

2 FAR STRANGE COUNTRY

Banquet of Choices
VOLUME I of II

Arielle Hunter



A Far Strange Country : Banquet of Choices - Vol. 1 of 2 -

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(Rated R - For drug use and abuse as well as some brief language.)

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- Prologue -
Chasing the Dragon
Berkeley, California 1968

PICTURE THE TIME.

Picture the place.

Picture a gaunt young man sitting by a fire on a threadbare Turkish rug spread over a hardwood floor, wearing loose paisley pants in crimson and saffron, tied at the waist with a woman's scarf. Now picture a small, naked boy nearby, playing a silent game.

Rain crawling down the windowpane melts away the ashen clouds. Cedar smolders in the fireplace and incense burns in a brass pot filling the room with the scent of woodland and spice. Peace signs and daisies balance on a mobile hanging from the ceiling. And in a photograph on the mantle, two young soldiers in jungle fatigues pose in front of a moss laden temple.

Nouveau lithographs and psychedelic posters watch from the wall. And the room is awash in a liqueur from the spirit-world so thick it could be poured out and served to guests, but there are none. Only the young man and his child.

A bottle of wine sparkles in the firelight. The young man empties the bottle into a glass. Swirling the blood-red liquid, he tips the glass and drinks, then picks up a pencil and paper and begins writing.

A violet sky standing in exile

Tapping the pencil on his forehead, he crosses out what he just wrote, and begins again.

~~*A violet sky standing in exile*~~
A violent sky stands in exile
Souls twist in time like a witness tree
Young men smoke carnelian dreams
And the old again begin to sing
Of a far strange country

He starts a record spinning on the turntable, then sits down. A haunting guitar resonates in the room, and a lone voice follows.

Taking a match from a brass box, he lights a candle. A wisp of sulfurous smoke trails away, replaced by a flame. The candlelight illuminates a smudged outline of black kohl surrounding his eyes; his pale skin is almost translucent in the glow. A long strand of tangled dark hair falls from a crooked part in the center of his forehead, but he takes no notice. He is slave to another master.

He picks up a piece of aluminum foil and pinches it into a shape resembling a tiny Chinese sampan, the way he learned in a hovel on the edge of Da Nang. And into the aluminum sampan, he empties a packet of unrefined brown crystal. Heroin -- the blood of the poppy, scraped away by a knife that turns and cuts the poppy again.

Leaning forward, he holds the little boat over the candle. As the heroin warms, it turns to a muddy liquid. Small droplets race inside the tiny craft, then vaporize into smoke. Following the swirling smoke with a straw, he inhales, rocking the boat back and forth over the candle. The hot resinous smoke burns his throat, then his lungs.

Chasing the Dragon, they call it.

He sits motionless, waiting. Then, trapped in a momentary eternity of blinding awareness, he remembers drinking the last of the wine. He grabs the pencil.

Too late I ride the Dragon . . .

In slow motion, his eyes roll back. He sits suspended for a moment before succumbing to gravity's relentless pull. His head drops to one side and draws him crashing to the floor.

The little boy scrambles to his father's side and shakes him.
"Daddy!"

No response.

"Daddy! Wake up!"

Nothing.

The boy begins to cry. And cries, and cries, until there are no more tears. Then the exhausted child falls asleep in the hollow between his father's knees and chest.

The arm of the turntable spins into the center, filling the room with rhythmic static. Daylight wanes. The fire burns itself out. Cold creeps into the room. And the candle melts into a pool of wax, swallowing the tiny aluminum sampan and the vicious, vaporous dragon the young man unleashed.

In those days there was no king, so every
man did what was right in his own sight.



I

ON A CRISP Sunday morning in the Sierra Nevada foothills just before the full bloom of spring, a flock of sparrows ascended as one then fell, then ascended again at some unseen bidding that only they perceived.

Pauline Harper stood at her kitchen sink gazing out the window washing dishes. The ticking of a cuckoo clock punctuated the quiet. She took an iron skillet from the stove, and the smell of bacon wafted through the room. Sliding the pan into the soapy water, she looked up at an aging family picture on the windowsill above the sink.

Pale sunlight, filtering in through a curtain, divided the photograph into light and shadow. Her son, her only child, was lost in darkness. Steven, born late in her life, long after she had given up hope of ever having a child.

Tears pooled in her eyes. She dropped her dishrag on the tiled counter and picked up the picture. With a corner of the apron covering her flowered house-dress, she brushed away a film of dust. *I wish I could wipe away this heartache . . .*

She set the picture back on the windowsill. *Five years. Where has it gone? Five years since I looked forward to the change of seasons. Five years since I looked forward to a holiday. Five years*

since Steven enlisted and went away to war. I'm trapped in time -- mother of the boy he once was.

"Steven, where are you?" She gripped the front of her dress. The pain of missing him came, piercing and desperate, stabbing like a knife.

Just then, a muffled call came from the upstairs bathroom. "Pauleen!"

She wiped her eyes and tightened the hairpins in a French knot that, according to fashion, was a decade out of date and far too black for a woman her age. "Husbands," she said under her breath. "He should be dressed by now." *Any other morning he'd be up and dressed -- but not on Sunday.* She planted her hands on her hips and shouted, "Honestly, Buck! What?"

"Turn on the radio! There's too much static up here. Something about a rockslide on the highway . . ."

"You'd think all those rocks would have fallen by now," she muttered, switching on a radio on a shelf above the counter.

" . . . another massive rockslide west of Pacific House on Highway Fifty between Sacramento and the summit. Traffic is at a standstill and the highway could remain closed for a week . . ."

"They said the highway could be closed for a week," Pauline shouted toward the stairs.

Turning back to the sink, she looked up to see a shadow passing by the kitchen window. Moments later the doorbell rang. A wirehair terrier bounded into the kitchen, yelping and scratching on the door. The dog's black and tan markings made it appear he was wearing a custom-made jacket.

"Tailor! Stop it!" she snapped. "Coming," she called, taking off her apron and smoothing her hair.

The bell rang again. The dog barked louder and scratched harder.

"Tailor! Get!" Scooting the dog out of the way with her foot, she opened the door.

A young Western Union courier held out a light tan envelope. "Telegram for Mr. Buck Harper."



2

THAT SAME SUNDAY morning, Donatello Dragghi paced the length of a picture window stretching from ceiling to floor in his suite at the Beverly Palms Hotel. He stared at a telephone on a nearby end table. “Why you don’t ring?” he muttered with a thick Italian accent. “All morning, you are silent.”

Sitting on the edge of a table, he tapped the ash off his cigarette, set it in an ashtray, and pushed a strand of dark, wavy hair off his face. Sunlight refracting through a bottle of vodka splintered into a rainbow across the table. He picked up the bottle. Resting it in the crook of his arm, he unscrewed the cap, then filled a small glass and drank the biting liquid in one long swallow. As it slid down his throat, warmth spread across his chest.

“Thank God, for good vodka,” he said under his breath.

He turned and stared out the window, past gently swaying palms, to the sepia sky. The day threatened to be as unseasonably hot as the day before. *This city -- I hate. The freeway -- I hate. And the people. They all stink like the smog. But I hate most -- small people wishing to be big stars.* He thrust out his jaw. “I am Donatello Dragghi. I am not one of them.”

Resting his forehead on the window, he allowed his mind to wander along a well-worn path. *Brusco. Brusco Caggiano. Of everything I hate, I hate him most of all. The Sicilian. The member of Parliament. The Deputy of Derriere Wiping. Whose mistress was so expensive.*

Donatello fumbled with the buttons on his shirt and struggled to slip it off his shoulders. He looked down at his right hand, bandaged like a mummy. Only the thumb and fingertips were exposed. *Already, it has been three months.* Stretching his fingers over the splint that immobilized his hand, he winced as a sharp ache shot up his arm. *Will it never heal?*

With his other hand, he absently twisted the chain of a gold crucifix around his finger. A wave of loneliness and regret washed over him. Regret, he dismissed, but loneliness lingered like a cloying guest.

“Meika . . . Meika . . . Meika . . .” he whispered. “Why you did this to me?” Rolling his forehead over the window, he was lost in a recollection.

He stood on the balcony of his family home -- a marble villa overlooking the Mediterranean. The sky was cold and gray, and the sea shimmered like quicksilver in the wind.

“Why can’t you be good like your brother!” his father, Demetri, shouted in raspy Italian, throwing his hands into the air.

“But Papa, I am ‘The Bounty Killer,’” Donatello protested. “Leo, he is a priest.”

“Dona, you are not a bounty killer. You make up stories for a living.” Demetri paced the perimeter of the balcony, then stopped again in front of Donatello. “Are there not enough women in the world for you? Why must you embarrass me with Caggiano’s Austrian whore? She is old enough to be your mother!”

“Mieka is not a whore, and not that old,” Donatello countered. “Only seventeen years . . .”

“Dona, are you lunatic? You know Caggiano.

Thanks be to God it was not his wife.” Demetri looked heavenward, kissed his thumb, then made the sign of the cross over his chest and forehead.

Donatello feigned a laugh. “Oh Papa, who cares about Caggiano?”

“Dona, listen to me. The only reason you are not dead, and me too by the way, is because Caggiano was my friend. You notice I say *was*. He did me a favor not to kill you.”

“Oh Papa . . . ”

“No, Dona, you listen!” Demetri snapped, waving a stout forefinger at him. “You no, oh Papa me! Why can’t you keep your pants on? You make enough trouble to put me in my grave.” Demetri grabbed his hair with both hands. “You see my hair! It turns white!”

“Your hair already was white,” Donatello said.

Demetri shook his head. “No! I tell you why. Because you won’t be good.”

“But Papa . . . ”

“Even my friend Benito tried to reason with Caggiano. He told him he should be flattered a young man like you would want his mistress. But you know, he was not flattered.” Demetri paused, staring at Donatello, then looked down at his watch. The anger in his eyes faded into agony. “Dona, I cannot stop what is to happen. There is nothing I can do.” Shaking his head, he turned away.

“Papa?” Donatello called after him.

Demetri stopped outside the open door to the balcony. A balding older man and a younger man with eyes black and vacant like a shark passed him without speaking. He went inside as the men came toward Donatello.

“Caggiano?” Donatello whispered.

The younger man pushed Donatello back against the marble railing. Caggiano fumbled in his coat and pulled out a Beretta pistol. Pointing the gun in Donatello’s face, he cocked it.

Donatello went limp. *God, I am a dead man.*

Caggiano grabbed Donatello's hand and held it against the rail. "Now you will learn, 'Bounty Killer,' not to take what is not yours." He swung back, then smashed the butt of the gun into Donatello's hand.

"Papa!" Donatello screamed.

Caggiano swung again. The lip on the magazine cut through Donatello's flesh.

"Papa!"

Caggiano swung again. Blood splattered his face and coat. And again. Crushing the bones in Donatello's hand.

"Papa," Donatello moaned, sinking against the rail.

Caggiano nodded, the younger man released his grip, and Donatello slumped onto the balcony. Caggiano stepped back and took a handkerchief from inside his coat. He wiped his face, then the butt of the gun as Demetri hesitantly approached.

"Get him a doctor," Caggiano said with a guttural growl. He dropped the handkerchief beside Donatello, then he and the other man left.

"Papa, my hand . . ." Donatello cried as Demetri knelt beside him.

"I know, Dona. You are lucky to be alive. Caggiano said only because you are my son, he would have mercy. But if ever, ever, he sees you again, he swore to me he will kill you."

"But . . ."

"I arranged for you to stay with Uncle Lorenzo in San Francisco. There, maybe you will be safe."

"When can I come back?"

"Dona, you cannot come back. Not ever." Demetri helped him to his feet. "We need to call a doctor."

Just then the phone rang, jolting Donatello back to the hotel room. He shuddered and grabbed the receiver. "Mark?"

"Hey, Donatello!" Mark blurted. "Sorry I didn't get back to you last night, man. I was out late, but hey, great news. I just about got the part sewn up," he continued, rapid-fire. "They want you, man, they're dead serious, and by the time they start shooting, you should have the bandage off your hand, so no problem. There's only one thing . . ." Mark paused for a breath. "Since they're making a romantic comedy, they want -- I mean they need you to do a screen test. Whadda ya say?"

"What you mean?" Donatello said in a measured tone.

"They need you to do a screen test."

"What you mean they need me do a screen test?"

"Sheesh. You sound like a broken record. The producer wants you to read because he's worried about your accent and -- "

"Accent? What you mean, accent?"

"You know, how you talk, they wanna make sure they can work around it."

"I know what you mean!" Donatello exploded. "How they dare to ask me read like I never make a movie!" He threw his bandaged hand into the air. "Like I am a no one!"

"That's nobody. Geeze, Donatello, you've got an ego the size of the Roman Coliseum. Relax. It's just a screen test. It won't kill you. And hey, it's a job."

"It is not just a screen test, it is insult. All over Europe I am a star."

"I know it's a drag being here, starting over and all. But I've been working my butt off to get you this part, and it's not like it's the easiest thing in the world to get work for an Italian actor in this town." There was a short pause. "It wouldn't be so bad if you would've done something besides sweaty spaghetti westerns. They think it's all you can do."

"Why you say this? *The Bounty Killer* is the biggest film in Europe. There I am -- "

"Yeah, yeah, I know, you're a star in Europe, but it's not like anybody in Hollywood gives a damn. As long as *The Bounty Killer* is hung up at the ratings board, believe you me, nobody cares."

“But Mark . . .”

“It doesn’t matter how big you are -- or were -- in Europe, you’re here now, and if you don’t knock off all this prima donna crap, you’re sure as hell gonna be a has-been. And as you know, you’re only as good as your last movie.”

“But . . .”

“Here’s the deal. They want you, but they’re tired of screwin’ around, either you do the screen test or they offer the part to Franco Nero. Now, are you gonna do it, or not?”

Donatello exhaled a long sigh. “I . . .”

“Look, I gotta go. The producer will be at his office ’til 6:00, then he’s goin’ to Vegas for a couple a days. If he doesn’t hear from you before he leaves, that’s it. They give the part to someone else.”

Icy silence.

“You got that?”

More silence.

“Well?”

“Sì. Sì. I call.”

“And, uh, Donatello? Don’t jerk me around. If you blow off this job, I don’t care how big a star you think you are, you can find yourself another agent.”

A sharp click and the phone went dead.

Donatello froze, holding the receiver in mid-air, then slammed it onto its cradle.

A noise from behind startled him.

A young woman came into the room. Tall and striking -- with long chestnut hair, dark olive skin, and haunting eyes the color of tarnished gold. She yawned and wrapped a towel with the hotel’s monogram around her. “Who that wass?” she asked in English even more broken than his.

He glared at her. “Mark.”

She looked incoherently at him.

“Mark. My agent.”

She raised her thick, dark eyebrows. “He hass good news?” she said with a heavy Slavic accent.

“Yes . . . no . . . I don’t know!” Donatello threw his hands into the air. “Get out my way. Why did I believe the fortuneteller? You

bring me no luck.” Pushing past her, he stomped into the bedroom and slammed the door behind him.

Late-morning glare streamed into the bedroom. Reaching up to grab the drapes, he banged his bandaged hand on the windowsill. “Damn!” He held the splinted mitt to his chest and jerked on the curtain with his other hand. The heavy brocade screeched as it came off the track.

He threw himself onto the bed. Hidden in darkness, his tears distorted the blade of light cutting across the room through the sagging drapes. His body vibrating with rage, he gripped his crucifix.

“Jesus, Mary, Mother of God,” he said in one long breath. “Our Father in heaven, I am Donatello Dragghi, not a no one.”

He took another breath.

The oracle said I was born under fortunate stars.

Another breath.

But here, beneath the brown California sky, the stars are falling and my fortune has abandoned me.

Then a strange, yet familiar, sensation washed over him. *The pounding, is it my head . . . or my heart.* The taste of metal flooded his mouth, and panic crashed in on him like a wave. With an intense electric shudder, his mind seized and his world faded to black.



The young woman tightened the towel and slumped onto a chair beside the picture window. Her name was Slovika -- Donatello’s wife. She stared at the bedroom door. *I hate him. With everything in me, I hate him.* She slid lower in the chair. *But it is my curse, that I love him even more.*

Slovika picked up Donatello’s half-finished cigarette from the ashtray and stared at the chocolate-brown paper. Putting it to her lips, she struck a match. After a deep inhale, she propped her long, olive-skinned legs on the table. As she exhaled the smell of tobacco permeated the room. *Almost noon.*

“So boring,” she muttered, looking around the suite. *Nice. But like all other hotels.* “He goes to dinner. He goes to parties.

He goes to lunch. Does he take me?” *Never. I am a prisoner. Like a piece of luggage, I never leave the room. Not even to the pool. And this day will be like all the rest.*

She tapped the ash off the cigarette, then took another long drag and stared out the window at the late-morning haze. Then at the people sunbathing around the swimming pool several floors below. A young man, tall and tan with an arrogant swagger, walked across the courtyard. He stepped up onto a diving board at the end of the pool and placed his feet on the edge. With his arms overhead, he sprang into the air, then straightened and pierced the water like a dagger.

Why do men think they are gods? “Ow!” she gasped as the cigarette burned to the end. She dropped it in the ashtray and licked her fingers.

Standing and stretching, she let the towel slip to the floor. She picked up Donatello’s shirt, held the slick cotton to her face, and inhaled the lingering scent of his cologne. Passion flooded her, followed by a rush of despair. She slipped the shirt over her shoulders and slid her arms into the sleeves. Smoothing the fabric over her breasts, she embraced herself. *Why doesn’t he love me?*

Slovika wound her chestnut hair into a knot, held it on top of her head, then turned and stared at her reflection in a mirror above the sofa. She seductively lowered her eyes and pursed her lips. *My face is strong, but not ugly. I am beautiful. I think.* She let her hair fall. *Why did he marry me, if he doesn’t find me so?* The background became a blur and the room melted away, leaving only the empty golden-brown eyes staring back at her.

“What has happened to me?” *So young. Old. Lost.*

A sound in the bedroom caught her attention. *How long have I stared into the mirror? Hours? Days? A lifetime?*

She sighed. “I don’t know. It doesn’t matter.” *Because there is no Slovika left. Only the empty shell that answers to her name.*



3

HOURS PASSED.

The smell of cold bacon hung in the Harper's kitchen, and evening shadows crept into the house. Buck sat across from Pauline at a chrome table. The cuckoo clock chimed six. He picked up the telegram and held it to the light.

MR. BUCK HARPER=
YOUR SON STEVEN IS IN THE HOSPITAL=
CALL 415-363-1018=

No matter how many times I read it the words never change. With all my heart I wish Pauline had never answered that door. He set the crumpled paper on the imitation marble tabletop, and ran his fingers over his silver crew cut. "It's past dinner time and the fire's gone out."

"Try again," Pauline demanded.

He took off his wire-rimmed glasses, and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "We've tried it a thousand times, but there's no answer. And we've called all the hospitals in the bay area at least twice. There's no mention of what happened, which hospital, or who sent it. Maybe it's a sick joke."

Pauline shot a resolute glare at him. "Try again -- or I will."

"Alright already." He rubbed his palms on his khaki work pants, then re-tucked his matching shirt and picked up the receiver from its cradle on the wall. Amid the buzzing dial tone, he heard a click on the other end of the line, then a TV in the background. "I'm on the phone, Alma," he grumbled, scuffing at a hairline crack in the black and white linoleum.

No response.

"I need to make a call. Will you *please* get off the line?"

"You've been on all day," a creaking female voice replied.

"Al-ma . . ."

"Fine."

Another click and the line went dead.

"Damn party line." Buck slapped the hook several times. The phone came back to life, and he dialed the number. After three rings, a vacant female voice answered. He nodded to Pauline. She jumped to her feet and put her ear to the receiver next to his. He gripped her hand.

"This is Buck Harper. I'm calling about my son, Steven," he blurted.

"Just a minute. Shara, it's for you . . ."

The voice trailed off into the background, then the echo of footsteps came toward the phone.

"Hello."

"Who is this!" Buck snapped.

No answer.

"What happened to Steven?"

"I'm Shara, his girlfriend," a hesitant, child-like voice replied.

"Girlfriend?" Buck rubbed his forehead. "What happened?"

Silence.

"Calm down. She might hang up," Pauline whispered.

He took a long breath. "Please . . . what happened?"

"Steven overdosed."

"What?" the Harpers gasped in unison.

"He overdosed . . . smoking heroin. And I don't know what to do," Shara stammered.

"Smoking heroin? I've never heard of --" Buck began.

"Oh my God," Pauline moaned, slumping into her chair.

Buck gripped her shoulder. “When -- ” His voice cracked. He cleared his throat. “When did this happen?”

Shara burst into tears. “Last night . . . I wasn’t home when they found him. I didn’t know your phone number, but there was an old letter in his duffle bag . . . it had your address on it, and my friend told me . . . told me to send a telegram,” she said between sobs.

“Could -- couldn’t Steven tell you the number?” Buck said.

“No. He can’t talk.”

“Can’t talk?” His voice cracked again.

Pauline buried her face in her hands. “Oh, dear God, no.”

“Where is he?” Buck said, stiffening his jaw.

“He was in Oakland, but they’re transferring him to another hospital in the city.”

“What hospital? What city?”

“San Francisco. I don’t know what hospital. They won’t tell me anything. This is totally freaking me out! I . . . I don’t know what to do. Will you come and help us?”

Between her choking sobs, the hollow sound of a child crying echoed in the background.

“Okay, okay, take it easy. Of course we’ll come.” He paused, running his hand over his hair again. “Damn. The rockslide. Look, we’re in the foothills up above Sacramento. There was a rockslide and the road’s closed. But we’ll catch the next flight out of Reno.” He took a long breath. “Don’t panic. We’ll get there as soon as we can.”



4

DONATELLO WOKE FROM a dreamless sleep, shaken and ashen. He pushed the sweat-soaked hair off his face, then struggled to sit up. *God . . . my head.* He dropped back on the bed. *Another seizure.*

Sunlight cutting across the room had been replaced by evening shadows.

Where am I? What day? What time?

He stared up at the ceiling. *Sunday. California.* He turned over and looked at a clock radio on the nightstand. The digital cards flipped.

6:46

The luminous numerals held no meaning. He reached for the timepiece. It was bolted to the table. The digital cards flipped again.

6:47

“Sei, quaranta, sette,” he said under his breath. He looked at the clock again, rubbed his eyes, and shuddered. *The time . . .* He put his hand over his eyes. *The producer has gone to Las Vegas. Now I have no agent.*

“Why does this happen to me?”

Familiar voices replied.

*You brought this upon yourself . . .
It is nothing more than you deserve . . .
Your father will never take pride in you . . .
You can never go home . . .
If only you had been like your brother . . .*

Donatello sat up. Catching his reflection in the mirrored closet door, he wiped the perspiration off his forehead and squared his shoulders, then turned on the radio. Bouncy bossa nova flared from the speakers.

“Quel che sarà sarà,” he said, staring at his reflection. “I am Donatello Dragghi, and I will conquer this.”



Slovika looked up as Donatello came into the suite’s living room. He leaned against the doorjamb in a pale silk shirt open almost to his waist, skin-tight velvet pants, and snakeskin boots with Cuban heels.

She sank back on the sofa. *He ignores me all day long, and now he’s going out again.*

“I look good, no?” he asked with a flourish of his splinted hand.

“As always,” she said.

“Then, come. We will go out together. To the ristorante of my friend Vincente on the Sunset Strip.”

Slovika stared blankly at him.

“You want go or not?” he said, winding the chain of his crucifix around his finger.

She managed a feeble nod. “There will be dancing?”

He shrugged. “We will see. But you no can wear mia camicia . . . uh, wear my shirt. Hurry. Go and dress, I’ll not wait all night.”

Slovika sprang off the couch and skipped past him into the bathroom. Smiling into the mirror above the sink, she giggled and hugged herself. *I cannot believe he takes me too! I must make myself beautiful.*

She splashed water on her face and dried it with a thick hotel towel. Then colored her full lips dark red and lined her golden-brown eyes with a black kohl pencil. She slipped large hoops with tiny bells into the holes in her ears, wound her hair into a knot, and secured it with a tortoiseshell comb.

Throwing off Donatello's shirt, she rushed into the bedroom and opened the closet. *What will he like?* Rifling through her clothes, she stopped and took out a flowing paisley skirt, a peasant blouse, and laced sandals. "Maybe this." She stepped into the skirt and slipped on the blouse. Sitting on the bed, she tied the laces around her ankles. She stood and slid the mirrored closet door closed, then stepped back to study her reflection.

Straightening the blouse hanging below her olive shoulders, she smiled. "Yes. I am beautiful."



5

THE NEXT FLIGHT out of Reno turned out to be the final flight of the day, and the Harpers were the last passengers to get off the plane in San Francisco late that evening. Most of the business travelers, weekend gamblers, and other passengers had already gone when they entered the terminal.

“Baggage claim and rent-a-cars are downstairs,” Buck said, pointing toward the escalator.

“But it’s Sunday night. The car rentals are probably closed,” Pauline moaned.

“Then we’ll get a cab.”

A blonde PSA flight attendant in a red and orange mini-dress, red knee-high boots, and a fishbowl-shaped cap came from behind. “Evening,” she said. Her voice and footsteps echoed through the sterile quiet of the terminal as she passed them and stepped onto the escalator.

Pauline followed her, then Buck got on.

Pulling off his glasses, he closed his eyes and the sinking sensation swallowed him. *God, I feel like . . . it’s all too much . . .* Glancing down, he stepped off just before the stairs slipped away. He put on his glasses again, tugged on the lapels of his tweed jacket, and took Pauline’s arm. “Baggage is this way.”

As the Harpers entered the baggage area, the lonely sound of grinding metal reverberated through the space. The single remaining bag, a suitcase the size of a folding card table, disappeared through a split curtain as the luggage carousel turned. "Have to wait 'til it comes around again," Buck said with a weak smile.

Standing like ancient statues in a deserted city, they watched the machine slowly rotating. Pauline gripped the collar of her camelhair coat. "It's been all day . . ." Her voice cracked, and her eyes filled with tears. "First we couldn't get tickets. Then that stupid man on the plane blocked the aisle, and now -- "

Buck caught her hand. "Pauline, don't. We can't fall apart. We'll get there."

Biting her lip, she nodded, then glanced at a newspaper hanging in a nearby rack. "It seems like there's nothing but trouble . . . trouble everywhere."

"What do you mean?"

"March on Memphis Turns Violent," she read, pointing to the headline. "What's happened to everyone? This morning everything was fine." Tears spilled down her cheeks. "Then Steven . . . and now . . . it's like we're in another country and the whole world is going crazy!" she cried, throwing her hands into the air.

He put his arm around her. "Pauline, please. Don't. We can't. Not yet."

She took a long breath, then wiped her eyes. "You're right."

"There it is," Buck said as their suitcase came around again. He yanked it off the carousel and nodded toward a revolving door in a glass wall at the far end of the baggage claim. "That way."

They hurried to the door, then slipped into the vacuous space between the walls of turning glass. After half a rotation, it spit them out on the street. Dark, low-hanging clouds and damp air carrying a hint of the ocean met them on the other side. An odd muffled clattering punctuated the urban noise.

A battery of gritty panhandlers flanked either side of the door -- some intent on their purpose, others sitting dejectedly on the sidewalk. A wraith-like woman holding an illegible cardboard sign stared vacantly into an alternate universe. A few steps away, a grizzled man wrapped in a sleeping bag waved at the Harpers.

“Hey, how ’bout it? Spare change?” he called.

As the man started toward them, Buck took Pauline’s arm. “Watch your purse,” he said. “Taxis are over there.”

Turning a corner, they came upon the source of the clattering. A barefoot, saffron-robed gathering beating drums, tambourines, and finger cymbals danced and chanted with ecstatic abandon.

Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna . . .
Krishna, Krishna
Hare, Hare . . .
Hare Rama, Hare Rama . . .
Rama, Rama Hare, Hare . . .

A tall man wrapped in an orange sheet stepped away from the group. He thrust a basket across Buck’s path. Pulling out a flower, the man waved it sinuously through the air. “Krishna, Krishna,” he sang. “An offering for Krishna?”

“No,” Buck said over the jangling noise. “Now, if you’ll excuse us . . .”

The man held out the basket. “Hare, Hare . . .”

“I *said* no, thank you!” Buck snapped, then pushed the man out of the way, spilling coins, finger cymbals, and flowers onto the sidewalk.

“That was totally un-cool,” the man muttered.

Buck grabbed Pauline’s hand. “Come on,” he said, stepping over the artifacts of bliss scattered on the walkway.

The suitcase banged against his thigh as they hurried to the taxi stand. “Damn, it’s heavy,” he muttered, dropping the bag near the curb. “And those people are pushy.” He looked back at the chanting crowd. “Everybody wants something. And who the hell is Harry Christian, anyway? I wish he’d keep his people off the sidewalk.”

A few minutes later, an old black cab pulled up. Buck leaned in the window. “Immaculate Heart Hospital.”

The driver nodded, then jumped out and hoisted their suitcase into the trunk. The Harpers slid into the back seat, which smelled of stale cigarettes. After a quick glance over his shoulder, the cabbie drove away.

Bedraggled transients walked along the road, heading toward the highway. Hitchhikers stood shoulder to shoulder, waiting at the on-ramp. All the human detritus disappeared into the rearview mirror as the driver accelerated onto the freeway.

Buck ran his hand over the black vinyl seats, cracked with wear, then looked up at the frayed gray fabric lining the roof. *I feel old as this cab.* He glanced at Pauline; she stared out the window while fidgeting relentlessly with the strap of her purse. “It’s good Steven’s at Immaculate Heart,” he said.

She looked up at him. The desperation in her eyes left him crestfallen. He turned back to the window.

Stony silence descended in the taxi as evening settled over the bay. They passed mile after mile of bleak, featureless, shoebox buildings overhung by sagging power lines on treeless streets. A never-ending landscape of stucco, concrete, and asphalt. Small lackluster cities strung together by a thread of freeway that seemed to stretch past infinity. The relentless monotony seemed to heighten their sense of urgency.

At Army Street, like the turn of a page, the backdrop changed. Wind-bent cypress stood like sentries watching over the luxuriant tapestry of San Francisco, spreading over the edge of the bay. Many threads of highway ran together, and the traffic slowed to a crawl.

Rain began to fall. They stopped at an intersection. Lights blurred and slid down the taxi window, as if the city itself was crying. The rain on the roof and the soft, rhythmic splashing of the wipers weakened Buck’s composure. His lips began to tremble. He closed his eyes. *One tear falls and the dam will break. Got to stay strong for Pauline. For Steven.*

The buoyant lilt of the driver’s voice rescued Buck from the impending flood. “If you ask me, we’re in for a real gully-washer tonight,” the cabbie announced with a broad grin, glancing in the rearview mirror. “Hey, you don’t look so good. Are you okay?”

Buck stiffened. “Our son’s at Immaculate Heart.”

The driver looked over his shoulder. “Oh. Is it serious?”

“Don’t know yet.”

The driver nodded, then turned back as light changed.

Buck grasped Pauline's hand. "Another block. Almost there."

Pulling into the hospital's circular driveway, the driver stopped at a covered loading zone. In a flash, Pauline was out of the cab and hurrying toward the entrance. Buck waited as the driver got their suitcase from the trunk and took it to the curb. He handed the cabbie a roll of bills. "Keep the change."

"Gee, thanks," the driver said, greedily flipping through the roll. "Hope everything comes out all right . . . for your son, I mean." He slammed the trunk shut, then jumped in the cab, closed the door, and sped away.



6

THE NIGHT WAS hot for early spring. A reddish glow canopied the sky. The smell of cigarettes, marijuana, and stale beer hung in the air along the Sunset Strip. Music pulsed from bustling clubs and restaurants. Lights dashed to and fro, blurring into a rainbow of neon. Swirling with rhythm and blues, surf riffs, surreal psychedelic, and soul, the night took on an infectious, driving beat of its own.

People on the sidewalk turned and stared as Donatello's long, low sports car rolled by, rumbling with the tightly geared hum of surplus horsepower. Swinging the car around in the middle of the street, he pulled alongside the curb and stopped at a valet station.

The valet jumped up and went around to open the door for Slovika. "Evening miss," he said, extending his hand. He helped her out, went to the other side, and opened the door for Donatello.

"Don't park on street." Donatello got out and threw the keys at him.

"Sure bet," the valet replied in a tone suggesting he had no intention of complying.

Donatello's nostrils flared. "I mean it."

The valet half-smiled and handed him a numbered ticket. "Like I said, sure bet."

Donatello grabbed Slovika's arm and stomped away. "You see? I tell you, the city full of imbecilli. Always rude. They are, how you say? Lunatic. If ever you wonder, this is why I no bring you," he snapped, almost dragging her along.

Walking on Sunset Boulevard was like looking through the window of a costume shop. Two young men wearing musketeer hats and tight pants with Errol Flynn haircuts. Three black-robed nuns strolling arm-in-arm. Inebriated sailors weaving on and off the sidewalk. Girls in bright mini-dresses and go-go boots. Laughing boys in prep-school outfits with longish hair combed over their ears. Drunken men sleeping in a doorway. Pimps and prostitutes making their rounds. Barefoot young women panhandling in dirty, bedraggled clothes beside a van painted flaming red, electric green, and magenta day-glo. Across the street fashionably clean-cut hipsters, smoking pot and cigarettes, while waiting in a long line at a restaurant.

"Many strange people here," Slovika said breathless and flushed with excitement. The gilt in her eyes sparkled in the flashing neon. And the light danced on the chestnut tendrils falling around her face.

He put his arm around her with a crooked smile. "Is okay. 'The Bounty Killer' will protect you." A warm gust blew his silk shirt open and her skirt fluttered in the breeze. The heels of his boots clacked on the pavement as his steps fell in line with hers, and he slid into a comfortable swagger.

Slovika looked up at him. "Where we go?"

He nodded in the direction they were walking. "Villa Nova. My friend Vincente Minnelli, he own it. I meet him in Cannes at the preview of his movie *Blow-Up* and he tell me, if ever I am in LA to go his ristorante."

Just then, a man dragging a large wooden cross with a wheel on the bottom, came around a corner, followed by a small entourage. He stopped, blocking the sidewalk as Donatello and Slovika approached. "The hour is late, time to come to Jesus, man," he said with an impassioned smile.

Frowning, Donatello held up his crucifix. "That, I do since I am bambino," he said, motioning with his splinted hand for the

entourage to move out of the way. Trying to pass, he bumped into the cross, knocking it off the man's shoulder. It tumbled to the sidewalk with a dull thud. Pedestrians stopped. As if the Sunset Strip had been drawn into a vortex, the music, cars and people all seemed suspended in time.

"Consider the path your feet are walking, my friend," the man said as one of his followers picked up the cross. Staring at Donatello, his eyes glistened with tears. "One false step, and then the fall . . . broad is the way that leads to destruction."

Donatello shrugged his shirt back in place and glared at him. He grabbed Slovika's arm and stomped down the block. "You see? I tell you -- imbecilli everywhere."

As they came to the corner, the traffic light turned red. They stopped and Donatello looked back. The man with the cross stood, watching him. "Why he say that to me?"

Slovika looked up. "What?"

"Niente," he muttered, shaking his head.

The light turned green, he took her arm and they hurried across the street. On the next block, they came to a line of people spilling from the entrance of a restaurant built like a large A-frame cabin with an add-on upstairs nightclub.

Donatello pushed through the crowd and went to the head of the line. Taking Slovika's hand, he went around a sign reading:

*Please wait here.
The host will seat you.*

"Hey, whadda ya think you're doin'?" a man near the front of the line grumbled.

"Yeah. Who do you think you are?" another complained.

"Donatello Dragghi," he replied with a nonchalant wave.

He stopped at a tall reservation desk just inside the door.

Behind the desk, a young man in the last stages of puberty waged a valiant battle against the crowd. Donatello placed a fifty-dollar bill on the desk, then cleared his throat. "You have table for me?"

The young Maître d' looked up from a list of reservations and frowned. "Are you blind?" he said with an accent fresh from New Jersey. "Can't you see the line? It's at least a forty-five minute wait."

“Vincente is here?”

“No.”

Donatello whisked the bill off the desk. “Then, get Alphonse. Tell him Donatello Dragghi want table.”

The host rolled his eyes. “Who doesn’t? You’re just another rich jerk with a lousy accent.”

“Get Alphonse!” Donatello shouted, slapping the desk hard enough that Slovika, and several people at the front of the line jumped.

The Maître d’ shook his head, then lumbered to a narrow doorway behind the desk. After knocking, he disappeared through the door.

Slovika tugged on Donatello’s sleeve. “Maybe we should go in the line.”

He shrugged off her hand. “No. You know nothing of these things,” he said, waving as if to erase the thought. “My friend, Alphonse, he seat the customer by how rich or importante. This the politica the ristorante. No matter the crowd, I get table. You see.”

The young host reappeared with a short, balding man. Impeccably dressed, the man straightened his bowtie and pasted on a broad smile. “Donatello, my ex-pat friend!” he gushed with open arms. “Good to see you. How goes the movie business? And your hand? Healing, I hope.”

Donatello shrugged and nodded. “Alphonse,” he said with a slight pout. “We are hungry. I had no time to make reservation . . . ”

Alphonse glanced at the line of customers, then back at Donatello. He manufactured another smile. “Of course, my friend. I’ll see what I can do.”

“But what about the other people?” the young Maître d’ said, waving in the direction of the line. “Why are you kissing his -- ”

With a look, Alphonse cut the question short. “And you, since you’re such a smart-mouth, go help Miguel with the dishes.”

The young host glared at Alphonse, then at Donatello. Shaking his head, he sauntered toward the kitchen.

“Your host, he is molto rude,” Donatello said with a frown.

“Don’t mind him. He’s my sister’s kid from Jersey. She sent him out here to keep him out of trouf -- ”

“Good table,” Donatello interrupted. “Not by door, or kitchen.”

Alphonse sighed. “Of course. Just a moment.” He snapped his fingers at a passing waiter. “Lucca! Table sixteen for Mr. Dragghi.”



7

BUCK LOOKED UP at a crucifix high atop the roof of Immaculate Heart Hospital. Juxtaposed against the cold, sterile outline of the modern physicians building, the hospital's graceful Gothic lines seemed, somehow, comforting. He bent to pick up the suitcase, then stopped, staring at his hands. *What has become of this world? What has become of me?*

After a moment he came to himself and grabbed the suitcase. He followed Pauline through the hospital's wide automatic doors, into the warm, antiseptic air of the hospital. He found her waiting at the circular information desk. Resembling a military command post, the desk was staffed by a stern-looking, black-robed nun.

Pauline looked up at him with a despondent stare. "Buck, she said it's too late."

The color drained from his face. He set the suitcase down and steadied himself against the desk. "What?"

"Visiting hours are over, sir. You'll have to wait until tomorrow," the nun said with a thin, officious smile.

"Oh, thank God. I thought he was . . . gone."

She smiled and shook her head. "No, sir."

"But we can see him . . ."

"I'm sorry, sir, but as I told your wife, visiting hours are over."

“You don’t understand,” he said, drumming his fingers on the desk. “We were stuck at the Reno airport all day.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that, but as I said, visiting hours are over.”

He glared at her. “Now, listen. We spent all day trying to get here. And damn it, we’re going to see him. Tonight. Not tomorrow. Tonight!”

The nun took a long breath. “You’ll need permission. The name of your son’s doctor?”

Buck looked at Pauline, then back at the nun. “I . . . I don’t know.”

“Your son’s name then.”

“We already told you. Steven Harper.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Turning to a wide ledger, the nun began flipping through the pages. “It’ll be just a minute.” She got up and exited through a door behind the desk.

“Buck . . .” Pauline moaned. “What if they won’t let us see him?”

“We’ll pull strings if we have to.”

He went to a row of aged, hand-tinted photographs to one side of the information desk. A portrait of his parents hung above a plaque honoring them for their contributions to the hospital.

Mother’s thin-lipped smile. Father . . . the mischievous look in your eye. He touched the glass over the picture. *What would you think of all this? Of your grandson? Of me?*

“Sir?”

Buck jumped.

“Found it,” the nun announced. “Your son’s doctor is Dr. Buehler. But let me warn you, getting him to agree to anything will take an act of congress.”

“Well, fortunately, I’m a senator’s son. And that’ll be close enough. I’ll resurrect the memory of dear old dad if I have to,” he said, tapping the glass over the photograph.

The nun smiled. “I’ll call his office for you.” After dialing the number she gave the phone to Buck.

“Dr. Buehler’s office,” an irritable sounding receptionist announced.

“I’m Buck Harper. My son, Steven, is one of his patients over here at Immaculate Heart. They told me I need permission to see him.”

“Visiting hours are over.”

Buck rolled his eyes. “I know that. But my wife and I just flew in from Reno, and we want to see him.”

“One minute.”

An interlude of insipid music.

“Name of the patient?” the receptionist asked when she came back on the line.

“Steven Harper. Now look, you tell Dr. Buehler that my father, Senator Harper, was one of the major donors for the new wing of the hospital and the building you’re sitting in. You tell him I want to see my son, and I want to see him, tonight.”

Another musical interlude.

“Dr. Buehler wants to talk to you.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I’m just repeating his instructions. He said he’ll wait half an hour.” The receptionist hung up.

Buck frowned and handed the receiver back to the nun, then turned to Pauline. “The doctor wants to see us.”

“What? Why?”

“Hell, I don’t know.”

Pauline’s face fell. “Oh, Buck, what now? I don’t want to talk to the doctor. I want to see Steven.”

“I know.” He put his arm around her. “Don’t worry. We’re going to see him. Tonight.”

“That corridor will take you to the Physician’s Building,” the nun said, pointing to a long hallway. “You can leave your luggage here, behind the desk if you like. Dr. Buehler’s office is on the tenth floor. Ten fifty-two, I think.”

Buck set the suitcase behind the desk. He took Pauline’s hand. “Come on. We’ll just see about Dr. Buehler.”

Cold, sterile air met the Harpers as they hurried down the long, curved corridor. The hall was deserted, except for a young black man in a dark suit, crisp white shirt and a bow tie talking and laughing with one of the doctors.

“Evening,” Buck said.

“How do ya do?” the man replied. The doctor smiled and nodded and they went back to their conversation.

After walking by, Buck paused and his thoughts drifted, staring down the hallway as if in a dream. He shook his head. *Does he think like the protesters in Memphis? Why is there such injustice. Things are changing so fast right under our noses. Where is the time going -- and what's happened to me through these years?*

When he snapped back, Pauline was several paces ahead. He hurried and caught up with her.

The corridor opened into a wide lobby with banks of elevators on either side. On a narrow slice of wall between the elevators, they found a directory. Buck traced his finger over the names.

“Buehler . . . Buehler . . . there it is. The nun was right. Ten fifty-two.”



8

THE LONELY ECHO of the Harpers' footsteps followed them into Dr. Buehler's office. The stuffy, overheated air was thick with the unsettling odor of disinfectant.

A middle-aged receptionist glared at them from behind a glass partition. "Mr. and Mrs. Harper?"

"Yes. We're here to see Dr. Buehler," Buck replied.

"Of course." The receptionist picked up her purse, coat and umbrella. "The Harpers are here," she said into an intercom. "May I please leave now?"

A muffled response.

"You can go in. It's down the hall, second door on the right," she said, then quickly left the office.

Buck looked over at Pauline. "I already don't like that Buehler character."



The Harpers found Dr. Buehler sitting at an immense desk, occupied by the contents of a file. A dark panorama of city lights dissolved into rivulets of rain on a window behind him. Buck yanked on his tie to loosen his collar, then cleared his throat.

Though Dr. Buehler's stare remained fixed on the file, he stood to greet them. After a moment he set the file down and looked up. "You must be Steven's grandparents," he said with a nasal drone, squinting through thick, tri-focal glasses.

"We're his parents," Buck replied.

"Parents?"

"We want to see our son," Pauline blurted.

"Oh, uh, yes." The doctor frowned, then took another file off one of the stacks on his desk and pointed the corner at Buck. "You know, up until a few years ago, we rarely had drug cases at this hospital. But ever since the hippies took over the city, it seems that's all we see in the emergency room anymore. Not to mention the overflowing maternity ward. As our illustrious governor put it, 'They dress like Tarzan, have hair like Jane, and they smell like --'"

"Wait a minute. We don't care about all that. We just want to see him," Buck snapped.

Dr. Buehler's face reddened. He waved the file across the darkened cityscape behind him. "In the last few years they've turned the city upside down. It's literally crawling with them. They all expect service, but don't pay for it. Do you know how much it costs this hospital? And the taxpayers of this city?"

"Uh . . . no," Buck stammered.

"Plenty. It costs the taxpayers plenty. Filthy, ungrateful, drug using derelicts." Dr. Buehler slammed his fist on the desk.

"How dare you!" Pauline shrieked. Her lips quivering, she stared at the doctor a moment, then burst into tears.

With a sigh that sounded like air escaping a punctured tire, he pushed a box of tissue across the desk with the file.

Buck yanked one out and gave it to her. "Our son is not an ungrateful derelict, if that's what you're saying. We'll see to it that his bills are paid."

Dr. Buehler cocked his head back and looked at Buck through the bottom of his glasses.

"I *said*, his bills will be paid," Buck repeated. He pulled another tissue from the box and wiped the perspiration off his forehead. *What I'd like to do is punch the good doctor right in the chops. Then*

elbow him in the stomach just for the hell of it. And while he's doubled over -- a swift hook to the jaw . . .

The monotone droning of Dr. Buehler's voice brought Buck back from his imaginary prizefight.

“. . . as I was saying, it doesn't appear that Steven is addicted, per se. More along the lines of psychologically addicted.”

Pauline blew her nose, then wiped it with the tissue. “What on earth does that mean?”

“Psychologically addicted? Um, in other words, I don't think he'll go through withdrawal like a true addict does. He doesn't have a physical need for it -- yet. Actually, in the long run, it may be best that it happened this way.”

“How dare you say such a thing!” she wailed, accompanied by another flood of tears.

“What I mean is,” the doctor said with another sigh. “Assuming he recovers, this may scare him enough to keep him from developing a true physical addiction. And believe me, that can be far worse than what he's facing now. Addiction can lure a person into a living hell.”

Buck struggled to swallow the lump that had formed in his throat. “Just exactly what is he facing? Give it to us straight.”

“Alright.” Dr. Buehler crossed his arms. “Your son was transferred here because I'm the leading specialist in the area for brain trauma, nerve damage, spinal cord injuries, and neurological disorders. Steven is partially paralyzed from a transient ischemia caused by a drug overdose. In short, the overdose resulted in a stroke.”

He paused a moment, tapping the edge of the file on his desk, then continued.

“Your son made the all-too-common mistake of drinking alcohol while using heroin. Alcohol and opiates make very bad bedfellows. As I understand it, he was unconscious for approximately seven hours. At some point during that time there was a lack of blood flow to his brain. He's lucky the ischemia resolved itself. If it had gone on longer, he most likely wouldn't be here. He is hemiplegic, meaning he has no feeling on one side of his body. His left arm, leg, and that side of his face are paralyzed.”

The Harpers stared as if the doctor's words had no meaning. "Perhaps you should sit down," he said.

They robotically complied.

"But if all goes well -- and that's a big if, Steven has a reasonable chance of recovery."

Buck rubbed his forehead. "A chance? You said you're top in your field. Can't you be more specific?"

"No, I can't. There is no way to predict how well Steven's body will repair or compensate for the damage." The doctor pushed up his glasses. "But in his favor, he's young and in relatively good health. He's in a neck brace, but he has the use of his right arm. He can't speak, but he can communicate by writing, although it's laborious for him. When you talk to him, use simple words and short sentences to make it as easy as possible for him to reply. But above all, it's imperative that you don't upset him. Emotional outbursts could be devastating at this stage of his recovery. Do you understand?"

The Harpers nodded.

"Uh, also, he had several wounds that required stitches -- shards of glass embedded in the side of his head and face. Apparently, he fell on a wine glass. His hair was so long and matted the emergency room in Oakland elected to shave his head."

Dr. Buehler's expression softened.

"I'm not entirely the callous, heartless person you might think I am. More than one misguided parent has thought that. I have children of my own, and I *do* understand. But in the last few years, I've seen situations like this more often than you can imagine. The pity of it is, the suffering is self-inflicted and completely unnecessary." The doctor paused, staring at the Harpers. "You seem like decent people. I'm sorry we had to have this conversation."



A stringent, antiseptic smell permeated the air of the intensive care unit. Bathed in sterile silence and a pale unnatural glow, the intermittent beeping of machines and hushed footfalls of the personnel punctuated the quiet.

A nurse with an authoritarian expression met Buck and Pauline at the door to a small glass-walled room draped with a heavy curtain. “You’re the Harpers?” she whispered.

They nodded.

“Your son is sleeping. Dr. Buehler doesn’t want him disturbed. Do you understand?” she asked with a look that demanded a reply.

Buck put his arm around Pauline. “We understand.”

The nurse slowly opened the door and pulled back the curtain.

Buck caught his breath. *My God, Steven, what have you done?*



9

A BOTTLE OF wine and two menus waited on table sixteen for Donatello and Slovika. He paused as she slid into the booth, then set his gold cigarette case and matching lighter on the white linen cloth and sat down beside her. The smell of garlic, tobacco, and men's cologne hung in the air, making the large, crowded room feel claustrophobic and small.

A passing waiter stopped at the table. He picked up the bottle and cut off the leaded foil. "Compliments of Alphonse," he announced. After pulling the cork, he poured a small amount into a goblet and passed it to Donatello.

Donatello forced a smile. *Cheap house wine, but I will appear grateful.* He swirled the crimson liquid, inhaled the bouquet, then took a sip. His eyes widened. Rolling his tongue over his palette, he motioned to the waiter.

The waiter held up the bottle.

Donatello examined the label. *A fine Valpolicella.* "Alphonse has been generous."

"In honor of the beautiful lady," the waiter replied, smiling at Slovika. "Is it to your liking?"

"Sì. Thank Alphonse," Donatello said with a shallow nod.

"Certainly, Mr. Dragghi." The waiter filled their glasses. "I'll leave you with the menu."

Donatello wrestled a cigarette from the case and fumbled with his lighter. Slovika took the lighter and lit his cigarette. After a long drag, he pointed it at her. "You see? I tell you," he said with a wave of his bandaged hand. "Alphonse give buona bottle wine and best table. Is as I say, the politica di Hollywood. Now, look the menu. If you no can read it, I help you."

As she opened the padded folder, something across the aisle caught his eye.

Overly-tan, bleached-blonde, and heavily made-up, the woman's appearance demanded attention. Wearing white knee-high boots and tight hot-pink, she shared a table with a lanky man she seemed to be ignoring.

Donatello locked her in a visual embrace. He nodded and raised his glass. The woman flashed a smile and mirrored his actions. *Like I am her prisoner, she holds me captive. It is impossible to take my eyes away. From every pore, she screams, "Make love to me!"*



"What is this?" Slovika asked, pointing to a selection on the menu. Looking up, she caught her breath and the padded folder slipped from her hand. *That woman . . . soon she will come to him, or he will go to her. But either way, I will be alone.*

The waiter came back to the table. "And what will the lady have?" he asked, pen in hand, smiling at Slovika.

"The lady --" Donatello interrupted, pointing across the aisle. "Ask will she like to join us."

The waiter looked first at the woman, then at Slovika, then back at Donatello.

"Ask will she like to join us," Donatello repeated.

"Yes sir," the waiter replied, then went to deliver the invitation.

Slovika gripped a wad of her paisley skirt. *I do not believe he does this, yet I am not surprised. If I could, I would kill him, but without him I am alone.*



The man sharing the woman's table stretched, then got up and left. Heads turned as she stood and straightened her

short hot-pink dress, and followed the waiter across the aisle to Donatello's table.

"Well, *hel-low*. I'm Deborah Donaldson," she said in a breathy nasal whine. As she bent to extend her hand, her voluminous breasts, reminiscent of a baby's bottom suspended in a sling, nearly rolled out of her low-cut neckline. "And *who* might you be?" she asked with a sugary-sweet affectation, emphasizing certain words to enhance their effect.

Donatello's eyes widened. He coughed, then swallowed. Unable to take her hand, he held up the splinted mitt instead. "Donatello Dragghi," he replied, sitting back so his pale silk shirt fell open, revealing his sculpted torso.

She paused for a moment, staring at his chest. "Hey! Donatello Dragghi -- Deborah Donaldson. We have the same initials. We could use the same monogram," she said with a high-pitched squeal.

Donatello smiled. "Perhaps we will," he said, his voice smooth as warmed brandy.

"You'll have to excuse me, I have to manage my assets," she said, laughing and setting a long, thin handbag on the table. She wiggled the neckline to settle her breasts. Her dress strained at the seams as she slid into the booth beside him. "Since this is a place to see and be seen, I was looking for promising prospects -- you know, working the room, when you came in. I don't know *who* you are, but I do know Alphonse found a table for you almost immediately."

She leaned forward and ran a fingertip around her neckline. "*That* intrigues me. As I always say, it's good to get in on the ground floor, as it appears nobody around here has a bigger ground floor than you," she said, pointing a frost-white fingernail at him. She looked over at Slovika. "And who are you, honey?"

"A friend," Donatello replied before Slovika could answer.

"Oh, good. I thought maybe you two were, you know, *together*," Deborah said, laughing again. She unclipped a jeweled latch on her handbag, and took out a pack of cigarettes. Pulling one from the pack, she leaned toward Donatello.

He fumbled with his lighter, then turned to Slovika. "You will light for her?"

Glaring at him, Slovika grabbed the lighter, lit Deborah's cigarette, then slapped it on the table.

Deborah winked. "Thanks, hun." Turning back to Donatello, she caught him staring at her breasts. "Well, shame on you," she said, pulling up on the plunging neckline. "So, what's your sign? Bet you're a Scorpio."

"No. Leo."

"I should have guessed." She tapped her chin. "Hmmm. It could still work, depending on your rising sign. "You have an accent. So you're not American . . ."

He shook his head.

She took a long drag off the cigarette. "From France?" she asked, the smoke escaping with each syllable.

"No, Italia."

"A Leo, all the way from Italy." Her eyes sparkled. Wrinkling her nose, she pointed to the bandages. "What's wrong with your hand?"

"Broken."

"Broken? How'd you break it?"

Donatello mouthed a silent exaggeration of the word, "Mafia."

Deborah gasped and raised her brows. "What! What on earth happened?"

He shook his head again. "I no can talk of it."

"Oh, wow. That's too bad, because it's probably so, you know -- *dramatic*." She paused again and fluffed a mound of hair ratted at the crown of her head. "So, what brings you to LA?"

"I am attore e un regista."

"I don't speak Italian, silly."

Donatello shrugged. "Uh, actor and, how you say it, direttore?"

"Oh, um, director?" Deborah took another drag off the cigarette and tapped the ash into the ashtray. "*Fa-bulous*. Then you are in the business. I thought so. Are you working on anything?"

"My film, how you say, at the rating board waiting a . . ." He snapped his fingers. "A decisione the rating."

“Oh. Well . . . as you may have guessed, I’m a leading lady. But right now, I’m hosting a talk show. It’s live here in LA. You’d be a *fa-bulous* guest. And of course, you could plug your movie.” Deborah wiggled in her seat. “In fact, tomorrow we’re taping a pilot for my show to go national. It’ll be up against Mike and Merv.”

Donatello stared blankly at her.

“You know, Mike and Merv? Surely you’ve heard of them.”

He shook his head.

“Mike Douglas and Merv Griffin?”

He shook his head again.

“You’ve never heard of Mike Douglas and Merv Griffin? They’re *only* the biggest talk show hosts on TV.” She shook her head. “Well, anyway, like I said, I’d love to have you as a guest. You’d be just *fa-bulous!*”



10

LONG AFTER THE restaurant stopped serving, and most of the other patrons had gone, Donatello, Slovika and Deborah sat at the table littered with a stack of dishes, an overflowing ashtray and three empty wine bottles. A cloud of stale smoke hung in the air and the ceiling vibrated with a driving beat from the upstairs nightclub.

Slovika looked wistfully at the ceiling. *I wish to be there, dancing.* She dropped a spoon into a bowl of congealed lentil soup, then pushed it away. *For days I sit alone with them at this table.* Her stare wandered to Deborah's temples where unblended brown make-up met the faint dark roots of her platinum hair. To the thick black eyeliner concealing the bands of her false lashes. To the small lines painted to look like eyelashes, sinking into the creases under her eyes. To the frosted white lipstick covering a mouth perpetually in motion. *Her face like a mask -- talking, talking, always talking.*

Deborah's droning voice brought Slovika back to the table.

"Like I was saying . . ." She paused as the man who had been sitting at her table lumbered toward them, breathless and sweating. Wearing a cowboy hat and boots with jeans ripped at the knees, he sported thick sideburns shaped like lamb chops.

“There’s a righteous party goin’ on down the street at The Whiskey, the likes of which have never been seen on a Sunday night!” he announced with a thick Oklahoma drawl. He took off his hat and wiped the back of his neck with a napkin. “It’s like a heathren paradise. They’ve even got the girls dancin’ in the cages. Too bad y’all are missin’ it.”

Slovika stared up at him. *I would dance in a heathren paradise cage -- whatever that is.*

Deborah frowned. “Bob, I thought you would’ve outgrown caged dancing girls by now.” She looked over at Donatello. “This is Bob, uh, Robert Morant. He’s the drummer for The Time Season Band. Have you heard of them?”

Donatello shook his head and glared at Bob.

“They just got back from a European tour.” With a wink in Slovika’s direction, she added, “You know drummers, hun. They’re all muscle and they’ve got great rhythm.”

Bob nodded at Donatello and thrust out his hand. “Howdy,” he said with a broad grin.

Donatello held up his splinted appendage. “Donatello Dragghi. I no can shake your hand.”

“Whoa! What happened to you?” Bob asked.

“The Mafia,” Deborah said before Donatello could answer.

“The Mafia?” Bob repeated loud enough that the few remaining diners turned and stared.

Deborah rolled her eyes. “Yes, the *Ma-fia*. It’s supposed to be hush-hush, even though you just announced it to the whole Sunset Strip.”

Bob stared at Donatello a moment, then his face lit up. “Hot damn! I thought you looked familiar. I didn’t recognize ya without the greasy hair, and no . . .” he said, rubbing his chin where a stubbly beard would have been. “You’re ‘The Bounty Killer!’ Far-freakin’-out!” He grabbed Donatello’s other hand and ardently shook it. “Man, I love that movie. Especially the part at the end when you blew that whole town away, lock, stock, and barrel for hidin’ the banditos. I saw it in London. Ya know, England -- not the one in Arkansas.”

Donatello visibly warmed. “So, you like *The Bounty Killer*, eh?”

“Yeah man, yeah,” Bob replied. He stepped back and stared at Donatello as if he had been taken by surprise. “But, dang . . . I thought you’d be bigger ’n that. You’re like a little banty rooster.”

Donatello turned to Deborah. “What he say?”

Taking a long drag off her cigarette, she shot a stinging look at Bob. “You’ll have to excuse him. He’s from *Okla-homa* and he acts like a hillbilly. I’ve tried working on his manners, but -- ”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. You’re whippin’ a dead horse with all that crap, Deb.”

Deborah blew a cloud of smoke out her nose. “I believe, in spite of all my crap, you’re living in my house and driving my car.”

“It might be your car, but no matter how you slice it, it’s *our* house,” Bob said. “But that’s got nothin’ to do with nothin’.” He drew himself up and stretched. “Anyway, I’m leavin’ for Frisco in the mornin’, so I’m blowin’ this pop stand. You comin’ or not?”

Looking desperately at Bob, Slovika made the sign of the cross over her chest. *Maybe this man will take the devil woman away with him. Please, Saint Sara e Kali . . . please . . .*

Deborah paused. “I have to stop by the studio.”

“What? You didn’t say anything about that.”

“I know. I forgot my questions for tomorrow’s show. I didn’t think it would be a big deal.”

Donatello leaned forward. “I take you.”

Please, Sara e Kali, I will do anything . . .

“Um, I don’t know,” Deborah muttered, winding a lock of platinum hair around her finger. “I want to stay, but . . . ”

Please, God.

“Come on, Deb,” Bob moaned. “Make up your mind.”

“Oh, alright.” She leaned toward Donatello. “If you’re *sure* you don’t mind. Besides, while we’re at the studio I can add your name to the guest list, and we can talk about what questions you want me to ask tomorrow.”

“I no mind,” he said with a broad flourish of his bandaged hand. “But I am not, how you say, promettendo, uh, promise.”

Slovika sank against the table.

Deborah looked up at Bob. “Well then, I guess you can, as you say -- ‘blow this pop stand.’”

“Well, then I guess I’ll see you whenever.” He turned to Slovika. “G’night, Miss,” he said, tipping his hat. He snugged it on his head, then looked over at Donatello. “Hey, great meetin’ ya, Mr. Bounty Killer,” he said with a shallow bow. “Just don’t let Deb suck you into any a’ her BS. I guaran-damn-tee she’ll try ta turn ya into a wuss.”

Bob sauntered toward the door. He turned and mimicked the action of pointing a gun and shooting off a round, and Donatello pretended he had been hit in the heart.

Deborah took Donatello’s hand. “You’re probably wondering about me and Bob”, she said, tracing her fingernail over the bandages. “We used to be, well . . . *married*. Actually, we still are. Sort of. We kind of love each other and everything, but now we’re just like, you know, friends. I mean, I *really* love Bob, but we’re not exactly compatible. Know what I mean?”

He shrugged, then frowned and shook his head.

“Oh, Donatello, don’t be so judgmental.” She paused a moment and her eyes widened. “Oops. I forgot. You’re Italian, so you’re probably Catholic and you can’t help it.”



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