fear that he had gone too far and was risking losing her. “Phyl, wait. Give me a good-night kiss before you go.”

“A good-night kiss!” She barked a laugh and slid from the car, evading his hands.

“All right, damn it!” he yelled after her. “All right!” He watched her run up the front walk, her legs showing tantalizingly as her dress swished from side to side. He realized he had a lump in his throat. “Be that way,” he whispered. He waited until the front door of the house had closed behind her; then he drove off with a squeal of tires he hoped Phyllis could hear through the door.

As soon as he had left North Hill, he stopped at a drugstore and called Julie Ernst. Earlier that evening, before leaving his apartment, he had decided to keep her number handy in his wallet. She was delighted to hear from him and quite ready to move their dinner date up a day.

\*

As soon as she heard her granddaughter’s key in the lock, Carla struggled awake and pushed herself from her bed. She had put off this conversation for long enough; now the matter must be faced.

Sophia looked as tired as she felt. The after-school job was bringing in much-needed money, but it was wearing the girl down. Carla felt a stab of guilt; then she told herself that what she was about to urge on Sophia would in the long run ease her burden. That, after all, was Carla’s underlying motive.

Sophia looked up as she entered, surprised to see her grandmother awake. She tried to force the tiredness from her face and smiled. “Hello, *Abuelita*.”

“Sophia, there is something I must talk to you about. Please sit down here with me.” She walked slowly to the couch and sat at one end, patting the cushion next to her to indicate where her granddaughter was to sit. In fact, the couch only seated two, and there was only one other place to sit in the room, an armchair as old and worn as the couch. The formality, the pretense, maintained by Carla ever since her arrival in America forty years earlier, maintained despite the steady decline in her fortunes and their precipitate decline after her husband’s death, both disturbed and amused Sophia. She had lived with her grandmother in this apartment for most of her life, but the conflict between the world outside the apartment and that within still disturbed her, perhaps now more than ever before. But she said nothing and sat down next to Carla.

“My child, we cannot go on in this way. The money from the accident—every month it buys less, and when you are eighteen, it will stop entirely. My Social Security won’t be enough then, especially if they do reduce it. Sophia, you already work too much; I don’t want you to have to work even more.”

She knew all that; she didn’t need her grandmother’s reminder to know how bad their situation was and how much worse it would become in only six months. At least Mickey no longer lived with them. Sophia shuddered at the memory of the days when he had.

Her grandmother’s hand was on her shoulder, concern in the old woman’s face. “Are you ill, Sophia?”

“No, no, *Abuelita*, no.” Years ago, Carla had taught the baby Sophia to call her *Abuela*. Later she’d learned from her friends to be embarrassed by that word, proper enough in Spain but unacceptable in this world. “I only have another year of school, *Abuelita*, and then I’ll be old enough to get a much better job, much more money.”

Carla shook her head. “It’s not good enough, Sophia. I want better for you than that. College, perhaps. You’ll get married, maybe even to a professional man from Spain, like your grandfather, and not to one of these boys here, these—” Her face twisted in disgust. “These Chicanos. They’re not our type. I want better. . . .” She stared into space.

“*Abuelita*,” Sophia said softly, “*you’re* not their type, but *I* am. I belong here. I’m not Spanish: I’m a Chicana.”

“No! You must never say that!”

“Please.” Sophia fought back tears. Every time they had this argument, it came nearer to destroying her self-control. “Anyway, there’s no other future for us.”

“Yes, there is. I have thought of a way. I have already discussed it with your brother and his wife.”

Sophia could say nothing.

“You know that retirement home that’s opening near here, that Lifeway Village? It’s run by that man on the radio, that Pastor O’Hair. He’s not of the Church, but I think he’s a good Christian. It would be a good place for me to live. Mickey says he could help pay my fee there, so that with my Social Security, I could afford it. He says you could come to live with him and Theresa.”

It was as if her chest were filled with ice. *Mickey. He'd love to have me in the same house with him again. Even with his wife and children there, I wouldn't be safe.* She couldn't tell her grandmother that, though. Instead, she made one last, desperate try. "But that place is only for rich people!"

"Maybe so, maybe not. We wouldn't be paying for this apartment anymore, and Mickey and Theresa would help. And I'd have my Social Security still. It's nice where they live. You could walk to the community college. You could visit me on weekends. This is for you, Sophia!"

*For me.* She looked at her grandmother's face, and it struck her more than ever before how tired Carla was, how old, how anxious. "Yes, *Abuelita*. What do you want me to do?"

"Mickey already telephoned them at the Lifeway Village, but they want someone to come in and talk about it. He's too busy with his job; he cannot go. And Theresa is running around after the children all day. You will have to take care of this, maybe tomorrow right after school."

"Yes. All right. I must go to call my boss and tell him I won't be able to work tomorrow." Perhaps there would be a reprieve, then, after all. Mickey had long ago taken to calling himself Michael Martins, and he had worked on his accent so that now he sounded like any Anglo salesman. She knew why the Lifeway Village people wanted someone from the family to come. *They want to see the color of my skin before they go any further. Well, I will tell them who I am: Sophia Montez. Then what will they do?* She would do her best for her grandmother, but when she imagined the response of the people at Lifeway Village when they met Michael Martins' sister, she smiled openly.

On her way home from school the next day, Sophia found Ernie waiting for her, as he so often did, pretending that their meeting was pure accident. He often did that, too. They walked slowly the rest of the way together and climbed the stairs of the apartment building, Ernie prattling happily all the while about his day in school and his plans for the future.

*I wish I had a younger brother,* she thought. *Ernie's so different from Mickey. Is it just age? If Ernie had a sister ten years younger than him, would he also ... ?* No, surely not Ernie. She could remember still, in nauseating detail, the first time Mickey had raped her and then threatened her with a knife, told her what he would do to her if she told anyone about it; and she remembered with just as much detail every subsequent time, the last less than two years ago, the day before Mickey had moved out of the apartment. When she was younger, she had hated her parents for getting themselves killed in an accident and deserting her. Then she had realized how foolish that was, and shortly after that realization, she had started to hate Mickey. That, however, was with sound reason, and she was sure she would never, could never, hate anyone else with such passion.

"When I grow up and leave this place," Ernie was saying dreamily, "I'm going to change my name to Ernest Holland."

They were climbing the stairs and were just short of the landing from which the doors to both of their apartments opened. Sophia stopped and turned to the boy. "No, you won't," she said sternly. "You will stay Ernesto Jolero, just as you are now. Just as I'll always be Sophia Montez."

"But you—"

"What I just said. I know who and what I am, now, and you must learn that, too." She ran her fingers affectionately through his hair. "And help your parents more. Sometimes I can hear them yelling at you." Sophia climbed the remaining stairs quickly, unlocked her door, and vanished inside.

Ernie climbed the rest of the way slowly, bewildered. But then he thought, *Maybe Sophia Jolero sounds even better than Sophie Montescue-Holland,* and he entered his parents' apartment whistling.

Sophia changed from blue jeans to a skirt and from her father's old army shirt to a neat blouse. That was the best she could do; the only better clothes she had were reserved for church. At the last moment, she thought to put on her only pair of high-heeled shoes, something she had splurged on for her sixteenth birthday and then had worn only to practice walking in them.

Despite the cost, she took the bus. It would take her too long to walk, and besides, she wasn't sure she could in those shoes. Above all, she wanted to look neat and unflustered when she arrived. Perhaps she would have to take the bus on the way home, as well: she didn't want to get home after dark. The bus driver looked her over appreciatively as she got on at the stop on the corner of Lincoln and Central. "Very *bonita*," he muttered. Sophia looked at him coldly and stalked down the aisle. Only after she had sat down did she smile with pleasure at the compliment. The bus took half an hour to reach South Street, where it turned east, and then almost another fifteen minutes before it passed Lifeway Village. The stop was a block further along the street. Walking West toward the Village, Sophia estimated that she could surely have walked the whole way in less time, even in these shoes. Going home, though, would be a different matter. That was uphill, and she had foolishly neglected to bring either a sweater or a coat.

The twin towers, one stone and glass, the other still a steel skeleton, were intimidating, but Sophia set her mind to her business and trudged up the front walk. It *was* pleasant, peaceful, even beautiful. Certainly a better place for poor old *Abuelita* to spend her time than the apartment on North Hill.

Except for her job, which was technically not on North Hill, and some occasional school trips, Sophia never left the Hill. It was strange to be here, wonderful in a way. And it was thrilling, too, she must admit, to be entrusted with an important mission. It had taken long enough for her grandmother to start treating her as an adult. Her pleasure at that was almost enough to drive from her thoughts her possible future in her brother's house.

As of now, there was no one living at Lifeway Village. That wouldn't come until the buildings were complete and permissions of various sorts had been obtained from a number of state and city agencies. To Sophia's eyes, however, it looked complete. She was delighted by the aseptic lobby, the glass and stone and steel everywhere. Already, men and women in white were rushing about busily. It was almost like a hospital, but she sensed something else there, or thought she did, an atmosphere of caring, of long commitment, rather than the move-them-through, conveyor-belt air of a hospital. She saw a plaque on a wall, dark brown metal against the blond stone behind, and went over to read it. "Dedicated to lifelong care in a Christian environment," it began. Sophia needed to read no more. She did, however, glance at the bottom of the plaque, where the firm signature of Carol O'Hair was accompanied by a raised profile of the Pastor staring nobly into the distance. Sophia felt instinctively and at once that he must be a very great man, a saintly man.

She looked around, wondering where she was supposed to go. At last she noticed a cubbyhole with a desk against one far wall of the lobby and half blocked off from the confusion with partitions. That, she realized, must be the right place; perhaps the permanent business offices weren't yet complete.

Behind the desk was a handsome young man dressed in a suit that must have cost more than Sophia earned in a month. He was busy with some paperwork on his desk and pasted a stiff smile over his annoyance as Sophia approached hesitantly.

"Pardon me, sir," Sophia said, "I was told to come here about my grandmother. My brother called first."

"Name?"

"Mon— Martins, Michael Martins."

"Hmm." He searched through a neat stack of eight-by-five cards on his desk. "Yes, here it is. He called three days ago. I'll need more information for the application than he gave me. Please have a seat."

Sophia sat down gratefully, and the questions began. The first few went smoothly enough, as she gave her grandmother's age and described her generally good health. But the next question was for her grandmother's place of birth, and Sophia sensed something new when she answered, "Huelva. That's in Spain."

The receptionist looked at her in surprise. "*Carol Martins?* Were her parents missionaries?"

Sophia laughed. "Oh, no. Her name isn't Carol Martins. That's my brother's idea. Her name is really Carla Montez."

"I see." The receptionist put his pen down carefully on the half-completed application form and said in a very cool tone, "Before we go any further, perhaps I'd better tell you about the cost of care at Lifeway Village. This is actually a cooperative venture, a jointly owned community, requiring an initial investment of forty thousand dollars and monthly payments of a thousand dollars thereafter."

Sophia stared at him speechlessly. At last she managed to say in a husky voice, "But that's impossible!"

The receptionist smiled thinly. "Yes. I thought it might be."

At that moment, the intercom high on the wall behind him crackled into life. "Henry," it said, "please send the young lady in to see me." Sophia looked up at it in surprise and noticed for the first time that some sort of camera was mounted next to it, aimed at her, with a red light glowing on it. It reminded her of the cameras in a bank.

Henry looked upset. "That's the Pastor!" he whispered. "Well, um, go down that hallway"—he pointed—"to the end." As she stood up, feeling a bit uncertain, he hissed at her, "*And smooth your skirt!*"

Sophia headed down the hallway feeling as if she had just had a vision and heard the voice of a saint. How wonderful that after that disastrous word about the cost of Lifeway Village, Pastor Carol O'Hair himself would notice her and call her to his presence. But what, she wondered, could he have to say to her?

He opened the door for her almost the instant she knocked, then apologized for having so obviously startled her. He was grand indeed, much more so than the priest she knew so well on North Hill. This must

be the way the bishop was, a man she had never seen but of whom Father Largo always spoke reverently. As O'Hair led Sophia to a chair and closed the door to his office, she was aware of warm concern and fatherly protection.

O'Hair sat down behind his desk, leaned forward with elbows on desk and fingers interlaced, and said kindly, "I overheard your conversation out there with Henry. The cost, then, would be more than you could manage?"

"Yes. Yes, sir." At first, she said no more, but then, encouraged by his benevolent gaze and smile, she began to talk. She explained their financial situation first, how they managed on her slender earnings, her grandmother's Social Security, and the payments from the insurance company, blood money for her parents' death. She told him how that would end when she turned eighteen next winter, how unreliable she felt her brother's promises of a contribution were, and how her grandmother needed the security and care of a place like Lifeway Village. "She's such a good woman," she told the beaming Pastor. "Of course, we're Catholic, and I know you aren't, but she says this would be a good Christian home for her."

"We are all," the Pastor assured her, "children of the same Father, and Jesus died for all of us."

"Why, that's just what Father Largo always says!"

"Indeed?" His smile faded slightly. "How interesting."

Sophia didn't notice that at all. She talked on happily, increasingly at ease in this warm atmosphere, more so than she usually was in the company of any adult, even her grandmother. The Pastor, she felt, would make a good confessor; it would be a pleasure and a relief to tell him of all her sins, and not just a duty. His eyes roamed slowly over her as she talked.

O'Hair stood up slowly and walked around his desk, nodding to encourage her as he did so. Somehow—she wasn't quite sure just how—he ended up standing behind her chair with one hand on each of her shoulders. Sophia's flow of words faltered and stopped, and something cold began to grow inside her.

"There are ways," he said quietly, "for the various fees to be reduced, and possibly even eliminated entirely." Then he bent forward and kissed her hungrily on the side of the neck. He made a lot of noise.

\*

Mark Adler had discovered the Lifeway Hour of Power some years earlier, while still in college, and he had quickly decided that it was among the best comedy on radio. Finding it again on a radio station in Picketon was like a pleasant reunion with an old friend, one who had provided many hours of comic relief at a period in Mark's academic career when he had sorely needed such relief. The usual closing sentences about the broadcast originating from "the beautiful Lifeway Temple in lovely Picketon, Arapahoe" hadn't meant anything before, and even after moving to Picketon, he had not at first made the connection. It was only when he had heard someone at work refer obliquely to O'Hair and the licensing process for Lifeway Village that the names had clicked. *Of course!* he had told himself. *My radio buddy. Maybe I'll go down there some Sunday and hear the clown in person.*

On more sober reflection he had decided it was hardly worth the cost of extra gas or a wasted weekend. O'Hair wasn't quite *that* amusing. He did, however, still listen to the rebroadcast sermons on Thursday mornings on KPIKE on his way to work.

This morning the topic was "The Corruption of the Young."

"How," Pastor O'Hair asked his flock, indignation ringing from the walls of Lifeway Temple, "can we permit this evil to continue? Why, just the other day, a policeman told me that he had arrested a prostitute the night before who was only thirteen years old. Thirteen! My dear friends, imagine your daughters in such a role. Isn't that unthinkable? And yet we can let it happen to the daughters of others. Oh, I know well enough that parents like you protect your children from evil influences which can lead the young into such depravity. But what are we doing, as a society, to root out this Devil's work? Is the Lord telling us something, if we would only listen? Is he saying that our prayers and devotion are too shallow?" And so on.

"Thirteen!" Mark muttered. He was genuinely shocked at that. But he smiled nonetheless at what he thought he detected in the Pastor's tone, the underlying excitement. He laughed aloud at the thought of hypocrisy carried quite so far. Fortunately, the morning was cold enough that the drivers stopped on either side of him had their windows rolled all the way up. Mark had always talked back to preachers on the radio. Now he said, "Maybe you wouldn't mind some young stuff yourself, right, Carol?"

## THREE

### August

“No, sir,” Mark said, “I’m not saying it’s a major urban crisis, not at all.” *Give me strength!* “What I am saying is that it’s something real and the police department should be taking it more seriously. We should be taking it more seriously.”

Nicholson shifted uncomfortably behind his mammoth desk. He ran his hand quickly over his shock of white hair, as if to reassure himself it was still there and as thick as ever. It was an action that usually helped calm him when he needed calming. “But, Adler,” he said with that nasal, rural Western delivery that Mark hated but the local voters seemed to love, “didn’t it turn out to be missing husbands?”

Observing Nicholson over the past few months had taught Mark the valuable, practical lesson that image outweighed substance in politics in the West just as much as in the East. The realization had made him wonder whether he, looking and sounding so much like the Eastern Jew he was, shouldn’t stick to a career in law and forget about politics. Perhaps what annoyed him the most was the way he caught himself falling under the spell of that mayoral father image, adopting an absurd subservience toward this man he had found to be small-minded, mean minded, narrow-minded, and stupid. “Some of it *was* missing husbands,” he admitted. “But also missing wives, children, relatives of all sorts. Let’s just say that this is a physical phenomenon, not a social or economic one.”

“What the Hell does that mean?”

“I mean that these people are genuinely missing, and for no real reason. They didn’t just walk out because of marital or money problems. Most of them disappeared in the middle of some ordinary duty, like going to the corner store. And always at night. The police *have* found some of them, later. Pieces of them, I mean.”

“Yeah, I know about that,” Nicholson said with an airy, dismissive wave of his hand. “Wild dogs. That’s what Pickel says.”

“That won’t wash. That’s the sort of police attitude I was complaining about.”

“Sure. I understand. McGary?”

McGary had been sitting silently during the exchange between the other aide and the mayor, as if he’d hoped no one would notice him. Addressed directly by the mayor, he now had no choice but to speak. “Fact is, all those pets you wanted me to look into are also really missing. I know Chief Pickel says that stuff about wild dogs, but the fact of the matter is, no one on North Hill’s seen any of them. There were a lot of complaints about dogs barking during the night a few weeks ago, but that’s stopped. It was right after that that the missing-pets stuff started.”

“Well?” the mayor said impatiently. “Don’t wild dogs eat pets, too?”

“I suppose they do,” Mark said. “But not just at night. Nothing has happened in daylight.”

McGary said thoughtfully, “Packs of dogs run down their victims, so there’d have been witnesses, or some victims would’ve escaped, or there’d be some reports of human screams. Something like that, anyway.”

Nicholson jumped to his feet, face red. “So what’re you nitwits saying is going on up there? Vampires? Werewolves?”

Mark held his own temper under control and said, “All I’m saying, sir, is that we can’t ignore this.”

McGary added, “That whole part of the city could panic. You couldn’t afford riots up there.” What he meant by “afford” was clear enough.

Nicholson sat down again and reached for the phone. “Okay, so my office has to show some concern. That bastard, Archuleta, won’t let up otherwise. Terry,” he said into the phone, “get me the police chief.” To his two aides he said, “I’ll show my concern. I want you two to ride around in the patrol cars on North

Hill for a few days and talk to the people up there. Del, hi. Listen, I need a favor from you. No, a small favor.”

Ken and Mark looked at each other. McGary leaned over and whispered, “I’m a family man.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll do it myself.” In fact, Mark was more curious about how life was lived on North Hill than he would have admitted to his colleague.

\*

The arrangement whereby Mark Adler was to ride in the back of cruiser number 93 from District Four was scheduled to last for one week. On Monday afternoon, the day before he was scheduled to start riding with Officers Henderson and Ortiveda, he was asked to visit Chief of Police Delbert Pickel in his office on the top floor of the new police administration building. The request, couched in terms that made it tantamount to an order, puzzled him.

“It’s simple enough,” McGary told him. “He wants to tell you what he’s too cowardly to tell His Honor. Old Del’s probably as mad as a pregnant prostitute about having you foisted on him, and he’s going to take it out on you.”

Mark laughed, a bit nervously. “Practical politics experience.”

Ken grinned at him. “Keep telling yourself that.”

The police administration building was only two blocks away, so Mark walked. As it had been all summer, the weather was clear and cool. With the breeze on him as he walked, Mark regretted not wearing a jacket or sweater. He walked rapidly, trying to warm himself up. Native Piketonians—a rare breed—and those who had lived in Piketon for some years had been complaining about the weather since spring, but Mark hadn’t voiced a word of complaint. Chilly it might be, but even so, the brilliant sunlight, clean air, and bone-dryness were a striking and delightful change from the muggy, murky summers of the East. The natives were blasé about it; he didn’t think he ever would be.

He could see the police administration building from a block away. It was ten stories tall, towering above the smaller, older buildings around it. It occupied a full city block, with a vast underground parking garage whose entrance was guarded by a glowering policeman in a bulletproof glass booth. Beside the path, flowers struggled valiantly against the cold, the drought, and the building’s shade.

The lobby was huge, echoing, and almost empty. Mark discovered that access to the stairways and elevators was blocked by a sturdy, chest-high wooden barricade. One section of the barricade was lower and curved to form a wide arc of a desk facing the lobby. The single gate in the barricade was next to this desk. No attractive, vapid receptionist sat behind the desk, however, but a large, expressionless black policeman.

Mark was asked in order for his name, the reason for his presence in the building, and identification. He took his wallet out, opened it to expose his new Arapahoe driver’s license, and put it on the desk. The policeman drew back slightly, as if he had been confronted with something badly diseased. “You’ll have to take it out of there, sir.”

“Out—? Oh, of course.” There mustn’t be the slightest hint of a bribe, of money to be removed from the wallet. Feeling completely unmanned, Mark slipped his driver’s license out and handed it over.

“This will take a few minutes, sir.”

*Damn it, do I look like a mad bomber?* Mark nodded and walked over to a far wall to examine what turned out to be a vast, wall-covering display of Japanese coins. Nearby was a police motorcycle. Mark stared at both, thinking black thoughts about coin collectors and motorcycle riders.

At last his identity and the genuineness of his appointment were verified, and he was permitted to enter the fortress. He was alone in the elevator, wondering, as the car rose, whether he were being observed. On the tenth floor, he walked angrily down the short corridor toward Pickel’s office, not sparing a glance for the display cases of Piketon police badges and uniforms of the last hundred years or the framed photographs of Teddy Roosevelt grinning from the midst of a parade down Central Avenue.

The end of the corridor consisted of wall-to-wall glass. The door in the middle was labeled DELBERT PICKEL, CHIEF OF POLICE in gold lettering in toned-down Gothic script. Beyond the glass was a room filled with potted plants and a vast, naked receptionist’s desk. Behind it sat the beautiful young woman he had expected to see in the lobby of the building. For some reason, this infuriated Mark all the more. He pushed the door open and stalked into the office, saying loudly, *‘Mister Adler to see Mister Pickel.’*

The receptionist's striking blonde beauty would normally have been more than adequate to cow Mark, as was usually the case with other visitors to the chief's office. She smiled her receptionist's smile and said, "Won't you have a seat? I'll see if he's in."

"No, I won't. I'll stand. He'd better be in—I have an appointment with him." He tugged back the cuff of his shirt-sleeve and looked at his watch pointedly. *Gee, this is fun.*

She glared at him and went through an inner door. Mark could hear a muffled conversation beyond, then a feminine laugh, and then she came out again, plastic sweetness restored, to say, "Chief Pickel will see you now."

When he entered the office, Mark was at first unaware of the desk and the man behind it. His attention was captured and held by the decorations covering the wall. Guns of every kind, more than he had known existed, hung proudly in every available space. What wasn't guns was photographs, expensively framed pictures of Delbert Pickel with various governors of Arapahoe and various presidents of the United States and of course with his old friend the present, once, and future mayor of Picketon, Mack Nicholson. The desired impression was that this was a man who had been here almost as long as there had been a Picketon, an Arapahoe, a United States. A man of authority and power who no doubt knew how to use every one of those guns with great proficiency—and might do precisely that if his visitor annoyed him. Mark shook off that feeling resolutely and turned his attention to the chief of police.

Delbert Pickel was a stocky man, pale skinned with thick, black hair that he kept well greased and brushed backward so that it looked like a beaver's pelt. He was studiously working on papers on his desk and ignoring Mark.

"I suppose," Mark said, "you didn't want to see me, after all, so I'll be leaving."

Pickel looked up at that and growled, "The Hell you say. You're the young punk Mack's told to stick his nose in our business, aren't you?"

"He didn't use those words. I'm supposed to try to get an inside view of the situation on North Hill."

Pickel threw his pen down on his desk. "Oh, sure. You listen to me. Mack's not as smart as he likes to think. I know what he's up to. He wants to get rid of me, and he's thinking you might find something that'll help." He shook his head. "My men are loyal."

Mark sighed and sat down in one of the chairs facing the desk. "I think you're missing the important point. I don't know anything about your political relations with the mayor, and I care even less. The point of my assignment is that people are missing on North Hill, lots of people. Pets, too. It seemed to me that the police weren't dealing with the issue adequately. You can't say 'wild dogs' to people who've just lost a husband or a wife or a kid and expect them to nod their heads and say, 'Okay, sure.' They turned to the mayor's office when the police refused to do anything, and I feel it's up to the mayor's office to respond appropriately."

Pickel nodded. "So *you're* behind this, then, not Mack. I should've guessed that the moment you walked into the office. I've met your type before."

Mark jumped to his feet. "Didn't you hear anything I just said?" He tried unsuccessfully to keep himself calm and his voice below a yell. "What about the people up on North Hill?"

Pickel shrugged his shoulders. "Ah, life's cheap up there."

Mark said bitterly, "In other words, when you're a greaser, one husband or wife or kid is just as good as another?"

Pickel smirked. "You said it. I didn't." He pointed down toward his desk. "And now it's on record."

"If you insist, then, we'll do it on that basis. I'm riding in that squad car as scheduled whether you like it or not. If you're wise, you'll keep quiet about your objections."

"Damn it," Pickel said, "I don't work for you!"

Mark said quietly, "We both work for the same boss." He paused for a moment, letting Pickel think he was going to say that that boss was Nicholson. Instead, he said, "We both work for the people of Picketon, and that includes the people of North Hill." *What a line!* he told himself. *I'll have to save it and reuse it when I run for mayor.*

Pickel stared at him for a moment openmouthed. Then he closed his mouth, smiled slyly, and said, "I can sure tell just who you work for." Suddenly, he was all affability. "Hell, yes, you can go ahead and ride around with them for a few days. Can't hurt." His smile disappeared as suddenly as it had come. "But while you're watching them, they'll be watching you. You only get one chance, one mistake. That's all I'll need to call it off."

On his way out, Mark stopped at the receptionist's desk and said, "I bet he'd like to have you come in and smooth his feathers down again." *At least he didn't shoot me. Maybe the guns are only for show, after all.*

\*

Grenley introduced himself hurriedly on the way from one crisis to another and passed Mark on to a lesser official, Sergeant Jellinek, who hustled Mark through the station house and into the garage, talking not a word except to say, "Our Captain Grenley's a real card, right?"

"A scream, I guess."

"Right. There they are." Two figures stood next to a patrol car, features invisible in the dim light of the garage. The two were watching Mark approach; their stances told him they were impatient. As he came closer, he could see that one was a woman. He hadn't expected that out here in the self-consciously rugged and masculine West.

Jellinek kept the introductions to a minimum. "Mark Adler from the mayor's office. Officers Sam Henderson and Phyllis Ortiveda." He turned on his heel and hurried away.

Now that he was closer and his eyes were growing more used to the dim light, Mark could see Phyllis well enough for his heart rate to momentarily double. She spared him a quick glance and a curt hello and then went back to the paperwork she was trying to get out of the way before starting. Mark kept staring at her, his mouth open. Sam Henderson watched the younger man with a straight face but an inner smile. *Poor kid's lost forever*, he thought. *Doesn't have a chance against Sly Whitman, unfortunately.* "Adler, was it? I'm afraid you'll have to sit in the back."

"Uh, yeah, sure." Mark climbed into the back seat. The other two took the front, Henderson behind the wheel today, and the car moved slowly forward toward the rising door of the garage.

It was brightly sunny outside, with a hint in the air that it might be almost hot that day for a change. Mark blinked against the light. The car moved out onto Lilac Street, turned right, and accelerated sharply. As they approached Lincoln Drive, the light ahead turned red. Henderson promptly turned on sirens and lights and shot through while cars squealed to a stop all around. Halfway down the next block, he turned the signals off and slowed back to normal, grinning. Phyllis turned to him and said, "Forgot the fink?" But Mark was too busy studying her profile to so much as notice her words, let alone be offended by them.

\*

Quite possibly it was a deliberate effort on the part of the police department. Mark had no way of knowing. He did know that the car he rode in never seemed to receive orders to take care of any kind of trouble. The three of them did little but ride around North Hill day after day. He learned that there was an important social and economic difference between the eastern and western halves of North Hill and that, in fact, the missing-person and pet reports all came from the northeast quadrant of the neighborhood, the quadrant where the station house was located. He became aware early in the assignment of a growing tension and fear in that northeast quadrant. And he discovered just how much the residents of North Hill resented well-dressed outsiders like Mark Adler.

Phyllis and Sam spoke little to each other, and what they did say had to do with immediate business; it was never personal. Phyllis' words on that first morning came back to Mark suddenly, thrown up by the tape recorder in his unconscious: "Forgot the fink?" So that was how she saw him: the fink from the mayor's office, to be chauffeured wordlessly around North Hill. Sam seemed friendly, but he also seemed to be taking his cues from Phyllis, and she was always distant, cool, unapproachable.

*Impenetrable*, he thought. The word conjured up the inevitable flood of sexual imagery centering on Phyllis Ortiveda, and Mark sank into his fantasy world, blanking out the barely hidden hostility of the real Phyllis and the depressing squalor of the street outside.

The fantasy was shattered at a high point by a squeal of brakes and a deceleration that threw Mark forward violently. He got his hand up just in time to avoid a broken nose and found himself staring at close range into Phyllis' glossy, black hair. He decided to stay where he was, breathing in the faint perfume of her shampoo. How, he wondered, could shampoo smell so sexy?

Phyllis was saying, "What is it?"

Henderson was looking back over his right shoulder and backing up fast on a fortunately deserted street. "Dead dog," he grunted.



“Dead dog?” Mark said, almost shouting. “Is this a joke? Dead dog!”

The other two ignored him. The car stopped by a fire hydrant, almost on the corner formed by the street and an alley. From the car, little more than the dog’s head was visible, eyes staring toward the street. When Mark reached the sidewalk, he could see more. It was a fox terrier, small and runty. Its spine was hard up against the hydrant, curled around it in the wrong direction; every vertebra in its back must have been crushed to make that position possible. Its side was torn open, ribs pointing out in random directions. Congealed blood clotted its fur. “My God,” Mark said, “what kind of people would do that?”

Phyllis looked up from the dog to glare at him. “Not the people on North Hill.”

Henderson said quickly, “I don’t think anyone did this, exactly.” He looked thoughtfully toward the alley opening. “I think he was thrown from the alley. Maybe he attacked something there, in the alley, and this is the result.”

“But think of the force,” Mark said. “What could have that kind of strength?”

“Good question. Not a man, anyway. I’d better call the animal-control people and tell them to come pick it up.”

“And I want to check that alley,” Phyllis said. She walked away quickly, and Henderson got back into the cruiser, leaving Mark with only the mangled terrier for company.

He headed quickly after Phyllis and caught up with her just within the alley mouth. “Do you think that dog is connected with the disappearances—that he’s one of the wild ones?”

“Shut up.”

“Right.” *Whatever you say, my Aztec queen.*

“I’m sorry.” Her manner softened and warmed somewhat. “My family lives on the Hill, and most of my friends. That makes a difference.” Her gaze had been roaming the ground while she spoke, and now she pointed and said sharply, “Look!”

A few feet further into the alley, in the shadows at the foot of a wall, was a scattered pile of bones. They had been picked clean and were broken and cracked open. Mark and Phyllis bent over to look more closely. “They’re so small,” he said softly. “Maybe a cat’s or a small dog’s.”

Sam Henderson had come silently up behind them. “Or a child’s.”

\*

It was some hours later that they got word that the bones were indeed human, apparently those of a child, as yet unidentified. “There’re so many small children missing on North Hill these days,” Phyllis said sadly. “I know a lot of them. Knew, I should say.”

“Yesterday evening,” Henderson said, “Jellinek was telling me about some lab reports on the remains that’ve been showing up around here. Someone decided to look for signs in what’s been found of the killer. I mean, things like saliva or hair.”

“And?” Phyllis prompted.

“And he claims he found just that—saliva and hair. He also claims it matches dog saliva and hair more closely than anything else.”

“So it *is* wild dogs, after all,” Mark said.

“Maybe. Except that, so far, it seems to come from just a few individual animals. I guess it’s like fingerprints, you know? But you know how dog packs are: everyone gets into the act. There should be signs of lots of different animals.”

Phyllis said, “Could we maybe change the subject?”

“Sure,” Mark said, “let’s talk about me.” Henderson grinned, but Phyllis didn’t react. “I wasn’t sent along with you guys to be the mayor’s spy. Fink, as you so elegantly put it. I was supposed to observe the situation on North Hill and try to talk to the residents. I don’t know why the mayor thought I could do that better from inside a police car.”

Phyllis smiled faintly. “Maybe he thought you needed protection.”

“Hmm. Maybe I do. I didn’t do too well trying to make friends and influence people back at that lunch counter, did I?”

“North Hill is very . . .” She groped for the right word. “Insular. Maybe I really mean xenophobic. Anyway, you obviously don’t belong, with your skin and your clothes and your accent. Sam’s only tolerated because he’s with me, and even I’m barely tolerated when I’m in this uniform. Well, actually, everyone likes Sam.”

Henderson grinned. “That’s me. Lovable ol’ Sam.”

"It's also the area. Where my parents live, the hostility wouldn't be so open."

"But it'd still be there?"

"Oh, maybe. Not necessarily. I'm"—she hesitated fractionally—"I'm engaged to an Anglo, and no one thinks anything of that."

*Engaged? Oh, shit.*

Henderson said, "There's probably another reason for putting you in a police car for a week. You met our Captain Grenley, didn't you?"

"Yeah. A real card."

Both Phyllis and Henderson laughed. Sam said, "Salt of the earth, that man. We all worship the ground he walks on. He and Archie Archuleta are as thick as . . . thieves, you could say. So that's the other reason: visibility."

"Always thinking ahead, His Honor the Mayor," Mark said.

"Say," Sam said, "I keep forgetting. Linda told me to ask you both if you'd like to come over for supper tonight. Barbecue, if it's warm enough."

Phyllis said, "I'll be there. Linda doesn't have to ask me twice to eat her cooking."

Mark was amused by Henderson's transparency but kept a straight face. "You're sure she won't mind my coming?"

"Mind? Of course not!"

"Sure, in that case. Better draw me a map. I still don't know Picketon very well."

"Okay. Phyllis, Sly's welcome, too. Her fiancé," he explained to Mark.

"Maybe I'll call him," Phyllis said quietly. She looked out her window, suddenly uncommunicative. Mark's spirits rose.

\*

Linda Henderson was a quiet, pleasant woman of about forty, a good match for her likable husband. For once, the evening was warm, so the four of them stood around on the rear patio, sipping at their cocktails and chatting while they waited for the chicken to finish cooking in the barbecue. Phyllis was wearing the same white dress she had worn for her last date with Slipper Whitman; Mark Adler was overwhelmed by the way she looked.

"Phyllis," Linda said, "Sam was telling me about the trouble up there. Are your parents all right?"

"Oh, yes. All the missing-person reports are from the east side of the Hill. My parents like to think that nothing serious ever happens where the *nice* people live."

"I hope they're right."

"My youngest brother just got a job on East Rose, not far from the station house. My parents aren't happy about that."

Sam said, "Jimmy? Well we can try to keep an eye on him. Give him a ride home in the evening."

Phyllis smiled. "No w that he's sixteen, he calls himself 'James.' And he's determined to buy a car of his own."

Sam whistled. "Jimmy behind the wheel of a car! The streets will never be safe again. I know what: Tell him, if he manages not to get a single ticket by fall, I'll take him hunting with me again."

Phyllis grimaced. "My parents won't be wild about that idea, either. *I'm* not."

Sam looked offended. His wife entered the verbal breach. "The way the weather's been, I don't think there'll be much hunting this year. We haven't even been up into the mountains at all this summer."

"True," Sam said. "There's still snow all over the place. I've been concentrating on the house instead, for a change. Linda, I think we'd better go inside and get the salad and other stuff together."

"I can help Linda," Phyllis said. "You take it easy, Sam."

"No, no. You're a guest. I know where everything is. You two can stay out here. Turn the chicken over and keep an eye on it."

Inside the kitchen, Linda said, "What are you up to, Sam?"

"I like him," Sam said defensively. "A lot more than Whitman, anyway. It's worth a try."

"Oh, Sam!" She laughed and patted his cheek. "And you feel guilty because you introduced her to Slipper."

"Hmph. Did ever a man have so appropriate a nickname?"

Phyllis had just turned over the chicken. Mark was holding up the barbecue hood for her and watching her. He was unaware how plainly his admiration showed on his face. "Sam's a nice guy."

Phyllis grinned at him. “He means well, as they say. He’s decided I’m his daughter. As if one father wasn’t enough!”

“Sam and Linda don’t have any children, then?”

She shook her head. “And it’s a real shame. They both like kids so much. They’d be terrific parents. I think they both wanted children, but they were unable. So they’ve adopted all the kids in my family, with me as oldest daughter.”

He asked the question he was really interested in. “Your, um, fiancé didn’t want to come?”

“No,” she said shortly. “He and Sam don’t really get along.” Her cheerfulness had evaporated, and Mark cursed himself for having raised the subject.

Sam and Linda came out at that moment, each carrying a loaded tray. “Time’s up,” Sam said breezily. “Let’s eat.” Later, mouth full of chicken, he said to Phyllis, “Your car must be okay now.”

“No,” she said in a tone of disgust, “now the damned thing needs a couple of hundred dollars of brake work. I can’t afford to keep this one running, and I certainly can’t afford a new one.”

“Hear that, Mark?” Henderson gestured with a chicken bone. “Tell the mayor we need a raise.”

Mark pretended to be writing a note on the palm of his left hand. “Big raise,” he muttered. “Everyone but Grenley.”

“You got it. Phyl, how did you get here?”

“My sister dropped me off on her way to the hospital.”

“You’ll need a ride back. Mark?”

“Of course. Be glad to.” *Overjoyed, in fact.* As soon as he had spoken, he realized how he must have sounded to the others and stopped short in embarrassment. *Damned overeager teenager.*

Sam grinned at him, which made it worse, but Linda came to his rescue. “Sam says you’ve only been in Piketon a short time.”

“That’s right. Since spring—April, in fact. I’m from Indiana originally, but I went to school in Boston. Let’s see, I’ve been here four months now. That makes me close to a native, for Piketon. I don’t think I’ve met a real native yet except for the mayor.”

“We’re natives, all three of us,” Linda said, smiling. “What brought you here, since you’re not working for one of the energy companies?”

Sam cut in before Mark could answer. “The weather, of course. The climate, the air, the dryness, the mountains. I don’t know if you hunted in Indiana, but it’s a lot better out here. Say, maybe this fall . . .” He looked hopefully at Mark.

“Uh, you won’t like to hear this, but I’m in favor of gun control, and I disapprove of hunting. Your typical liberal, intellectual, East Coast Jewboy, I guess. And also, I came out here for the political and legal experience, partly because of the energy boom. I’ve never been in the mountains, yet, and I really hadn’t planned to go up there at all. After a year or two, I might go back East and join my uncle’s law firm and become obscenely rich.”

“Hmm.” Sam stared at his plate. “Oh, Hell, we can argue some other time. You’re a good kid, anyway. Tell you what, you come with me this fall, give it a try, and I bet you’ll change your attitude. You get out there in the wilderness, no one around for miles, just you and your partner and your guns, and you see that big elk against the sky, I tell you—”

Linda raised her eyes to the sky. “Someone change the subject, quick.”

While they were clearing off the picnic table and collecting dishes, glasses, and cutlery, Phyllis said she needed to make a couple of quick telephone calls. Linda went inside to start the washing up at the same time. Later, after Mark and Phyllis had driven off, Linda told her husband, “I shouldn’t even tell you this, but I overheard Phyllis on the phone while I was in the kitchen. She called her parents to tell them she was going back to her own place for the night.”

“Ah-hah!”

“Don’t be smug. She also called up Slipher Whitman to cancel their plans for this weekend.”

“Oh-ho!”

“What about Mark’s ideas about guns and hunting?”

“I’ll work on him. Anyway, that’s not really important. And what’s more, with Slipher Whitman you never know what his real opinions are. He changes them for the company. At least Mark speaks out, even though he knew I’d disagree with him. I like that.”

“So you’re happy about the way it’s working out?”

“Yup.” He grinned broadly and grabbed her around the waist. “Forget the dishes. Let’s go to bed early.”

\*

They spoke little during the short drive. When they were stopped outside her apartment building, Phyllis hesitated for only a moment and then said, "Would you like to come in for a drink?"

Mark held his breath surreptitiously, fighting for self-control. "I'd love to." *Smirk, leer.*

The apartment was small, neat, with prints from the public library on the walls and a large stereo system above an impressive collection of records. It was much as he had expected. The wall almost entirely given up to shelves of books, however, he had somehow not expected. "What would you like?" Phyllis asked.

*Good Lord. Oh, she means to drink. "A vodka martini."*

"Oh . . . Well, how about if I make it with water instead of vodka and bourbon instead of vermouth? Bourbon's all I ever have on hand."

"Then why did you ask me what I wanted?"

"Just trying to be polite." As she went to the kitchen, though, she wondered, too, why she had asked. *What tricks is my unconscious playing on me now? He's not even attractive. Too short, and I've never liked curly, dark hair or glasses. Or those thin, big-nosed faces. Certainly doesn't compare to Sly. Damn Sly.*

Mark looked the books over while she was away. Some of them seemed to be college texts covering a wide range of subjects, no doubt retained after she'd graduated. There was a large block of evidently new ones, however, all dealing with natural history. He hadn't expected to find a policewoman who was a fan of beavers, badgers, and bees. He extracted a book at random and let it fall open. It was a heavily illustrated, general book on North American mammals, and his eye fell upon a paragraph that began, "This awesome monarch of the forests and prairies feared nothing, not even Man, for this was before the advent of the white man and his rifle. The bravest Indian warriors avoided the grizzly and admired his skill, dignity, courage, and pride." *What silly anthropomorphism!* He flipped the page and was confronted by a full-page, full-color photograph of a grizzly dining on carrion caribou. He glanced at the caption, which assured him that the fearless, brave, noble, royal, dignified grizzly preferred not to attack animals large enough to put up a dangerous fight but loved already dead animals, and the riper, the better. Mark looked at the photograph again, simultaneously fascinated and repelled.

The caribou lay on its back, forelegs sticking straight up in the air, head twisted out of sight. The abdominal area had disappeared, reduced to little more than red, churned-up snow and mud. The camera angle was such that Mark was looking up into the chest cavity from the bottom. It had been almost hollowed out by the happy grizzly, who sat beside the carcass, eyes closed, though head still up. Mark grimaced with disgust and put the book back.

Phyllis spoke from right behind him, and he spun around, feeling guilty, caught in the act. "Here's your bourbon-and-water martini. Hope it's dry enough. Uh, those books, I'm reading them because my fiancé, Sly Whitman, is in that field. He works at the museum. I felt I ought to learn something about his work." Her tone was midway between apologetic and defensive.

Mark sipped at his drink. "So I suppose he reads lots of books on criminology?"

For a moment, Phyllis looked angry. Then she relaxed and smiled. "Well said." She turned away and walked aimlessly across the room. "You said you're Jewish. When I was about ten years old—fifteen years ago—a little friend of mine told me that her father had told her that all Jews have horns. What happened to yours?"

He clapped his hand to the top of his head. "Oh, my gosh, I must have lost them somewhere. Actually, they get cut off while you're still a baby. It's called circumcision. Well, the truth of the matter is, I had to give them back when I decided I didn't want to be a Jew anymore. If you wanted to get back at me for that stupid thing I said earlier about criminology books, then you've succeeded."

Phyllis laughed. "That was the idea. If you're not a Jew anymore, then what are you now?"

"A cynic. Also a coward. A cynical coward. I expect to live for a long, long time, sneering all the while. Now, tell me all about yourself." *Is this really me, Mark Adler, speaking so debonairly? Guess it's all a matter of the right inspiration.*

She gestured at the apartment in general. "What you see is about what there is."

"What I see," Mark said softly, "is stunning."

She blushed at that, which surprised him, and turned away. "That's a bit unexpected."

"Unexpected! I've always worn my heart on my sleeve. I thought I was as obvious as an adolescent having his first infatuation."

“I didn’t notice.”

“Thanks, I guess.” He put his glass down on the counter that divided the end of the kitchen from the dining area and stepped in front of her. *Why not try? She probably knows judo.* He put his hands on her shoulders gently, bent forward, and kissed her.

Phyllis moved away from him, and Mark’s sudden excitement evaporated just as suddenly. However, she stepped over to the same counter where he’d placed his drink and put hers down next to his. Then she came back to him, removed his glasses, and put her arms around his neck. Her eyes were half closed. “Try again,” she whispered.

Her mouth opened slowly against his. The kiss became timeless. Mark felt his legs tremble with sudden weakness. He pressed her against him, marveling at the firmness of her body and the warm softness of the inside of her mouth. She pressed her hand against the back of his head; deeper, she seemed to be saying. He thought of her slender strength in bed with him and slid his left hand around to cup her breast.

Phyllis pushed him away. “It’s very late, Mark. We both have to be at the station early tomorrow. You’d better go now.”

Mark took his glasses and left, too dazed to protest. Phyllis closed the door behind him and leaned against it, breathing heavily. “Slipher, you son of a bitch,” she whispered, “you’d better be worth it.”

Mark drove home scarcely noticing anything along the way. He stumbled up the stairs to his apartment, locked the door behind him, took his clothes off in the dark and fell into bed, and masturbated until he thought his hand would fall off.

\*

The next morning, the three of them chatted pleasantly as they drove their circuit on North Hill. Sam Henderson eyed the other two with poorly veiled curiosity, wondering how he could find out if anything had happened between them. Instead, they talked about the weather, which was still granting them a seasonable spell.

“Wonder how long this’ll last?” Henderson said. “I can stay awake more easily when the weather’s warm. Cold weather always makes me sleepy.”

“It’s called hibernation,” Phyllis said.

“Yeah. Linda always says I’m a bear in the morning. Say, Mark. Tomorrow’s your last day, isn’t it?”

“That’s right.” *And last night was my first and last chance.* Even without that to shade his thoughts, he felt sad at the coming farewells. *After only four days! How silly.* But the other two seemed to feel it, too, and the conversation trailed away.

The radio crackled out, “Unit nine three. Location.”

Sam answered quickly. “One-hundred block of East Rose, heading east.”

“East Lily, Sam. Paradise km. Neighbor called about screams during the night, and now your buddies don’t answer the door.”

Henderson and Phyllis exchanged a quick glance, and then she turned on lights and siren and squealed south onto a sidestreet to reach Lily.

Mark sat silently in the back seat, holding on to the seat in front, fearing that if he drew attention to himself, he’d be left out of the excitement for his own safety. Curiosity finally overcame him, though. “The Paradise Inn? Sounds like a Chinese restaurant.”

“No,” Phyllis said, “Mexican, and very spicy.”

Henderson laughed. “Local house of joy. Couple of girls who share an apartment over on Lily. They’re free-lancers. Phyllis went to high school with one of them.”

“Doesn’t your rule book say somewhere you should arrest them for prostitution?”

Henderson snorted. “We manage somehow never to catch them in the act.”

“And it’s not always easy to manage,” Phyllis said.

“Anyway,” Henderson added, “we try to see that they stay out of serious trouble and keep it quiet. The big danger is that they can get beat up and robbed. That may be what’s happened this time.”

Mark sat back to digest this while the car screamed along the street. He had always affected cynicism, sometimes saying that his East Coast cynicism had undermined any childhood belief in city government or police honesty. On the face of it, the easygoing disregard for the law of these two Piketon policemen fell into the same category as the wholesale corruption of some Eastern police departments. In fact, he had only recently read an account of a scandal in Piketon in the 1950s involving a burglary ring made up of city policemen and headed by the then chief of police, Mayor Mack Nicholson’s older brother. That that had

happened, small beer though it was by Eastern standards, had seemed to prove that policemen in the upright, honest West were the same as those in the East. But there was something different about this, after all, Mark admitted readily. This seemed instead to be a case of bending the rules in order to help the local people, perhaps even to improve law enforcement overall, rather than for personal gain. *Or do I really know that? Am I just making excuses for these two because of Phyllis? My God— what are my feelings toward her?*

In the front seat, despite her worry about her girlhood friend, Phyllis was thinking the same worrisome thoughts about her feelings toward Mark.

Mark could tell which building was their target by the crowd of residents standing on the sidewalk, talking loudly and nervously. The block, with its swept sidewalks and well maintained buildings, was anomalous for the east side of North Hill. As she opened her door, Phyllis said over her shoulder, “You’d better stay in the car.”

“Fat chance.” He got out quickly, not giving her a chance to reply or Sam a chance to agree with her.

The three of them pushed their way through the crowd and across the tiled courtyard, surrounded by the building on three sides and with a locust tree fighting bravely for life in the center. Mark noticed that the crowd parted readily for Phyllis and only slightly less readily for Sam, who kept muttering, “*Perdón!*” Mark tried to imitate him and got some blank stares and a few looks of contempt. He managed to keep up with the other two, however.

The Paradise Inn was a ground-floor apartment at the end of a long hallway. Phyllis knocked at the door, and they waited.

Henderson said to Mark in a low voice, “The other side of the apartment has windows facing out into the alley. It gives the customers a way out in case of a raid.”

Mark said, “Unless the police have the foresight to cover the alley.”

Henderson grinned. “But we’re pretty dumb.”

Mark was just about to say something about the faint smell, sweet and sickening, when Phyllis said, “They’re not answering.” Her voice was loud and urgent in the quiet hallway. She tried the handle, but with no effect. “Locked. Force it, Sam.”

He hesitated. “Against regs, Phyl.”

She glared at him. “Connie could be hurt! I’ll do it.” She unsnapped the leather strap over the handle of her pistol and started to draw it.

“Oh, Hell,” Henderson said, “this isn’t a cowboy movie. Hold on.” He grabbed Mark’s shoulder for support, drew his right knee up almost to his chest with his foot aimed at the door, and shot his leg out. The door crashed open and banged against the inner wall and rebounded.

The three of them stood in the doorway, confused, looking at chaos.

The room in front of them was filled with barely identifiable fragments of furniture, strips of cloth, scraps of paper, and broken crockery. Directly across the room, a window from which all the glass had been broken out showed the far wall of the sun-splashed alley. A curtain cord hung beside the window, although the curtains were little more than shreds; the cord swung repeatedly away from the wall, caught in the breeze blowing through the opening, and fell back again against the wall, making a rhythmic tapping sound. The smell Mark had noticed earlier was far stronger now, and his stomach contracted at it.

To their left, a corner of a bed showed through an open doorway. The door itself hung crookedly, half open, the top hinge torn from the frame and the bottom hinge bent. The other bedroom led off to the right, the door closed. Mark was the first to spot the naked foot projecting from under a pile of newspapers just in front of the shattered window. He pointed with a trembling finger, unable to talk.

Sam stepped quickly across the room, bent down, and snatched the newspapers aside. He stood up slowly and turned toward Mark. “There’s nothing else there,” he whispered. “Just a foot. Just like in the car.” Then he added, “There’s blood on the window frame.”

Meanwhile, Phyllis had gone through the open doorway to check in the bedroom. They heard her shriek, “Connie! Jesus God!”

Mark was through the doorway a split second ahead of Sam. He caught Phyllis’ shoulders and pulled her away from the thing on the bed. She turned away from it and buried her face against his shoulder, her arms going around his chest; she shook with soundless weeping. Mark held her tightly to him, staring past her at what was left of Connie, unable to take his eyes off the sight.

Connie had been naked when attacked, lying on her back on her bed. She still lay there, the sheets beneath her soaked in her blood. She lay on her back still, spread-eagled, giving the impression that—one blessing—she had died quickly and with little struggle. Her head was bent awkwardly to the right, neck

apparently broken by the same blow which had crushed the left side of her face. The right side was unharmed, expression calm, eye staring at the ceiling. Her calves, slender and shapely, were unharmed, but her thighs changed halfway up into ragged flesh and exposed bone. Her hips and stomach area had been eaten away down to the bone, and whatever had done it had gone on to the chest, leaving the breasts untouched but digging into the chest cavity from beneath in its search for delicacies; Mark stared into a dark-red, gaping cave. He thought over and over of the dead caribou in the book in Phyllis' apartment.

Phyllis moaned her friend's name repeatedly. Her legs could scarcely hold her and her tears blinded her. Mark led her from the bedroom into the living room, found a couch in the midst of the chaos, and cleared it off and gently laid her on it. He noticed something small and white on the floor beside the couch, something different from the scattered strips and shreds of paper and cloth. He bent to pick it up. then recoiled as his hand touched it and he realized what it was: an ear, possibly a woman's, bloodless and ragged edged.

Henderson burst from the other bedroom. He looked at Phyllis lying curled up on her side on the couch with her hands over her face, then said hurriedly to Mark, pointing back over his shoulder with his thumb, "I'm going to call for an ambulance. Do what you can for the other girl."

Mark was confused. "In the other bedroom?"

"Yes, damn it! Hurry!" He rushed from the apartment.

Mark forced himself into movement, dreading what he would find in the other room.

At first, he stood in the doorway, frozen in horror. The girl was lying on her back on the floor, beside the bed. She, too, was naked, and so covered with blood that Mark couldn't at first tell what her wounds were. Blood covered the carpet, and the smell was even stronger in here. She was still alive, breathing with a curious gasping, sucking noise. In the light from the window behind her, her face was white. Her eyes were closed; the lids flickered. Her mouth opened in a grimace, clenched teeth showing, the muscles of her throat knotting.

Mark moved toward her, then stopped as his shoes squelched in the blood-soaked carpet. Do what you can for her, Sam had told him. *Do something*, Mark told himself. The girl moaned and mumbled something. Overcome with sudden pity, a wash of it that banished his horror, Mark stepped forward and knelt beside her, ignoring the blood welling up around his knees. Now he could tell that she was struggling for breath. With each attempt, the blood covering her chest frothed and bubbled. Her breasts had been torn off, and her scalp and hair were missing over the left side of her head, exposing red flesh and skull bone beneath.

*God, I don't know what to do.* He picked a torn sheet up from the floor, rolled it quickly into a cylinder, and gently placed it under the girl's head. For a moment at least her breathing became easier. The knotted muscles of her neck relaxed, and her face smoothed. If he ignored the ruin of her scalp, she was for an instant achingly beautiful, the sheet-whiteness of her face giving her the look of something ethereal, not of Earth. She mumbled, "*Me duele, me duele.*"

Mark said helplessly, "I can't understand you. I'm sorry."

He became aware of Phyllis kneeling beside him. She said softly, "She said, 'It hurts, it hurts.'"

"I don't even know what to do for her."

"I think her lungs are collapsed, the way she's fighting for air. And she must have holes right through her chest wall. She's lost too much blood. ...I hope Sam's sending for a priest, too."

"A priest! A doctor's more important."

Phyllis shook her head. "Not to her. I don't know if I can do it for her or if it has to be a priest." She bit her lip. "I don't even remember how it goes, unction. I've forgotten so much!" She touched her hand gently to the dying girl's cheek and muttered, "*Estese quieto.*" The girl seemed to derive some comfort from the touch and the words. Mark put his arm around Phyllis' shoulders, and she leaned against him. They stayed that way, listening for the sirens of the ambulance and feeling helpless to do anything more for the girl in front of them. Not drawing attention to himself, Sam Henderson stood in the doorway, watching them.

\*

It was hours later, end of the workday for Sam and Phyllis, and the three of them were back at the station house, sitting on a wooden bench, too drained to speak. Sergeant Jellinek appeared in front of them. "That girl died," he said emotionlessly. "Dead when they reached the hospital. Thought you'd wanna know. Grenley wants to see you, Oriveda." He drifted away again.

Phyllis heaved herself to her feet and walked slowly, listlessly toward Grenley's office. "Now what," said Henderson, "is that son of a bitch up to?"

Mark shrugged. "You know, Sam, I've never seen anyone die before, or even a dead body."

Henderson nodded. "Yeah, it's rough the first time. Hell, it's always rough. Especially if you know them." *And especially when they both look so much like Phyllis.*

"I told the mayor he shouldn't ignore what's been happening up here, and his response was to get me put in your patrol car." He spoke bitterly. "Wonder what he'll say when I describe those two girls to him."

"He'll say they're just greasers, anyway. And whores, at that. You don't sound much like a cynic this evening."

"Who said I was?"

"Phyllis did."

"And what else did she say?"

Sam smiled. "That you're funny looking. I'll go along with that. But she says you're okay, anyway."

Mark grunted. "Wonderful. Of course, no one compares with the brilliant, handsome Slipper Whitman. I've never met her mystery prince."

Henderson's expression was sour. "You haven't missed anything. Cool it—here she comes. Well, what'd our beloved chief want?"

"Not so loud, Sam. Brace yourself." She sat down at his end of the bench. "I've been offered a temporary promotion to plainclothes and assigned as the liaison with the mayor's office on these killings."

Henderson stared at her for a moment, then sniffed the air ostentatiously. "Is that rotten fish?"

Phyllis said, "Rotten politics. Archuleta, of course. Also, there's that new, what do they call it, North Hill Action Society. I'm a native, so to speak, so Grenley can keep everyone happy. I'm sorry, Sam."

"Don't worry about me. Everyone wants to be my partner. So does that mean you'll be working more with Mark in the future?"

"I suppose so, if the mayor leaves him on the case."

Mark said quickly. "Oh, he will. I'll see to that."

Henderson suppressed a grin. "Well!" he said loudly. "I'd better sign out and head for home. I'm sure you two have business to discuss." He ambled off.

"We *should* talk about how we're going to work together," Mark said in as neutral a tone as he could manage. "I can give you a ride home, since your car's still on the fritz."

"Yes. I'd appreciate that."

\*

That night, Mark slid into a dream in which Phyllis lay on the floor of her apartment, naked, breasts ripped away, breath frothing through the holes in her chest, neck muscles knotted, carpet soaked with her blood, flesh white with impending death. She looked directly at him and moaned words at him, but the words were Spanish. "I can't understand you!" he cried out in the dream. "I don't know how to help you!" A priest materialized on Phyllis' other side, leered at him, and touched Phyllis' forehead and hands, leaving glistening oil spots behind. The priest wore a skullcap with Hebrew lettering on it. "I shall now speak the words of the sacrament of extreme unction," he said solemnly, winking at Mark. "*Baruch atah, Adonai—*" Mark yelled and struck out at him.

And awoke abruptly, lying on his back and staring at the ceiling, where the light-and-shadow pattern of a nearby streetlight shining through the leaves of an elm outside the window shifted and moved in a nighttime breeze. Phyllis' head lay on his shoulder, her arm across his chest. She breathed quietly, regularly. He kissed her head, stroked her cheek, her breast. She awoke halfway, slid her arm around his neck, turned to him hungrily. Earlier that night, their lovemaking had been quite unexpectedly spectacular and exhausting. Mark could not tell whether her hunger now asked anything more from him than a repetition of that passion.