

“No one writes like Laymon, and you’re going to have a good time with anything he writes.” —DEAN KOONTZ

RICHARD LAYMON

Internationally Bestselling Author of *Dark Mountain*



FLESH

**Richard
Laymon**

FLESH

LEISURE BOOKS



NEW YORK CITY

A Loving Husband

Up the stairs three at a time, snapping open the holster and drawing his .38, still at full speed when his shoulder hit the door.

Wood splintered and burst and the door flew open.

Nobody.

He ran for the bat-wing doors.

He dove through the doors, tumbled into the kitchen, came up in a squat and took aim.

He didn't fire.

He didn't know what he was seeing.

The woman in the red shorts was sprawled on the floor, faceup. Faceup? She didn't have a face. chin maybe.

Ron was hunched over her, his face to her belly.

No one else in the kitchen.

The cellar door stood open.

"Ron? Ron, which way did he go?"

Ron lifted his head. A bleeding patch of his wife's flesh came with it, clamped in his teeth, stretching and tearing off. He sat up straight. He stared back at Jake. His eyes were calm. He calmly chewed. Then he reached back for the shotgun.

*This book is dedicated to Dean and Gerda Koontz,
Who consistently top The Laymon Times
“Best-People List.”*

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CHAPTER ONE

Eddie, in his van, had the road to himself.

Except for the bicycle.

When he first saw the bike from the crest of the hill, it was below him and far ahead. At such a distance, he couldn't tell much about the rider.

He knew it wasn't a kid.

The bike was one of those high, streamlined jobs, not like you see kids pedaling around on. And the rider looked big enough to fit the bike.

Could be a teenager, Eddie thought.

Could be a gal.

Squinting, he leaned toward the windshield. The bottom of the steering wheel sank into his belly filling the crease between his rolls of fat.

Could be a gal, he thought.

With the back of his hand, Eddie wiped his mouth.

He was halfway down the hill by now, picking up speed and closing the gap between his van and the bike.

The rider's brown hair was somewhat long. That didn't prove much. A lot of men wore their hair that long and longer.

But you don't see a lot of guys in red shorts.

Eddie sped closer.

Close enough to see how the rider's hips flared out from a small waist.

A gal, all right.

On both sides of the road were fields with trees here and there. No buildings. No people. The road ahead to where it curved and vanished was deserted. Eddie checked his side mirrors. Behind him, the road was clear.

"Her it is," he said.

He pressed the gas pedal to the floor.

Though the rider didn't look back, she must have heard the rising engine sound. Her bike moved to the right, gliding away from the middle of the lane and taking up a new position a yard from the road's edge.

Eddie bore down on her.

She was hunched over her handlebars. She kept pedaling.

Her T-shirt was so tight that Eddie could see the bumps of her spine. Bare skin showed between the bottom of her shirt and the elastic band of her shorts.

Her left arm swung out. She waved Eddie by.

At the last instant, she looked back. Eddie was near enough to see that her eyes were blue.

She was very pretty.

He turned his van toward her.

I like the pretty ones.

Her front wheel jerked right.

Pretty and young and tender.

He waited for her to meet the windshield.

~~But she was being hurled the wrong way—forward and to the right. She was no longer on the bike.~~ She was above it, legs kicking overhead, as Eddie's van smashed through it.

No problem, Eddie thought.

She won't go far.

I'll get her. Oh, yes.

His right-side tires bounced over the gravel shoulder of the road and he was about to steer back onto the pavement when he came upon a bridge.

He hadn't even noticed it before.

He glimpsed the sign as he sped past it.

Weber Creek.

Not much of a creek.

Not much of a bridge—but it had a concrete guard wall four feet high.

CHAPTER TWO

“Are you all right?”

“Do I *look* all right?”

She was sitting on the ground with her back to the road, her head turned to look up at him. Above her right eyebrow, the skin was scraped off to her hairline. The raw place was striped with beaded threads of blood. It was dirty, and a few bits of straw-colored weeds clung to the stickiness.

Jake sat down beside her on the edge of the ditch.

Both her knees and the front of her right thigh were in the same condition as her forehead. Her right arm hung between her legs, knuckles against the ground. She held the arm with her other hand while it shook. She didn't appear to be trying to hold it still. The other hand seemed meant to soothe the way someone might lay a hand on an injured pet.

“Do you think it's broken?” Jake asked.

“I wouldn't know.”

Jake took out a notepad. “Could I have your name?”

“Jamerson,” she said. The corner of her mouth twitched.

Jake wrote. “And your first name?”

“Celia.”

“Thanks.”

She turned her head to look at him again. “Shouldn't you be doing something about *that*?” Her eyes shifted toward the blazing van fifty or sixty feet to her left.

“The fire truck's on the way. My partner's keeping an eye on things.”

“What about the...driver?”

“We can't do much for him.”

“Is he dead?”

A shish kebab, Chuck had remarked when he saw the driver's remains hanging out the windshield.

“Yes,” Jake said.

“He tried to hit me. I mean it. He had the whole road to himself. I'm over by the shoulder and I signal him to go around, and I look back and he's actually swerving right at me. He's grinning and he swerves right at me. Must've been going sixty.” Her face had a puzzled expression as if she were listening to a bizarre joke and waiting for Jake to feed her the punch line. “That guy meant to kill me,” she said. “He creamed my bike.”

She nodded toward it. The bike with its twisted wheels lay in the weeds on the far side of the ditch.

“What happened, I turned quick to get out of his way and it flipped on me. Just before he hit it, I guess. The van never touched me. Next thing I knew, I was landing in the ditch and there was this crash. Bastard. That's what he gets, going around trying to...what'd I ever do to *him*?”

“Did you know him?” Jake asked.

“I've heard of these guys, they'll run down dogs just for laughs. Hey, maybe he thought I was a dog.” She tried to laugh and came out with a harsh sobbing noise.

“Had you ever seen the man before?”

“No.”

“Did you do anything that might’ve angered him?”

“Sure, I flipped him the bird. What is this? Is it suddenly my fault?”

“Did you flip him off?”

“No, damn it. I didn’t even see him till he was about a foot off my tail.”

“As far as you’re concerned, then, his action was totally unprovoked?”

“That’s right.”

“You say that you heard the crash just after you landed in the ditch?”

“Maybe I hadn’t hit yet. I really don’t know.”

“What happened next?”

“I think I conked out. Yeah, I’m pretty sure I did. Then what happened, I heard your siren. That’s when I got up and...”

“Hey, Jake!”

Jake looked over his shoulder. Chuck, fire extinguisher in one hand, was standing by the open rear door of the flaming van and waving him over. “I’d better see what he wants. Sit tight, there should be an ambulance on the way.”

Celia nodded.

Jake stood up, brushed off his seat, and walked over to his partner.

“Take a look-see here,” Chuck said, pointing to the ground.

The pale dirt of the road’s shoulder was speckled with a few dark blotches. Jake crouched for a closer look.

“Looks like blood to me,” Chuck said.

“Yeah.”

“Was the girl over here?”

“Not according to what she told me.”

“We better find out for sure. Cause if she wasn’t...know what I mean?”

Jake heard a distant siren. He saw a smear of blood on the gray asphalt of the road. The fire truck or ambulance wasn’t in sight yet, so he rushed across both lanes. Chuck trotted along beside him, still hanging onto the fire extinguisher.

“How’d someone survive a crash like that?” Chuck said.

Jake shook his head. “Just lucky.”

“Yeah, I guess it can happen. You hear about folks making it through airline crashes. *There.*” He pointed.

“I see it.”

A slick of blood on a blade of crabgrass.

Jake stepped into the weeds. He scanned the ditch and the field beyond it. Both were overgrown with weeds that had flourished and bloomed under the recent spring rains. The uneven terrain of the field was dotted with clumps of bushes. There were a few trees scattered around.

He saw no one.

Chuck cupped his hands to the sides of his mouth and yelled, “Hello! Hey, out there!”

Jake, standing beside him, could barely hear his voice over the noise of the siren.

The siren died. Chuck called out again. Jake heard the groan of air brakes, the tinny crackle of a radio. He looked back and saw the town’s bright yellow pump truck.

“How come you suppose he wandered off?” Chuck asked. “It was me got banged up, I’d stick around and wait for help.”

“Maybe he’s in shock and doesn’t know what he’s doing. More likely, though, he wanted to haul ass out of here. ~~The girl says she was riding her bike along minding her own business and the van tried to run her down on purpose.~~ Which would mean the guy’s not a model citizen. You take care of matters here, I’ll see if I can dig him up.”

“Don’t take all day, huh? I’m getting the hungries and my stockpile’s dry.”

The stockpile was the cache of Twinkies, chips and candy bars that Chuck kept in the patrol car.

“You’ll live,” Jake said. He slapped Chuck’s paunch, then climbed down into the ditch.

After looking for traces of blood, he climbed out of the ditch on its far side.

Back on the road, the firemen were blasting at the flames with chemical extinguishers. Chuck was walking over to Celia, who was standing now, though bent over a bit and still holding her right arm.

Jake wondered if she was from the university. She was the right age, and he probably would’ve known her if she was a local. Also, there was her wise-guy attitude. *Do I look all right?*

Don’t hold it against her, he told himself. She was hurting.

A good-looking woman, even with her face scraped up.

Came damn close to getting her ticket canceled.

He turned away and continued searching.

Two in the van, one bought the farm and the other guy got away. The dead guy was obviously the driver. The survivor must’ve been in the back of the van, or he would’ve gone out the windshield, same as the driver. And Celia didn’t mention seeing anyone in the passenger seat.

If he was in the back, maybe he wasn’t part of it.

No, he *was* part of it, or he would’ve stuck close to the van after the crash.

Wandering back and forth, Jake spotted a dandelion with a broken stem, a smear of blood on its blossoms. It was a few yards north of where he’d come out of the ditch. In his mind, Jake connected the two points and extended the line across the field. It led to a low rise a couple of hundred yards to the northwest. The high ground was shaded by a stand of eucalyptus trees. He headed that way.

From behind him came the blare of another siren. That would be the ambulance.

Nice response time, he thought.

He checked his wristwatch. 3:20 P.M. He and Chuck had spotted the smoke at 3:08. They’d reached the accident site two minutes later and called in. So the ambulance had taken ten minutes.

Good thing nobody’s life was depending on it.

Jake waded into Weber Creek, peering up and down the narrow band of water. On the other side, he stopped long enough to check the area for signs. The weeds were nearly knee-high. He couldn’t find any traces of blood or trampled foliage. Maybe the guy had changed course. Looking back, though, Jake could only make out the faintest sign of his own passage.

I’m hardly the world’s greatest tracker, he thought.

And if the guy had made any effort to be careful, he could’ve skirted the places with high weeds and stuck to areas where the ground cover was sparse. Or maybe followed the creek.

Maybe I already passed him. If he stretched out flat...

Sneaking up on me...

Jake whirled around.

Nobody there.

His gaze swept over the field, then back toward the road. The van was still smoking, but he couldn’t see any flames. Chuck was standing close to Celia. An ambulance attendant was heading the way.

Jake continued toward the rise, but he'd begun to feel that he'd lost the suspect. He didn't like that. In spite of the blood, it was apparent that the man hadn't been severely injured. Hurt, sure, but not incapacitated.

A potential killer.

Jake didn't want to lose him.

What kind of man pulls a stunt like that—tries to run down a total stranger in broad daylight? He wasn't driving, of course, but he was an accomplice, Jake was sure of that.

Maybe they never intended to kill her, just run her off the road, rack her up enough to take the fight out of her, and snatch her. That Jake could understand. A good-looking woman, get her into the van, have their fun with her, dump her later on, maybe dead.

If Celia's account was accurate, though, they actually tried to smash her with the van. It would've killed her for sure. And messed her up pretty good. Hardly your typical MO for a pair of traveling rapists.

They wanted her dead first?

Sick.

Outlandish, too. There just aren't that many necrophiles running around; the odds against two of them linking up must be staggering.

It could happen.

More likely, though, they just would have left her.

Thrill killers.

Combing the roads in a van, looking for suitable victims.

If I lose this guy...

Jake turned slowly, scanning the entire expanse of the field. He trudged to the top of the rise and made a quick circuit around the trees. Nobody there. On the other side, the ground sloped down to a narrow road. Beyond the road, the field continued. The foliage and trees were heavier on that side. Plenty of places for a man to conceal himself.

Jake spent a long time watching the area. Turning around, he gazed at the field he had crossed.

You lost him, all right.

Get up a search party, go over the area inch by inch. The logical step, but not very practical. How do you get together enough men on short notice to do the job properly?

He leaned against a tree. He kicked a small rock and sent it flying down the slope. It landed in a clump of bushes, and he imagined his suspect crying out, "Ouch!" and making a run for it.

Dream on, Corey.

Shit.

He looked up the side road. It led only to the Oakwood Inn. The old restaurant had been closed for years, but a couple from Los Angeles was planning to reopen it. He saw a station wagon parked in front. The folks must be there, fixing the place up.

I'd better warn them.

The damned restaurant only looked like it was a quarter of a mile away. Weary and discouraged—and gnawed by guilt for letting the creep slip away—Jake shoved himself away from the tree and made his way down the slope. He waded through the weeds. Once he reached the road, the walking was easier.

He kept a lookout, though he no longer expected to find the suspect.

Suspect, my ass, he thought.

This guy's into wasting random victims.

And I lost him.

~~Maybe the accident, losing his partner, took some of the starch out of him.~~

Right.

Goddamn it.

I lost him and it'll be my fault if he...

The distant sound of a car engine broke into Jake's thoughts.

Chuck coming to fetch him?

He turned and realized that the sound came from the direction of the Oakwood Inn. He remembered the station wagon.

Snapped his head forward.

He was standing in a dip.

He saw only the road.

From the noise, the car was speeding.

And he knew.

He'd been slow—he should've guessed it the instant he saw the car sitting there, vulnerable, in front of the restaurant.

Your van is totaled, you're on foot and hurt, you spot an unattended vehicle...

Heart racing, mouth gone dry, Jake Corey snatched out his .38, planted his feet on each side of the faded yellow centerline of the road, lowered himself into a shooting crouch, and waited.

He aimed at the road's crest fifty yards away.

"Come on, you mother."

Jake wished he had a .357 like the one Chuck carried. With that, he'd be able to kill a car.

Jake would have to go for the driver.

He had never shot anyone.

But he knew this was it. He couldn't let the bastard get away.

Six slugs through the windshield.

That should do it.

The car burst into view, bounced on loose shocks as it hit the down slope, sped toward him.

Wait till he's almost on you, blow him away, dive for safety.

Jake's finger tightened on the trigger.

Brakes shrieked. The car skidded, fishtailed, and stopped thirty feet in front of him.

Jake couldn't believe it.

"Let me see your hands!" he yelled.

The driver, a thin and frightened-looking man of about thirty, stared at Jake through the windshield.

"I want to see your hands *right now!* Grab the steering wheel *right now!*"

The hands appeared. They gripped the top of the wheel.

"Keep 'em there!"

Jake kept his revolver pointed at the man's face while he approached the car. The head turned, eyes following him as he stepped to the driver's door.

No one else in the car.

Jake pulled the door open and stepped back. Crouching slightly, he had a full view of the man.

Who wore a blue knit shirt, and Bermuda shorts, and who didn't appear to be injured in any way

"What's going on, Officer?"

"Place your hands on top of your head and interlace your fingers."

“Hey really...”

“Do it!”

Why are you keeping this up? Jake wondered. Because you don’t know. Not yet. Not for sure.

The man put his hands on top of his head.

“Okay. Now climb out.”

As he followed orders, Jake got a look at his back. No blood or sign of injury there, either.

“Turn around slowly.” Jake made circular motions with his left forefinger. The man turned. Jake looked for bulges. The knit shirt was skintight. The only bulge was at the rear pocket of his shorts—a wallet. Good. Jake didn’t want to frisk him.

“Will you tell me what’s going on?”

Jake holstered his weapon.

“Could I see your driver’s license, please?”

The man took out his wallet. He knew enough to remove the license from its plastic holder. Probably been stopped for traffic violations.

Jake took the card. His hand was trembling. It reminded him of Celia’s shaking arm. The name on the license was Ronald Smeltzer. The photo matched the face of the man in front of him. The home address was on Euclid, in Santa Monica, California. “Thank you, Mr. Smeltzer,” he said, and returned the license. “I’m sorry about stopping you that way.”

“A wave would’ve sufficed.”

“I was expecting trouble. I assume you’re the new owner of the Oakwood.”

“That’s right. Could you tell me what’s going on? I realize I was taking the road a bit fast, but...” Smeltzer shrugged. He was obviously upset, but showing no belligerence. Jake appreciated his attitude.

“I was on my way to speak with you—to warn you, actually. We just had an incident over on Latham Road.”

“We were wondering. We heard the sirens.”

“On your way to investigate?”

“No, no. As a matter of fact, we haven’t got ice. My wife and I have been working all day, trying to get the place in shape. No refrigerator, yet. It’s supposed to be delivered tomorrow. We thought we’d relax over cocktails for a while, but...” He shrugged. He looked as if he felt a little foolish. “No ice. What can I say?”

“Your wife is back at the restaurant?” Jake asked. The man nodded. “I don’t think you want to leave her alone just now. We’ve got a situation. Give me a lift to your restaurant and I’ll explain.”

The two men climbed into the car. Smeltzer turned it around and headed back up the road at a moderate speed.

“Pick it up,” Jake told him. “I know you can do better than this.”

Smeltzer stepped on the gas.

As the car raced toward the restaurant, Jake explained about the attempt to run down Celia Jamerson, the blood behind the van, and his search for the injured passenger. Smeltzer listened, asking no questions but shaking his head a couple of times and frequently muttering, “Oh, man.”

The car lurched to a stop at the foot of the restaurant’s stairs. Smeltzer flung open his door. At the same moment, a door at the top of the stairs swung wide.

A woman stood in the shadows. She stepped out onto the porch as Smeltzer and Jake climbed from the car. Her perplexed expression altered into a frown of concern—probably as she realized that Jake was a cop.

She had nice legs. She wore red shorts. This is my day for beautiful women in red shorts, Jake thought. The front of her loose gray jersey jiggled nicely as she trotted down the stairs. The jersey had been cut off, halfway up. Any higher, Jake thought, and he'd be seeing what made the jiggles.

"Ron?" she asked, stopping in front of the car.

"Honey, this is officer..." He looked at Jake.

"Jake Corey."

"I ran into him on my way out. Almost literally." He gave Jake a sheepish glance.

"Some kind of trouble?"

Jake let Smeltzer explain. His wife nodded. She didn't say, "Oh, man," after each of his sentences. She didn't say anything. She just frowned and nodded and kept glancing over at Jake as if expecting him to interrupt. "Is this true?" she finally asked him.

"He covered it pretty well."

"You think there might be a killer hanging around here?"

"He didn't kill anyone today, but it wasn't for lack of trying. Have either of you seen anyone?"

She shook her head.

"But we've been working inside," Smeltzer added.

"You folks have a home in town, don't you?" Jake asked. He seemed to remember hearing that they'd bought the Anderson house.

"I was on my way there," Smeltzer said, "for the ice."

"It's certainly your decision, but if I were you, I'd close up here for today and go on back to your house. There's no point in taking unnecessary risks."

Husband and wife exchanged a look.

"I don't know," Smeltzer said to her. "What do you think?"

"We've got to get this place in shape before they bring in the equipment."

"I guess we could come in early tomorrow."

"It's up to you," the wife said.

"This guy does sound like he might be dangerous."

"Whatever you say, Ron. It's your decision."

"You'd rather stay," Ron said.

"Did I say that?"

"I think we'd be smart to leave."

"Okay. It's settled, then." She smiled at Jake. It was a false smile. *See? You got your way.*

Hey lady, he wanted to tell her, sorry. Just thought you might want to know there's an asshole in the neighborhood and maybe you're his type. Forgive me.

Smeltzer turned to Jake. "Could we give you a lift?"

"Yeah, thanks. I could use a ride back to the road."

"Fine. We'll just be a minute. We need to lock up."

He and his wife headed up the porch stairs.

Jake glanced at the woman's rear end. He didn't find it especially interesting. She was a fine-looking package, beautifully wrapped, but Jake had the idea that he wouldn't like what he found inside.

So much for lust.

They were inside the restaurant for longer than Jake expected. At first, he assumed they were probably delayed by a heated discussion about leaving ahead of schedule. Then he began to worry.

What if the guy from the van was in there and got them?

Not very likely.

~~But the possibility stayed with Jake. He counted to thirty, slowly, in his mind.~~

They still weren't out.

He went for the stairs, took them three at a time, and reached for the door handle.

The door swung away from him.

"Sorry it took so long," Smeltzer said. "Had to use the john."

"No problem." Jake turned away, not even trying for a glimpse of the wife, and trotted down the stairs.

From behind him came her voice. "This really *is* the pits."

"Better safe than sorry," Smeltzer said.

"Of course."

CHAPTER THREE

A few classes were still in session and Bennet Hall had terrible acoustics that seemed to magnify every sound—especially on the stairways—so Alison climbed to the third floor with excessive caution, holding onto the old, wooden banister to keep herself steady.

Alison knew she was early.

She couldn't help it.

She'd tried to stay away until four, but Chaucer let out at two and she had no classes after that on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and it just isn't easy, killing two hours. The walk home only used up ten minutes. Neither of her roommates were there. Too bad. A conversation with Celia or Helen would've been good for making the time pass.

She'd tried to study, but couldn't concentrate. Not on the book, anyway. Just on the clock, the minute hand of which seemed to move one space every ten minutes. If she could just take a nap and wake up at a quarter to four... So she set her alarm clock and stretched out on the bed. Sure, sleep. She shut her eyes, folded her hands on her belly, and tried very hard. It was no use. She couldn't even lie still, much less sleep. Finally, she gave up on the idea, folded her waitress uniform into her flight bag, added a paperback, and left.

She had reached Bennet Hall at 3:20. That was early, even for her—a whole fifteen minutes earlier than her arrival time on Tuesday. So she took her usual seat on a concrete bench that encircled the broad trunk of an oak tree, and tried to read. Watched a squirrel eat a nut. Watched a couple of yelling lower classmen, probably frosh, toss a Frisbee around. Watched Ethel Something stroll toward the library holding hands with Brad Bailey. Tried to read. At last, it was ten till four. She couldn't wait any longer. Besides, she told herself, the class might let out early.

So she entered Bennet Hall and made her way as quietly as possible to the third floor. The hallway was deserted. She heard the slow tapping of a typewriter from a faculty office, and a few faint voices drifting into the hall from open classroom doors.

She stopped near the open door of the last classroom on the left. The students were out of sight, but her position gave Alison a clear view of Evan.

She'd been with him only last night, but she felt as if far too much time had gone by since then. Too much time with a hollow ache in her chest. The ache didn't go away. It seemed to get worse.

Come on, Alison thought. Dismiss the class.

Apparently, Evan hadn't noticed her arrival. He was looking forward, probably at the student who was asking about a minimum length requirement for the term papers.

"It should," he replied, "be like a young lady's skirt—short enough to keep one's interest but long enough to cover the essentials."

A few of the students chuckled.

"But how long does it have to *be*?" the voice persisted.

Evan arched an eyebrow. Alison smiled. He was so cute, acting the pedant. "Fifteen pages minimum."

"Is that typed?" inquired a different voice.

"Typed. Black ink. White paper of the 8 1/2-by-11-inch variety. Double-spaced. One inch margin all around. If possible, refrain from using erasable paper—it makes my fingers sticky."

They were freshmen. Probably taking notes on his every utterance.

~~Evan folded his arms. He was standing in front of his desk, its edge pressing into his rump.~~

Taking off his wirerimmed glasses, he asked, "Any more questions?" While he waited, he wiped the lenses on a lapel of his corduroy jacket. Without the glasses, his face looked bare and somehow childlike. He put them back on and became the scholar again. "No? Your assignment is to read pages 496 through 506 in Untermeyer and come to class on Tuesday prepared to astonish me with your knowledge of Mr. Thomas's craft and sullen art. You are dismissed."

Alison stepped away from the door. There was no stampede to leave the classroom. The students took their time departing, some coming out alone, others in groups of two or three. The bell rang. More students wandered out. Alison waited impatiently, then peeked around the door frame.

A girl in the fourth row was still in the process of stacking her books on top of her desk. Finally she stood, cradled the precarious pile, and strolled toward the front. "Have a nice weekend, Mr. Forbes."

He grinned. "I shall spend the weekend continuing my quest for naked women in wet mackintoshes."

"Huh?"

"Have a nice weekend, Dana, and Friday, too."

Alison entered the room. The girl stepped around her and was gone.

"Naked women in wet mackintoshes?" Alison asked.

Evan grinned. He slipped a book into his briefcase. "A line borrowed from Mr. Thomas."

"Your friend Dana will think you're daffy."

"Daffiness is expected from English instructors."

Alison shut the door and went to him. He latched his briefcase, turned to her, and stared into her eyes.

"How you been?" she whispered. Her throat felt tight.

"Lonely."

"Me, too." She eased herself against him, arms moving beneath his jacket, head tilting back, lips waiting for his mouth.

He kissed her. He pressed her body closer and she snuggled against him. This was what she wanted, what she had longed for since last night—being with him again. If it could only go on and on. If they could only go from here to his apartment and be together, make love, eat supper, spend the evening and the night. But it couldn't be that way, and the knowledge was a whisper of regret that tainted the moments in his embrace.

Alison ended the kiss.

She pressed her mouth to the side of his neck, squeezed herself hard against him, then lowered her arms and slipped her hands into the rear pockets of his corduroy pants. "It feels so good," she said.

"My ass?"

"Just holding you."

"The clothes get in the way."

"It's still nice."

"Nicer still would be naked on the floor."

"Undeniable."

"How about it?" His hands went to her rump. They cupped her buttocks through her skirt, squeezed.

"Not a chance."

“Give me one good reason.”

“The door doesn’t have a lock.”

“Aside from that.”

She smiled up at him. “Isn’t that enough?”

“A minor detail.”

“You think so, do you?”

“It would be well worth the risk.”

“No way, pal.”

“A coward dies many times...”

“And discretion is the better part of valor.”

“Methinks the lady doth not want to screw.”

With a laugh, Alison pushed herself away from him. “Walk me to work?”

“Well, I don’t know. One good turn deserves another, and...” He shrugged.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Nobody’s going to come in here.”

“How do you know?”

Evan reached out and opened the top button of her blouse. He started for the next button. Alison took him by the wrists and pushed his hands away. “I said no. I meant it. This isn’t the time or the place.”

He pressed his lips into a tight line and breath hissed from his nostrils. “If you say so,” he muttered.

Alison looked into his eyes. His gaze, which before had seemed so deep and searching, now had blankness to it as if something inside him had shut down and he no longer saw her at all.

He turned away. He opened his briefcase and took out a fat manila folder.

“Evan...”

“I guess I’ll stay here for a while. I’ve got some papers to grade. Besides, I want to see if anyone comes in during the next half hour or so. Call it curiosity.”

Alison stared at him a moment longer, not wanting to believe he was doing this to her. Then she walked to the door.

“Come on, Alison, what’s the big deal?”

She didn’t answer. She left.

In the corridor, then on the stairs, she expected Evan to hurry after her. He would apologize. *I’m sorry, it was a stupid idea. I shouldn’t have brought it up.*

By the time Alison pushed her way through the main door, she knew he wasn’t going to run after her. He’d meant it. He was staying. Still, she kept glancing back as she crossed the lawn.

How could he do something like this?

Evan had walked her to work almost every day during the past two weeks. A couple of times, he couldn’t do it because of meetings or something. But this—this was just spite.

A punishment.

Because she wouldn’t put out.

Put out. What an ugly term.

Put out or get out.

All day, she had been looking forward to seeing him. A hug and kiss in the classroom, holding hands as he walked her to the restaurant. Talking, joking, just *being* with him. And both of them knowing that he would meet her after work, that they would walk to the park or back to his apartment

and then he would be inside her.

Not today, folks.

The sidewalk was blurry. She wiped her eyes, but they filled again.

If it was that important to him, maybe...it *shouldn't* be that important. What's the big deal?

Well, it was obviously a very big deal to him.

I'm suddenly the bad guy 'cause I won't let him screw me on the classroom floor.

And you thought he loved you.

Well, think again.

He loved you all right—he loved putting it to you, that's what he loved.

Goddamn him.

Alison rubbed her eyes again. She sniffed and wiped her nose, and stopped at the curb. Gabby's was only a block away. She didn't want to walk in there crying.

She didn't want to walk in there at all.

Not today.

She wanted to shut herself inside her bedroom and stay there. And sleep, and forget.

But when the traffic signal changed, she stepped off the curb and continued toward the restaurant.

Maybe he'll show up later on, meet me at closing time just as if nothing had happened.

What then?

She walked past Gabby's, glancing in through the windows. Only a few of the booths were occupied. Still too early for the supper crowd. She hoped it would be a busy night, busy enough to keep her from having time to think.

The entrance was on the corner. She pulled open one of the glass doors. It seemed heavier than usual. Inside, she managed a smile for Jean who was heading her way with a tray of empty beer steins.

"Early today," Jean said.

All she could do was nod.

"You all right?"

"I'll be okay."

Jean stepped up close to her. "You need to talk, you give me a holler. I raised three girls, and it weren't always rosy, let me tell you. But you just name me a problem, you can just bet your tush I've run into it one time or another."

"Thanks."

"Get on along, now." Jean moved her head a fraction to the left. Taking the cue, Alison looked over Jean's left shoulder. "Careful Prince Charming don't follow you into the john."

Prince Charming sat alone at the last booth.

"Trying to cheer me up, are you?" Alison asked.

Jean winked and stepped around her.

Alison tried not to look at Prince Charming, but couldn't help glancing his way as she hurried toward the rest room. He was hunched over the table, pulling and twisting a long greasy hank of black hair in front of his face. Pasty skin showed through a hole in the shoulder of his gray sweatshirt. The sweatshirt looked as if he'd been wearing it for months.

A bowl of vegetable soup was on the table under his face.

Lucky Jean, getting to serve him.

Was he trying to wring something out of his hair and into the soup?

Alison averted her eyes. She caught a whiff of him as she rushed by.

Thank God he didn't look up at her.

She entered the rest room and locked the door.

~~Prince Charming, at least, had succeeded in taking her mind off Evan.~~

Evan.

The hurting started again.

If I want to feel bad, she thought, I should trade problems with Prince Charming out there.

She hoped he would be gone by the time she finished.

She put on her makeup slowly. Then she draped her skirt and blouse over the door of the toilet stall and opened her flight bag.

Most of the other waitresses wore their costumes to work. Alison didn't like to wear hers on the streets, and especially not on campus. The yellow taffeta skirt was several inches too short and had a dainty, frilly-edged apron sewn to the front. The short-sleeved, matching blouse had her name stitched in red over the left breast. The fabric of both, thin enough to see through, had obviously been selected by someone who wanted to give the male customers an extra treat.

Alison put on a short slip, then the costume.

She folded her street clothes. Spreading open her flight bag to put them away, she saw her toothbrush and black negligee.

For later.

For Evan's place.

She might as well have left them home.

Squeezing her lower lip between her teeth, she stuffed her clothing into the flight bag and zipped it shut.

She stepped out of the rest room.

Prince Charming was gone.

My lucky day, she thought.

CHAPTER FOUR

“In a way, it’s a relief,” Ron said.

“You’ll be singing out of the other side of your face, my dear, when we have to get up at five o’clock in the morning.” Peggy sipped her vodka gimlet, being careful not to spill. She was at a bad angle for drinking, but it felt good to be leaning back against the sofa cushion, her legs stretched out and feet propped on the coffee table.

“I don’t think we’ll need to get up quite *that* early,” Ron said.

“Think again. They’re coming in at ten with the appliances, and the kitchen floor has to be stripped and waxed before they arrive.”

“That won’t take five hours, will it?”

“You don’t think so?”

“I’m sure you know best.”

Peggy nodded. An icy drop fell from the bottom of her glass onto her bare belly below the cutoff edge of her jersey. She flinched a bit, then rubbed the glass against her shorts. It made a dark smear on the red fabric. She took another drink.

“We should’ve done the kitchen after lunch,” Ron said.

“My dear, we’d planned to do it after supper—having no idea, of course, that the long arm of the law, so to speak, would reach out and fuck us over.”

“He was just trying to help.”

“I can live without that kind of help, thank you very much.”

“We didn’t have to leave.”

“You couldn’t wait to get out of there and you know it.”

“I still think it was the wise thing to do. Why should we put ourselves in a possibly hazardous situation when it can be avoided?”

“Why, indeed?” she muttered.

“I really don’t appreciate your attitude,” Ron said.

“Too bad.” She started to take a drink.

“*Damn it, Peggy!*”

Her hand jumped. The chill liquid sloshed, spilling down the sides of her chin. “Shit!” She sat up. It trickled down her neck. With her left hand, she lifted her jersey and blotted herself dry. “You didn’t have to yell.” Her throat felt thick and her eyes burned. “Now I’m all sticky. Jeez, Ron.”

“I’m sorry.”

She tugged the cutoff jersey down to cover her breasts, took a drink, then set her glass on a coaster. “Excuse me.”

In the bathroom, she wiped her chin and neck with a damp washcloth. Ron appeared in the medicine cabinet mirror. His hands caressed her belly. “I am sorry,” he said again.

“Me, too,” Peggy said in a small voice. “I’ve been such a bitch. It’s just that I wanted to get it over with tonight.”

He lifted the jersey. His hands covered her breasts.

“I was worried about you,” he said. “That’s all.”

“I know.”

“If you want to stay here, I’ll go back tonight and get a start on the floor.”

“By yourself?”

“I could take the gun,” Ron told her.

“I’ve got a better idea. Take the gun, and we’ll both go.”

Jake Corey, sitting with his back to the trunk of a eucalyptus tree, scanned the fields with the binoculars he’d brought from home.

It was dusk. A breeze had come up and it felt good, a real improvement over the afternoon heat that had punished him during the long trek after he’d left his patrol car.

He must’ve hiked two miles or more, searching, crisscrossing his way through the weeds before coming to the high ground to settle down and watch.

“Don’t waste your time,” Chuck had said at the shift’s end.

“I haven’t got anything better to do.”

“Bullsquat. You oughta go out and get yourself some action, it’d do you good.”

Jake was in no mood for the kind of action Chuck meant. If he didn’t do this, he would spend the night alone in his small rented house, reading, maybe catching some TV, hitting the sack early. And he’d still feel guilty for letting the crash survivor slip away from him.

This way, at least, he was doing something about it.

The guy could be miles gone by now.

On the other hand, he might be nearby. The fields were far from flat. He could’ve found himself in depression and stayed low, resting and waiting. Biding his time until he felt it was safe to start moving.

That was the scenerio Jake counted on.

That was why he waited, well concealed among the high weeds with the tree to his back, scanning the area through binoculars.

Especially the area near the deserted restaurant.

That’s where you would head, he thought.

You’re hurt. You’ve been lying low in the weeds for hours. You’re hungry and parched. You’re starting to want a glass of water more than just about anything in the world.

Well, there’s the creek. You could get your drink there.

You’d still head for the restaurant.

You’re not just thirsty, you’re hungry, too. And this is, after all, a restaurant. You’re not from around here, you’ve got no idea it’s been closed for years. You only know that it isn’t open tonight. So it’s closed on Thursdays. You’re in luck. Get inside, you can have a feast. Take enough when you leave so you’ll be fixed up for days.

Jake’s position on the high ground gave him a good view of the restaurant. At least of its front and south walls. The other side and rear could be approached by an army, and he’d never know. Not from here.

Maybe the guy’s already inside.

Jake wished he had checked the place out before settling down for his vigil. At this point, he was reluctant to leave his cover.

Wait for dark.

That wouldn’t be long, now. Color was already fading from the landscape, the bright greens and yellows dimming, turning shades of gray.

Dark in a few more minutes.

~~Like waiting at a drive-in for the movie to start.~~

Jake was in his Mustang. With Barbara. His window was rolled down, the speaker hooked over the edge. Almost dark. Almost time for the movie. Kids were on the swings and teeter-totter of the play area under the screen.

Barbara. In a white knit shirt, white shorts, socks, and tennis shoes. Fresh and beautiful. Her skin dusky next to all that white.

A walk to the refreshment stand. It was always popcorn and soda during the first feature, then back at intermission for an ice cream sandwich or red vines. Usually red vines.

A lot of fooling around went on with the red vines. You could whip with them. Or tickle. Or tease. You could each take one end of the same vine in your mouth and chew your way toward the middle.

Until you met Barbara's mouth. Her cherry-flavored mouth.

The sound of a car engine snapped Jake back into the present, and he felt as if he'd awakened from a sweet dream.

Headlights appeared on the road to the restaurant.

The car approached. As it passed below him, Jake saw that it was a station wagon.

Terrific.

So much for his warning.

And so much for his plan to check the place out.

He watched the red taillights rise and fall with the dips in the road. When the brake lights came on, he raised the binoculars. A door opened. The car's interior light came on.

Smeltzer and Smeltzer. The dynamic duo.

Ron opened the rear door. He pulled out a double-barreled shotgun.

The door shut. Jake lowered his binoculars and watched the couple climb the stairs. They spent a few moments on the porch, Ron at the door. Then they both went in. Moments later, light appeared in the bay windows.

So what gives? Jake wondered. Why'd they come back?

Forgot something? If that's the case, they'll be out in a minute. Unless they get jumped.

Jake realized he was holding his breath, listening for a shotgun blast. Or a scream.

He got to his feet. He started down the slope to the road. Still listening. He heard his own heartbeat, the foliage crunching under his boots, the normal constant sounds of crickets and birds.

Maybe the guy doesn't jump them, Jake thought. Maybe he hides. He would've heard the approach of the car. An old restaurant like that, it must have plenty of good hiding places.

If he's in there at all.

He might just as easily be in the trees beyond the restaurant. Or two or three miles away. He could be anywhere. Hell, he could be lying in the weeds, dead from his injuries.

Or he might be crouched in a dark corner of the Oakwood Inn, watching for a good chance to pounce.

From a high spot on the road, Jake could see the station wagon and restaurant. But not the Smeltzers.

They didn't forget a damn thing, those idiots. They came back to work.

Not a big surprise.

Jake picked up his pace.

The woman, that afternoon, had obviously been reluctant to leave. Ron was the sensible one. Bu

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