

chapter *ONE*

A cold, damp chill blew across Harvard Yard that morning, as I forced myself along, head splitting, stomach growling and eyes sensitive to the dull grey light. A frosty dampness clung to my red beard and hair, overdue for trimming, as it twisted in the wintry breeze—late November in Boston. The cold was welcome. It worked well for me when I had a hangover.

In a few hours, I knew I'd be on a plane, headed back to California, a Xanax lulling me to sleep, thirty-thousand feet above the congestion. Good-bye hangover. Good-bye Beantown.

I love Boston. That's why I was there. For several years now, before the Thanksgiving holiday, I spoke to the Harvard journalism class. I am a graduate of that department. My college years were fun and the yearly trip was my way of giving back for all I'd received.

It snowed before I found a taxi. I pushed myself as best my condition allowed. The ground was frozen, layered with damp leaves. The same colorful leaves tourist came to see throughout New England each fall. For me they were soggy and dull, helping dampness seep into my shoes. I lived there for years, worked there, knew what the weather was like, and always failed to come prepared. Next year, I lied to myself again.

I wiggled my toes and felt the dampness of my socks when I heard my name called. I don't need this, I thought. A cold gust seeped past my half-opened coat, a welcome guest to my throbbing head. I looked up toward the voice.

I speak at times in generalities ... No that's not true, I lecture in generalities. Not in my writing, but in bar arguments, among friends and sometimes with enemies. So when I say all men have fantasy loves, I'm really admitting that I do, so if I do, all men do. I don't know if that's true or not. But I do know that since I first saw Woody Allen's movie *Annie Hall*, I had a

fantasy. It was not Diane Keaton. It was the clothes that made the fantasy, not the actress. The way she dressed in the movie became what I looked for in women. Fortunately, they're not out there. Or so I assumed.

An Asian rendering of my fantasy walked toward me, maybe five-foot-four, she wore a man's wide brim hat, an old overcoat, pants stuffed into boots, long bright red scarf around her neck, hanging outside the coat. She was so beautiful, my eyes hurt from staring at her. Her smile was enough to dispel the dampness, but I'd forgotten my ailments.

"Hello," I said, and to think I made a living with words. I took my hands out of my pockets. I wanted to touch her, to make sure she was real. Her hands stayed in her pockets.

"I need to talk to you," she said. Her elfin smile stayed but her large chestnut eyes told a different story. They were drowsy and that didn't fit the perkiness of their owner.

Annie Hall, or my version of her, had found me and she could do as she liked, was my only thought. I took in this fantasy and didn't utter a word. She fell in beside me and we began to walk.

"Do I know you?" More words of genius.

"No," she said, her hat almost rubbed against my nose. "But I must talk to you. I need your help." Her words echoed what I'd observed in her eyes.

Somehow, I knew she wasn't looking for an 'A' from the professor. "I'd love to help you," honesty in every word, "but I fly out in a few hours." Would I have stayed if she asked? Is the Pope Catholic?

"I know," she said softly, walking along next to me, hands in her pockets, hat on her head and a smile on her face. "I have to go to California too." Her words startled me. "I need your help, Mick. Give me a few minutes?"

We were out of Harvard Yard and at the street. I looked for a taxi. She knew my name, where I was, and where I was going. Journalists don't have groupies. Well, maybe Hunter Thompson did, but that's about it.

I neglected every rule I had about women, I mean, after all, this was no woman this was a fantasy. More important, though, I neglected all the warning signals I'd built up over the years; alarms that had kept me alive while I did my gonzo journalism in war zones, drug czars' back yards, and many other areas where human life was bought and sold like nickel cigars and Thunderbird wine. "Ride back to the hotel with me?" I said as a taxi stopped.

"Thank you." She got into the taxi.

As she brushed by, while I held the door open, I was again struck by her radiance and the contrast in her eyes. Sitting next to her, I breathed in the aroma of spring flowers.

"Where to professor?" the cabby grumbled, breaking my reverie.

"Tremont Hotel," I said. Snow continued to fall and I became aware that the cab was cold, but not uncomfortable. "Cold," I said and she took it as a question.

"No," she murmured, "no, I'm fine."

Fine was not the word I would have used to describe her. She sat back in the seat and said nothing. For the first time I realized she had long black hair, hidden under the red scarf and inside her oversized coat. Her complexion was rosy. Had she been waiting in the cold for me all morning?

"You know a lot about me," I said, uncomfortable with the sloshing sound of the cab's wipers. "Who are you?"

"I'm nobody important," she whispered without looking at me.

“You have a name?” This was not how I handled interviews. I was not in control, and to move ahead I had to be. Even if it meant losing my fantasy? I decided to wait until we were at the hotel. I had nothing to lose and a dream to gain.

Outside the hotel, I checked my watch. I had a few hours before the flight.

“I don’t have much time,” I lied, the snow slowly fell on us while we stood there. What did she want? “You wanted to talk to me.”

She looked toward the hotel. “Inside?”

I nodded and led her into the large lobby. She loosened her scarf and coat.

“I’d like a glass of wine,” she said softly, wiping the snow off her coat.

In my fantasy she would have asked for the wine after we got to my room. We walked to the lobby bar and took a seat in the almost empty room.

She ordered wine and I ordered Jameson on the rocks. After it was delivered, she sipped in silence. I said nothing. She kept looking at me, smiling with her face, her eyes unreadable.

“Do I know you?” I said again, confused with the situation.

“Do you?” she said back.

“No.”

“This isn’t easy for me, Mick,” she mumbled.

“You have something to say, best way is to say it.”

“You don’t know me,” she sipped her wine, “but you knew my brother.”

“And who’s your brother?”

“Manny Lonzo.” She said it quickly, as if the words hurt and sipped more wine. “You went to school with him.”

Name didn't ring a bell, but I wouldn't admit it. I wasn't interested in losing her because of a brother I couldn't remember. "Harvard?"

"Yes," she said. "His first year there." She looked out into the lobby. "His only year there, you tutored him in American history." She turned to me.

"Been a long time since I tutored anyone," I smiled, stalling. I couldn't remember a Manny or anyone that I ever tutored. Maybe she had the wrong guy. Not even my luck could be that bad, I thought.

"He came here from the Philippines. His English was accented and it was bad here in Boston for non-whites," she recited as if it were written down for her. "You helped him with his American history." She wiped at tears that were forming. "You were the only friend he had for the short time he was there."

"It was a long time ago," I agreed, not knowing to what. "How can I help you?"

"You had rooms in the same building in Cambridge," she said.

That rung a bell. "Okay," I said, swallowing a mouthful of whiskey. "I wasn't really tutoring him," I said, unable to take my eyes away for more than a second. "I suggested some reading and answered his questions." Slowly the image of her brother wormed its way back to me. He wasn't much bigger than his sister, shy and always studying. I couldn't remember anything we ever did socially, not even at a local pub.

"Small kindnesses are remembered when all other memories are bad," she said. "You treated him like a person."

She was right about the time being bad for non-whites in Boston. I'd suppressed some mischievous memories from the neighborhood, but couldn't recall anything involving Manny.

Maybe by avoiding the situations, or ignoring them, I added to the bigotry. I didn't like that thought.

"I wasn't aware he had that kind of problem." I tried to explain my ignorance away. "He was always studying. Asking questions. We didn't have any classes together." I continued to apologize, out of guilt for Manny or lust for his sister? I wasn't sure.

"You made a lasting impression," she smiled, her damp eyes still lifeless. "Over the years I've learned all about you."

Remembering what, I wondered.

"Mad Mick Murphy," her voice perked. "I would have known you, even without seeing your picture. Manny said you had the greenest eyes ever and you do," she mumbled and almost blushed. "I bet I've read everything you've published."

"Really?" I didn't have a clue to who she was.

"Mad Mick became your nickname because you were considered a crazy Irishman. Mad for crazy, Mick for Irish."

"I still don't know your name." She seemed to know me like a book.

"Michelle," she said, stretching her arm across the table.

I took her hand, it felt as soft and warm as I knew it would. "A pleasure," I smiled, leaning closer to her. "You're very beautiful." What a way I had with words that morning.

"Thank you." She gently pulled her hand from mine. "I'm sorry I come to you with a problem." She sat back, glass of wine in her hand, a serious stare on her face.

"You have me at a disadvantage," I admitted. "You know all about me and I know nothing about you." Her stare remained serious. "What is the problem?" Beautiful fantasy that

she was, I owed her brother nothing, and if she weren't the girl of my dreams, we wouldn't have been there talking. Getting control of the situation felt good, but I can tell you, reality can suck.

"The problem is mine and my family's." She tensely moved around in her seat. "Not yours."

I waited for more. She'd told me nothing I didn't already know.

"Do you remember Manny?"

"Honestly?"

"Please."

"Yeah." I sighed. "I remember the kid on the same floor with a million questions on American history. I don't remember the accent. He always had his nose in a book. Socially, I don't think we ever did anything." I waited for her to get up and leave. She didn't.

"You shared pizza one night," she reminded me, moving forward in her chair. "He came with a question and while you were talking a pizza was delivered."

"And beer," I added to show her I remembered. "He wasn't much of a drinker."

"No, he never was." She paused, still sitting forward, staring through me. If her eyes gleamed, she'd have been a goddess. "He liked you," she said. "He followed your career. I *had* to read," she stressed had, "everything he found of yours in print. Magazines, newspapers. You never published a book?"

"Not a fiction writer," I said.

"I'm not getting to the point, am I?" She fussed in her seat.

"No." I reached across the table to her, but she pushed back into her seat. "Am I making you nervous?" I stayed where I was, as close, it seemed, as I would get to her. My eyes drank in everything about her, fearing she'd get up and run at any time.

“I’m not even sure you can help,” she said. “It seemed, before I met you, that I’d known you for years. Manny talked and talked about you and knew everything you were up to. If you’d walked in for a holiday meal I wouldn’t have been surprised.”

“Think of me that way,” I said, unable to hide a grin, “if it’ll help.”

“Do you know why Manny left?” She twitched about her seat and sipped the wine.

“No,” I nodded and waited.

“The color of his skin was bad enough,” she began anxiously, “then some of his classmates found out he was homosexual.” She whispered the words as they would have been whispered twenty years ago in the same room. “It got to be too much for him.” Tears slipped from her eyes. She sipped her wine and wiped her eyes.

I was never much into skin color and sexual preference wasn’t a conversational subject in those years. Maybe I was too busy. I dated all kinds of women, if I was attracted to them. My friends were friends because I liked them and my enemies were what they were because I disliked them. I didn’t base likes and dislikes on the color of skin or religion or language or who they slept with.

It always puzzled me how people could support their likes and dislikes on such things. In Northern Ireland, I’d witnessed more raw hate over religion and nationality than I had ever witnessed in Boston. That was after Harvard, years after. I vaguely remembered a kid who needed help with history. I gave him some time, shared a pizza and a few beers in my room and if I hadn’t met his sister I wouldn’t have remembered him, his skin color or his nationality. Hard as I tried, I couldn’t recall an accent.

“This problem has to do with your brother being gay?” I spoke quietly, so as not to alarm her.

She finished her wine and began to cry. I drained my Jameson and ordered another round. I became uncomfortable and was totally in the dark with what was happening. Where did I fit into this picture?

Horror struck me as our fresh drinks arrived. Did she think I was gay? Was I supposed to be Manny's lover?

"I shouldn't be here," she mumbled. Two glasses of wine will usually do it. Soften 'em up or turn 'em tough. Which would it be?

"You need help," I said. "If you don't ask, you don't get it for sure."

"Manny's dead," she blurted out as if it were all one word. "He killed himself," she said more softly, looking directly at me. She chafed about in her seat, sipped wine and cried. "I was the only one who knew he was gay," she spoke slowly, subdued. "I think I knew it before he did. He was my older brother, but we were always best friends. Filipinos families are close," she sat forward, "but we kept it from them. He had to say something to someone after Harvard. Naturally, it was me. We worked it out," she smiled briefly. "He went to San Jose State. Worked and studied. He was never comfortable with his homosexuality, Mick. The family, the Church. It got to be too much for him." The confession tired her. "He kept a journal his whole life. I destroyed the ones I found. But the early ones from Harvard were at our family's place. They found them," she cried softly, wiping tears away. "The journals have the names and dates of everything. All the men that abused him, his one lover in Boston, his hated classmates." Her voice filled with anger. She'd rambled on now, through two glasses of wine and I still didn't know what she wanted from me. Some kid I'd briefly known twenty odd years ago killed himself because he was gay. Where did I fit in? Was I his fantasy lover? The thought struck me like a

piano falling from a fifth story window. She'd never believe my denial. I could make love to her for a week and she'd walk away thinking I was bi-sexual. Was I about to lose my Annie Hall?

"Mick, they're going to kill them," she cried. "I have to stop them."

"Slow down." I ordered, surprised by the twist of the conversation and forgetting about the piano. "Who's gonna kill who?" I said.

She looked at me with those torpid eyes as if I'd missed the whole thing. "My family," she uttered, exhausted. "They're going to seek revenge for Manny."

"What can I do?"

"I've been here for days," she said, holding back the tears. "I've gone through the books and papers for those years and tried to piece together some of the names I remembered. I don't have them all," her face tightened. "I've done the best I can. I want to warn them." Her words were a plea for help. "Manny wouldn't want this," she said. "He was not a hater." She slumped back into the chair and sipped her wine.

It was getting complicated. I didn't like complications unless I made them. Complications in women I definitely didn't like. I could have said sorry and left. Or I could have said how do I help and deal with some ritual-crazed Asians in who could guess what way? Was there a story here? My mind was functioning. I was thankful for that.

"You must know some of these people," she said, handing me a piece of paper. Could she see the confusion in my face? She wasn't giving me time to work it out.

I took the paper and scanned the names. Some were prominent within legal and political circles. Others drew a blank. A few were old classmates. Six I'd kept in touch with over the years.

"Some of these names are in the papers daily," I told her, looking at the list.

“I know,” she answered. “I need to begin in California.”

“Why?” I looked up at her. Why is always a good question when someone tells you they need something.

“That’s where my family’s beginning.”

Sometimes *why* receives a good answer.

“What do you want from me?” I wondered if she’d reverse the question later.

“You’ll help?” She was excited for the first time.

“Tell me what first.” I thought I was gaining control.

“Get the people you know to talk with me. I can warn them.” She looked at me, acknowledging she held something back. “I can’t go to the police, Mick. If these people want to, fine, but I can’t.”

“What do you tell them?”

“What to expect and then I’m gone. I’m doing this for Manny, not for them. They want to ignore me, I don’t care what happens to them. And I don’t want to do it by letter,” she said before I asked. “Nothing in writing. Nothing on the phone. Some of these people were real creeps and I want to meet them face to face.”

“There are six I can contact directly.” I handed her back the list. “Some of the others might know who I am.”

“They don’t want to cooperate, I won’t feel responsible,” she said.

It seemed my fantasy girl would be around a little longer. A late lunch, a five-hour flight to Los Angeles and then home to Redondo Beach. I had over eight hours to coerce her into staying at my condo and come up with a story idea an editor would buy, or so I thought earlier that morning.

chapter *TWO*

Each time my journalist's cynical mind questioned what I was doing and why, I would glance at her and thaw. Under the large coat, she wore a bulky brown sweater. She seemed delicate, the heavy clothing her protective shell. The rosy color on her face, from the harsh Boston weather, mixed beautifully with her natural bronze, high cheekbones.

We shared captivity until the plane landed in Los Angeles, so I convinced myself to make the best of it. In five hours I should be able to get somewhere with her. We flew first class, which afforded us privacy.

"Will it be too late to contact anyone after we arrive?" she asked.

We'd been drinking since early afternoon at the hotel, continued with lunch at the airport and the drinks were poured frequently in first class. I sipped Jameson on the rocks and she had white wine. She was persistent, focused on her brother's avengers.

"It should be seven Pacific time when we arrive," I said, acting as if I'd put a lot of thought into the process, "if we arrive on time. A taxi to Redondo Beach, check my phone book ..." I paused, not knowing if I fooled her or only myself. "Eight thirty," I said and smiled, sipping the Irish whiskey. "Not too late."

She smiled and began a soft giggle. She stared at the puzzled look on my face and continued to giggle, becoming smaller, drawing in on herself.

"Did I say something funny?" I asked, trying to sound cheerful.

"No," she giggled, trying to stop. "I can't help it." She sipped her wine. "I should be drunk," she said between laughs. "How much have we drunk?"

"My mother's not here, so no one's counting," I said.

Fact was, if I'd drunk the same amount in a bar, bored, waiting, I'd have passed out before the plane took off. Funny how the situation makes all the difference in the world when it comes to drinking. When I'm angry, upset, hurt, I'm a bad drunk; happy, I'm a fun drunk; tired, I'm a cheap drunk. Someday I'd have to stop being a drunk, but that was another day.

"You've been under a strain," I said, not knowing how much I made up and how much was truth. "When we land and you get some fresh air you're liable to pass out." I felt a Freudian slip there somewhere.

"Oh no," she said holding back the giggle. "I have to get to my hotel."

"Hotel?" What a way I had with words.

"I have reservations at the Rockport Suites," she said and stopped giggling. "I needed to be close to you."

"You knew I'd help?" I had just met her, had she been stalking me? I should have been more curious, but her beauty trumped my mind.

"I had to have faith to go on, Mick. Think positive." She smirked.

"I have a large two-bedroom condo," I told her, anticipation filling each word. "We could work together from there."

Sadness covered her face and the giggles were gone. She sipped some wine and blushed. Had I gone too far? I could've made phone calls and walked away. Just like that. Ended it all in a couple of hours. It was up to her. I waited for her to say something. In interviewing people, I found the pause between questions and answers often seems like a lifetime. She pulled her legs up to her chest, crossed her arms over her knees, and rested her chin there. I knew this as a sign of one of two things: withdrawal or the dam ready to burst.

“It’s so hard,” she said softly, face buried. “I don’t know how to explain,” she looked at me, her expression blank, the color fading on her cheeks. Even through the bulky sweater, I saw she was shaking. “Can I tell you about Manny?” She was begging, not asking.

“If you want.” I didn’t know what, if anything, it had to do with staying at my place. I was a captive audience.

“We went to different colleges in Northern California,” she said after a long wait. “We shared an apartment ...” she mumbled and wiped away tears. “Then a small house. It was more private,” she looked directly at me, as if I was supposed to understand.

I understood less and less. I listened without reply.

“I told you he didn’t handle his homosexuality well. It confused him,” she stared into the empty seats in front of us. The stewardess poured her more wine and gave me a fresh whiskey. “He’d go away sometimes ... he’d always call me, let me know he’s okay,” she looked out the window at the darkness. “I guess that’s when he did *it*,” she lowered her head against her arms again. Her body shook. “When he came back from these trips he was always in a horrid state. Guilt? I guess it was.” She lifted her head and tried a smile, but tears fell from her eyes. “I was his only friend because I knew everything. While he was working on his master’s he was invited to a social.” She sipped wine, wavering, I sensed, about continuing. I took a drink, leaving her on her own.

“He wanted to go,” she began slowly, hesitantly, “but everyone was bringing a date. It seemed so simple to me. I told him, ‘*Manny, I’ll go as your date.*’ It excited him ... because now he saw a way he could be social and his secret would be safe. It was good for him. After the social we were ... he was invited to other activities. We went. Finally, we had a cocktail party at our house. Everything was going great. One night, after the cocktail party, he came back from

the library, happy and laughing. It seemed, he told me, that his friends thought we were lovers. Fooling them was okay with me.” She pulled up into her seat and turned her back to the window. Whispering, she went on. “When I graduated the situation became ...” she paused ... “delicate. I had plans. Looking toward a future. Manny still had time before his degree. We talked. He was understanding, it made me feel bad. I was dating ... I guess you could call it that ... a guy from class. I gave in. I stayed at the house and worked in San Francisco. Once or twice a month I’d go with Manny to some event. My date and Manny’s friends were never going to cross paths. He stopped going away for days at a time and that made me feel better. He was happy and I loved him. It didn’t matter that my boyfriend was an American. Finally, they met... Bill that was his name.” Her breathing got heavier and the words came slower, more forced. Her eyes were puffy from silent crying.

Confession is good for the soul. Ask any priest or homicide detective. The cold, methodical miscreant can cry like a baby when caught between a rock and a hard place, be it a deathbed or a jailhouse interrogation room. But we were in an airplane and I was lost. I would not be a good priest. However, I am a good journalist and knew when to remain silent. I’d learned a lot from keeping my mouth shut. Sometimes, that’s the hardest thing to do.

“Once when Bill stayed over,” she unraveled herself and moved closer to me, “I caught Manny spying on us. At first, I thought it was cute, brotherly concern. Later, after Bill left, he confessed he watched us make love. He was horny,” I felt her blush without looking. “I was hurt and we argued and he left. This time he didn’t call. He came back a week later. A wreck as usual. I didn’t know what to do. He was going to move out. I couldn’t believe it. He told me I had more of a life with Bill than I did with him. We argued again. I couldn’t look at him like that and think of him on his own. It scared me. He was my brother,” she sighed and touched me, leaving her

hand on mine. "I'm not proud of this," she began, slowly running her fingers across the top of my hand, "but I'd do it again for him, if I could." She paused. "I hope you understand." She took a deep breath, "I let him spy on us when we were in bed." Tears flowed with the words. She rested her head on my shoulder.

I reached up and shut off the two small overhead lights. I put my arm around her shaking shoulders and applied a small amount of pressure so she could feel me through the heavy sweater. At the right time, silence can say more than words. She wept softly while I sat there, holding her and running her story through my skeptic's gauntlet of questions. After a few moments, she pulled away, retrieved her glass of wine, and settled back to my hold.

I was a young journalist in the early '90s and in my travels I'd attended many parties where voyeurism was a group activity. Michelle expected me to judge her. Maybe she didn't know me as well as she thought. My life, my work, was journalism and as a journalist I did not judge, I reported facts, situations and let others judge. If I confessed my sexual improprieties to her, I think she would've got up and walked off. I knew my confession wouldn't help her dilemma.

It had occurred to me several times that fantasies are fantasies and people are real. I was dealing with a real person and not a whimsy. If I could've kept my mind straight and dealt with this professionally, maybe I could've gotten control and handled it. Why didn't I? Because I was captive on an airplane with a beautiful woman. It was difficult to separate reality from fantasy.

Though I had learned that silence is golden in some situations, it was also a fact that questions had to be asked. Thought had to be given to them, but they had to be asked. How long before I could approach her? From her temperament, I knew that sexually I wasn't in the line up. However, I felt I was on the team. Maybe that's why I considered going through with this.

I had to ask questions. There were almost two hours before we landed. In my line of work, two hours to do an interview was a gift from the gods, a rare gift. What was I looking for? I almost laughed aloud as I thought that. What did I want to take from the interview was a better question. That would determine my questions and approach. I needed to know if she'd been telling me the truth. If not, why was she lying? If she was telling the truth, what kind of help did she really want? I couldn't see a reason to use deception, not then anyway. Honesty, I thought, was the way to go and that's unusual for me. Not too blunt, but as honest as I thought her condition could handle.

"Michelle," I said gently.

"Yes," she said, looking out the small window into the black void. "If you don't want to help ..."

"I want to." I felt her stir. "You have to answer some questions," I said. "Are you up to it?"

"Yes," she mumbled, sitting up straight. "You understand why I can't stay at your condo?" She whispered clearly, no trace of tears. "I really would like to ... maybe ... in time, I really would like to."

I was not only on the team, I'd made the line up, I thought. I should've been remembering my sister's motto—*be careful of what you wish for, you might get it*—instead of my conceit.

"There's a few things I'm confused about, so bear with me, okay?" How could I tell her I didn't understand anything?

"Yes."

“How did you live? Where’d the money come from?” It bothers me when people live without a known income. How does anyone live without an income?

“Our family has money,” she said faintly. “I didn’t work, but Manny did research for a computer company. It had something to do with his master’s. Money was never a problem.”

“Where did Manny go when he left for days? San Francisco?”

She turned to me, her smile gone, a scowl on her face. “What difference does it make?”

“I’m trying to understand a situation I know nothing about. It’s been more than twenty years since Manny and I talked. Even then, we didn’t know each other well. He followed my career, I forgot about him,” I said with as much concern as I could muster. “I have to know.”

“We never discussed it. He wouldn’t ... or couldn’t. I told you, his homosexuality bothered him. He wasn’t comfortable with it, like people are today. God, if he only was ...” she fought back tears.

“You destroyed his journals?”

“Yes.”

“Did you read them?”

She gave me that look again. What right did I have to ask? “Yes. Not everything. But most.”

“These had nothing to do with Harvard, or me or the men you’re looking for?”

“No. They were from when we first got the apartment. He stopped writing in them a few weeks before he died. There was depression in them, but there were good things, positive things too.”

“How do you know your family has the old journals?”

“They visited me after the funeral. They were angry and showed me the books. They wanted my help. I told them no. I told them Manny wouldn’t want them to do it. They talked of family honor. Saying if he hadn’t been raped as a child it wouldn’t have happened. Nothing could bring Manny back.” Her voice became raspy.

“Was he raped as a child?”

“Yes. He told me about it ... I didn’t read it in the journals.” Puffy eyes gazed at me.

“When people are hurt or angry, good people, they say things they really don’t mean.” I hoped I was right. Mothers, fathers, brothers, aunts, uncles, fight among themselves, but let an outsider say or do the same thing and there’s all hell to pay. “Your folks were hurt, confused. Their son is dead and they want to strike back. The threats ...”

“Here,” she cut me off. From her purse, she pulled a manila envelope, opened it, and brought out a news clipping. “Read this.”

It was dated three weeks earlier from a paper in Hawaii. A retired high school science teacher had been found murdered. The details were brief, but I’d been in the business long enough to know a tabloid would pick the story up and print the grisly facts. The man had been castrated, the severed pieces stuffed into his mouth. He suffocated. He was also beaten prior to suffocating.

“That’s the man who raped Manny.” She took the clipping back and put it away. “My family sent it to me.”

“You lived in Hawaii?” A detail she’d forgot to mention.

“Yes,” she hesitated. “For two years some of us lived in Hawaii. Then we all returned to the Philippines.”

“Because of Manny?”

“No,” she hesitated again. “My parents had separated and the youngest of us were sent away. They got back together and we returned. We weren’t supposed to know. The Church and all ...” She stopped short of finishing and stared at me with that puzzled look.

She was no longer the lively, colorful woman of my afternoon fantasy. The liquor, confession and, what I assumed were sleepless nights, had taken their toll.

“How do you know they did this?”

“They told me when they were here. They knew where he was and how they would kill him. I was supposed to help, that’s why they waited.” Her voice cracked.

“I believe you,” I said.

“You’re not what I pictured,” she yawned.

“Is that okay?” What had she pictured? Maybe she had read things about me as well as by me.

“Yes,” she yawned again. “I thought you would be tougher, mean,” she growled at me. “How could a guy like you write that series of articles on drug cartels and smugglers? Was it *all* true?” She stressed all.

“Every word. Matter of fact, there were things I had to leave out that were more thrilling,” I said, remembering how close I’d come to dying.

“You smuggled drugs in from Central America?”

“Sure did.”

“You were shot at.” She sounded excited.

“And I shot back,” I told her with a smile. “Something I hope never to have to do again. It’s scary.”

“How come you weren’t arrested?”

“Because I cooperated with the DEA through the publication. They got more out of it than I did. I had photos and dates ... you read the series?”

“Yes.”

“So you know what I had.”

“I thought you would be a colder person,” she smirked, her shoulders trembling. “I was so worried.”

“You got me at a weak moment.” How true that was.

“I appreciate your understanding,” she murmured. “I never thought I’d tell anyone. God ... maybe I should go back to the Church?”

I finished my drink as the captain announced we were preparing to land. It was 7:15 P.M. and the temperature was 60 degrees. Cool but there was no snow.

There were still missing answers. Or maybe there were better questions? She was real, not a fantasy and I wasn’t sure where we were going. I came up with reasons to go along; I was between articles, always took off between Thanksgiving and New Year’s, it could be exciting. If her family did kill the old man in Hawaii, it would be dangerous. I’d go back to Northern Ireland if the Loyalist didn’t want me. Before the truce, I’d even toyed with the idea of using false papers to enter from the South.

That’s the kind of damn fool I am. Wish I knew why I did the things I do. I’m considered a gonzo journalist. I think if you look that up in the dictionary, a synonym would be fool, possibly with a picture of me next to the word.

Christ. Mad Mick Murphy. It had been a long time since anyone called me that. Welcome home, Murphy, I remember thinking and recalled how we met earlier that morning, while the plane descended.

chapter *THREE*

The plane landed and I realized nothing had gone the way I'd pictured. Nothing. That should've told me something, immediately.

"That's very considerate of you, sir." The car rental clerk smiled warmly. "You couldn't guess how often we refuse rentals because of alcohol." She marked the prearranged rental agreement with the name of Michelle's hotel. "Delivery before nine tomorrow will be okay?"

"I think so," Michelle said and looked at me. "Mick?"

"Fine," I said and pulled Michelle with me toward the luggage area.

Drinking and driving, I'd learned after two arrests, was foolish, not to mention deadly. Locally, I'd made a few cops unhappy with certain articles and giving them the opportunity to put me in the drunk tank would have been foolhardy.

A damp chill shrouded the airport. The cab ride was less than twenty minutes to her hotel. I pulled my coat tight, she left her old coat unbuttoned, the bright red scarf wrapped around her neck and hung down the front of her bulky sweater. The old, wide-brimmed hat was pulled down tight covering some of her shiny black hair. It was challenging to think of her as anything but my fantasy.

Claudia had the same effect on me in Panama—for different reasons, but the same foolishness. That sudden thought quickened my heartbeat. Claudia was the sister of a powerful Colombian drug boss and from the moment I met her, my life was in danger. I came as close to dying as I ever want to because of infatuation. I nonchalantly equated both situations. A bad omen? Or a tired, drunken thought?

"There goes your macho image," Michelle smiled as we got into the cab. Her eyes were puffy and lifeless, but the color was back on her high cheekbones.

“What image?” I asked after giving the cabby the hotel address.

“Macho men never drink too much to drive,” she said, her voice tired and raw. “You have some hidden qualities, Mick.”

I was aware of my suppressed carnal desires, but not qualities.

It was early winter dark outside; a cool dampness was sitting along the ocean as we headed south toward Redondo Beach. We were on and off the freeway quickly. Claudia, I wanted to call her name. We’d never been anywhere this cool, so why was I suddenly reminded of her?

“You live close to the hotel?”

“Five-minute walk.”

“Why don’t we go to your condo first? Make the calls, have some coffee and then to the hotel.” It didn’t sound as if she’d stay awake long enough to make the calls.

“Okay,” I said and gave the cabby the new address. If she fell asleep and didn’t get to the hotel, it wasn’t my fault.

“I’m so tired,” she yawned. “Three hours difference. I must be getting old.”

“Lack of sleep, too much wine,” I said. The taxi stopped in front of the condo. “Home.” I said, shaking her shoulder. “You awake?”

“Yes.” She forced a slight grin and stretched. “Can I take a shower?” The bags were out of the taxi and I paid the cabby.

With mixed emotions—a pinch of bewilderment, a dash of confusion, a drop of curiosity, make that a teaspoon of curiosity, a small amount of skepticism, two ounces of lust and a whole lot of faith—I carried our bags to my condo, her two heavy ones and my one quick get-away.

Mel, my neighbor had aired the condo out, leaving it fresh and cool. It was too early in the relationship with Michelle to explain the young, attractive, Chicana neighbor who had entered my life and became my business manager and caretaker of my dwelling while I was on the road.

“God. It’s nice to be someplace other than a hotel,” she said and fell onto the overstuffed, futon. “This is great.”

I kept the futon as a lounge and rarely used it as a conventional couch. It made reading and relaxing that much nicer. Convenient on a date too.

I bit my tongue to keep from responding to her comment. I wanted to take it as a second thought on my invitation, but let it go. If she wanted to change her mind, she was going to have to tell me. There was something distant about Michelle that I hadn’t figured out.

My living room is large and serves as the nerve center of my life. One wall is glass, a small balcony on the outside that looks toward the ocean and pier, one wall is filled with books in homemade bookshelves. Mementos from trips and pictures of people and places are scattered through all the rooms. The large inside wall is converted into my computer work area and more bookcases. All made personally by me, by using heavy two-by-twelves—so they’ll remain standing during an earthquake—and stained a dark mahogany. Furniture is not my thing. The little I had was practical. It helped the rooms seem bigger than they really were. There’s a terrific view of the ocean and half a pier. A fire, a few years ago, had all but destroyed the large commercial one.

“Is that the pier you’ve written about?” she said without getting off the futon.

“Yes.” I put the bags down and opened the sliding glass door. She joined me on the patio.

You could hear the surf washing onto the beach but overcast weather hid the view. Small phantom lights made shallow depressions through the mist to help outline the pier.

“It doesn’t look so inviting,” she said with a chill in her voice.

“Caribe West is always inviting.”

“That’s the bar, right?”

“Yes.” It seemed she had read everything I’d published. “You read that piece too?”

“I told you, everything.” She turned and walked back inside.

“I need coffee,” I announced as I locked the glass door. “You?”

“Oh yes.” She looked toward the hallway. “May I?” She lowered her tone. “The bathroom ... ?” She pointed in the direction of the hallway.

“Yes,” I tried smiling but doubted it camouflaged my feelings. “Clean towels, shampoo, everything you’ll need is in there,” I said.

She smiled as she picked up one of her suitcases. “Everything?” She blushed briefly.

I felt myself blush and couldn’t come up with an answer deserving of her question. “I don’t have skin cream,” I finally said, my back to her, as I walked to the kitchen.

“I drink my coffee black,” she said and closed the bathroom door.

From the narrow hall, small unnatural sounds drifted into the kitchen. I closed the door that led from the kitchen to the hall, but I could still hear the noises she made. As the coffee dripped into the pot, I heard the water running in the shower. If this had been any other girl, in any other situation I would have taken all this as a come on. I wasn’t sure why things seemed different this time. Something told me they were and that I would have to deal with Michelle as someone different from anyone else I knew. These things did not make listening to the shower and the noises coming from the bathroom any easier.

To busy myself I searched through my computer address book to locate the six names I knew I had from Michelle's list. Some others might be there, but I needed the list to check. The thought of bringing her a fresh cup of coffee to the bathroom and asking about the list entered my mind and lingered.

"Working?"

The voice literally scared me. I jumped. She stood in the doorway, hair wrapped in a large towel, wearing an old-fashioned nightshirt that stopped just short of her knees. The four top buttons were left undone, accenting her small breasts. Barefoot she looked more like a child than a woman on a pilgrimage. Color had returned to her face, though all traces of make-up were gone. She looked impish. When I stared at her bronzed face, I was again struck by the contrast between her drowsy eyes and elfin vigor. She was still beautiful.

"No," I said and stood to bring her a cup of coffee.

She sipped the coffee and smiled. "I feel better." She moved to the futon and sat. "You're no decorator," she said matter-of-factly, scanning the room.

"Nothing I can't use," I told her. "How's the coffee?"

"Good," she smiled. "I want some more." She stood before I could get to her and walked to the kitchen. "You?"

I handed her my cup and she filled it. "I need to look at that list again. I think I have some of the names." We walked back to the living room.

"You look tired," she said as she glanced at my computer monitor. "Maybe you should take a shower?" She looked at the clock above the computer.

It was almost nine-thirty.

"What about the phone calls?" My mind was on other things.

“Tomorrow?” she said. “I don’t know, Mick. I’m kind of scared now that I’m so close. Am I doing the right thing? I don’t mean for you to answer me. I’m just questioning myself.” She sighed and went back to the kitchen. “I need a clear head,” she said sipping the fresh cup of coffee. “I’ve been running and running for days. This is the first time I’ve felt relaxed.” She walked to the patio door and looked out toward the water. “Did you have plans for tomorrow?”

“No,” I said without even thinking.

“Tomorrow okay? Let me sleep on it, so I’ll know I am doing the right thing.” She turned, concern on her face.

“Fine. Gives me time to go through the whole list and see how many I can find. You hungry?”

“No,” she said and turned back to the water. “It’s raining.” She opened the glass door and walked out onto the cold, damp patio.

“You’ll catch cold.” I told her standing at the door. “Come on in.”

“I love the rain.” She stuck her arms out and felt the rain come down. She came in, took the towel from her hair and wiped her wet arms. Her long hair fell straight down and covered her like a dark sheet. She shook her head; her hair flew around and fell over her again.

“I think I could use a shower,” I said. Not mentioning that it would be a cold one. “You don’t mind?” I wanted to be sure I wasn’t misinterpreting her, not that I thought for a moment I could decipher anything about her.

“It will make you feel better,” she smiled and began to wipe her damp hair with the towel. “Trust me, you’ll sleep like a baby.” She shook her head again, sending her hair flying about. “I love the smell of that shampoo,” she said with a grin and walked to the glass door. “Did you buy it?”

“I do my own shopping,” I half lied. I did most of it, but Mel, being my business manager, sometimes shopped with me or for me.

My head spun a little as I stared at Michelle looking toward the unseen ocean. I fought the urge to walk over and take her in my arms, though my ego told me that was what she wanted me to do. I remembered our talk on the plane and a chill went through me. I wondered what she really thought of me. She wouldn't have been here if she hadn't had a problem and if I hadn't known her brother while at Harvard.

I lacked control over the past, but I could exercise some control of the future, if the things she'd told me were true. Something I wasn't very sure of. Respect her wishes, no matter how hard, I kept repeating to myself. Knowing women, this could be the test to tell the difference between me and other men. Another chill ran through me, a colder one, a deeper one, as I thought that maybe this was her test to see if I was straight or gay. Could a straight man continue to take this?

“I'm taking a shower,” I said. Hair was growing on my tongue or so it felt as I uttered the words, not knowing what fate they sealed for me. “Can I get you anything first?” I prayed quietly that she would ask me to take her bags to the bedroom.

“I'm fine, thank you,” she said, still looking toward the ocean.

“I'll only be a few minutes.” I turned and walked toward the bathroom.

“Don't hurry,” she called after me.

On the guest bathroom mirror, I could see small pieces of fog remaining from Michelle's shower. One large, damp towel lay over the shower curtain. Her suitcase was on the floor, left open. The small room seemed inviting.

I showered quickly in my master bathroom, making the water as cold as I could stand. It woke me. My head cleared a little, some of the whirling gone. I splashed on Polo, went to the bedroom, and slipped into an old pair of jeans and tee shirt. Barefoot I walked to the living room.

An empty living room.

“Michelle,” I called her name as I looked into the kitchen. No one. “Michelle.” I walked to the guest room. It was also empty. I ran to the patio, but the glass door was locked.

“Michelle.” I called again.

There was no response. Her empty coffee cup was in the kitchen sink. Most of the coffee was gone from the pot. I checked for her bags. They were both gone. The towel that had covered her damp hair was next to the other towel, over the shower curtain. From the futon, I could see my computer screen had something on it. I got up and walked over. There was a brief note from Michelle:

Mick,

It's late and I'm a little mixed up with emotions right now. I think it's best for both of us if I go to the hotel. I called and they sent a cab for me. Let's get together around 9 a.m. OK? You've been so understanding. Please continue to be. For a little while longer. OK? Thank you for being there and for being Mick Murphy.

Kisses,

Michelle

Damn it. What the hell was going on? I fell onto the futon and felt a headache begin. A hangover? The phone rang. I jumped up, jittery, anxious and grabbed at the phone.

“Michelle?” I answered.

“Not even close, Romeo.” Mel chided me. “Michelle the little girl you came in with?”

“What do you care?” I said. “Thanks for airing the place out.”

“No thanks needed. You alone?”

“‘Fraid so.” It hurt to admit. “Weird trip from Boston,” I said. “You comin’ or goin’?”

“Oh Mick,” she moaned. “I’m in no mood to listen to another broken-heart story. You’re the dumbest goddamn Irishman I know.”

“You know if we weren’t friends, Mel, I’d marry you and get even for this shit.” I joked, but my heart wasn’t in it. I was too tired, confused, and anxious for the morning to be here.

“Okay, I do appreciate that,” she smiled. “You still have that Mexican brandy?” She was weakening.

“Whatever you left from last time,” I said. “Not too good to drink with a dumb Irishman?”

“Christ, Mick, I hadn’t thought of it that way,” she laughed. “Suppose some of you is rubbin’ off on me? Maybe we’re too close?”

“Use your key,” I said and hung up. I didn’t remember where I’d put the brandy snifters she’d given me. She’d know where they were.

It was almost eleven.

