

# CONSPIRATORS OF HEARTS

by Norma Hardt

## I

Paul Lowell gasped violently, begging for air to fill his near frozen lungs. He had pulled a woman from the icy waters of Rochelle Reservoir and she appeared to be losing her battle to survive. Feeling helpless, he watched her life failing in the hands of rescue workers as he recollected the events of the past hour. He knew that reviving her wouldn't be easy. During his efforts to save the victim, he'd incapacitated her in order to save himself. She had pounced on him, drove them down into the watershed's cold depths, irate that he hadn't rescued her companion as well. Even though he'd put his weight to the metal, the car door resisted his efforts to open it. It wouldn't have mattered. The man had breathed his last. He'd sought to prevent her from returning to the accident site, but she didn't accept his decision. She'd revengefully thrust him below the inky, flowing water. Her crooked arm constricted his windpipe. Air cut off, lungs near bursting, he groped for stability in the foamy lather. Unable to break free, he drifted aimlessly, drawing ever deeper into himself. Tumbling. Senses failing. Vision hampered. His clouded eyes caught the daylight glimmer of a widening eddy coursing above them. An illusion of a slithering, gold-colored reptile with two distinct, emerald-eyed heads suddenly appeared overhead. Iridescent, skin glistening, its jeweled eyes seemed to scream out, "Not yet! Not yet!"

Buoyed by the vision, elbow in line with his assaulter's midriff, Paul rammed it solidly into her vulnerable ribcage. She'd capsized; he'd sandbagged her. All he'd wanted was to save her life and she'd very nearly killed him.

He sat freezing on a sandy spot of beach, below the route the careening car had

taken from the uphill slope into the basin. Cold water dripped down his clammy face. He sloshed in sodden sweats; a discarded sweatshirt and sneakers lay somewhere up the grade. Having heard the cry for help, he'd torn through a maze of reeds and cattails to reach deeper water. The glare of headlights rocking on the water's surface had told him where to dive. He wouldn't soon forget the sight of the dead man. But he had no regrets for not being able to do more.

The tragic incident had drawn a curious crowd. A white-haired aged woman peeled a woolen wrap off her sloped shoulders and draped it around Paul's bare shoulders. Her husband poured hot coffee from a thermos. Paul reached for the mug with trembling hands, hoping the coffee's heat would lessen his shivering. His teeth chattered. While he tried to explain the tragic occurrence, the onlookers' murmurs filled the air.

Limp as bleached flotsam awash on a beach, the drowning victim hadn't heard a word of what was being said. To her rescuer, the situation appeared a bit more hopeful. Somebody had the audacity to call his crude efforts to save himself a brutal assault. Others agreed. Wheeling toward his accusers, hard thoughts in mind, Paul fired back, "If you knew how she jumped on me, you'd have done the same." When carrying her ashore, her weight had hampered him. Why hadn't they aided him in getting her out of the water? *People who lacked spleen shouldn't be so freaking critical.* Their ignorance compelled him to shout, "Geez! None of this was my fault. I did as best I could!"

"Maybe you didn't intend to K.O. the lady," came at his stiffened back. The response to his explanation bore some credence. He had an ally, he thought. Inconceivably, a harsh conclusion came hurling back at him. "With her being female and all- it does bring up an endurance factor. I mean . . . since you're stronger by far, did you have to slug

her?”

Paul’s jaw went slack. *What’s going on here? I’m being benched for this craziness?* Disconcerted, he faced his accuser. Portly, flint-eyed Milt McLeod earned his daily bread writing sensational, often lurid, copy. While willing to contest the rag reporter’s accusation, Paul switched his attention to the stricken young woman who’d muttered weakly, “I’ve spoiled everything, Tracey.”

Her glazed eyes were fixed on his harried face when he moved closer. In her confused mind he didn’t exist. Only a phantom presence did. “You don’t want me. Not now . . . not ever!” she blurted in an effacing, earthy tone that gripped his heart.

“Hush. Hush, baby.” he soothed. Assuming the role of her lover, he gently eased her raised shoulder onto the grass where she struggled briefly against his restraining hand. He was taken with the sad face half hidden in a wet, tangled mass of blond hair. *A lady as delicate as she once was his. Now there is only silence. You’re missed, Nhien.*

“You shouldn’t care,” the victim slurred.

Paul earnestly replied, “Well I do, lady . . . honest.” With a trembling hand he stroked her wan cheek. Perhaps the man who’d drowned hadn’t cared enough. It was then that he spied the medal on a chain clasped around her neck. Curious, he lifted the thin, silver bijou to examine it. The holy medal represented the sanctuary all devout members of the Church seek of the Virgin Mother. Was this near drowned young woman a pious worshiper? If so, the Madonna had surely been looking out for her.

Patting the medal back into place, gaze deflected momentarily, Paul failed to notice that she’d seen his face clearly before he’d backed away. “Please . . . let me die,” she pleaded of those who tended her.

Paul puzzled why she would wish for death when she was so young. Obviously she knew what she was saying. Her plea was plain enough. Before he could question, her troubled eyes fell shut. She'd withdrawn again into her fantasies. He'd wager on her being good-hearted. Perhaps she'd live to retell the event that traumatized her.

Maybe heaven had heard his call for help when he dove for the drift fence to avoid being flattened by the speed demon whose driver was now dead on the reservoir bed. He and God communicated, of course, although not too often.

Bent on polishing his fogged glasses, McLeod interrupted his meandering, "By George, Lowell, from the way you tell it, she put up one hell of a scrap!"

Bristling beneath the newsman's brusque analysis, Paul retorted, "Yeah. She's a real toughie." He felt he had more insight into the matter than McLeod did. Recalling the drowning incident, his hands fidgeted anew. Death's cold hand had stretched out to him in warning.

The chill, rising wind woke him to the knowledge that the golden fringe touching the scruff of his neck was sodden. Wet flakes dampened his sweat-pants, the frost-hardened ground supporting him. Shuddering, his anger with McLeod's baiting faded. He sympathized with the young victim's plight. *In her fragile state she might yet opt for a better world. Lord knows how all this has affected her lungs. It seems God turns a deaf ear to the pleas of humans, as I often do. If I ruled destiny, this sprite would be allowed to live.*

Scaling the steep, snow-coated slope to the slick roadway above, McLeod sought an answer for the wreck. He tramped slowly along the snowy perimeter of the rise, convinced that the accident had somehow been provoked. He returned to lower ground,

as yet undecided. Nudging Lowell's arm, he made mention of the unusual pattern of tracks scoring the roadway. Taking the position that the woman had probably been behind the wheel, since Lowell hadn't informed him otherwise, he inquired about her sobriety. Amid the grumbles of the crowd the odds on its being true began to grow from the seeds of suspicion McLeod had planted. "There's a man in a watery grave. I think something should be done to find out why," the newshound decided.

Paul suspected the reporter was exploiting the situation. He really shouldn't have expected him to find the morning's events un-newsworthy. To a journalist's way of thinking, there was always a story. A lurid expose perhaps? The creases at the corners of his mouth bit in a little deeper as he peered sleepily at McLeod. The mystery would go unsolved. The young woman's reputation would remain intact.

"Councilman, I don't want you to think my questioning your motives in sending the chick into orbit is out of line," McLeod snidely asserted, refusing to let up on him. "I wouldn't think of accusing you of shocking your constituents by printing an account of your primitive behavior. For you, I'll play it cool . . . this time."

*Primitive behavior? Using force to save him-self? Resenting the crass presumptions,* Paul mumbled through gritted teeth, "I did what I had to. There's nothing here worth noting." *Get out of my face!*

Finding Lowell's claim flimsy, McLeod spouted, "You don't have anything on tap that says: 'See what I did?' Come on, sport. Give me a story and I'll help you impress your voters." In his opinion, publicity for heroism was ideal for a city man running for the high office of town mayor.

Irked, the pegged councilman spun off heatedly, "You're way off base. Since the

guy's dead, you've made conscience the name of the game! Where's your concern for the injured party? That's little enough to expect from a dedicated newsman. If I were my twin, I'd- Geez!" *God I hate this quizzing.* He paused a moment to reflect, and then continued on, "You want me to corroborate your findings, eh, because your readership demands a negative slant?" Poking his finger into his open palm as if counting off the 'crumbs of evidence' in sequence, he huskily recapped the incident. "Man, we can only wonder - there's a sunken car, one person drowned, the other in shock. How it came about is anyone's guess. .

Deeming the councilman's scathing retort an attempt to scotch his sound judgment, McLeod was most assuredly unhappy. "Are you suggesting I keep your presence here low key?" he blurted, thinking Lowell was skirting the issue. *While jogging, maybe he'd gotten in the way of the car and the driver lost control. Guilt alone would keep him silent.* "Aren't you forgetting that the right kind of publicity can enhance a politician's image?" he baited.

*Who needs colored press? It'd only hurt my campaign.* Thumbs in his back pockets, hips slung forward, with an air of disdain Lowell haughtily snarled, "I'm not your city boy! I'm a numbers cruncher. I don't state policy nor do I speak out on the issues. That's my twin's line. I'd be a boob to mix in his politics. I like my privacy. So get off my back!" *Never . . . ever let it be said that Paul Andrew Lowell did not take his avocation seriously.*

The subdued columnist reconnoitered that at some time or other he'd run into difficulty reporting on the Lowell twins. He was trying hard to recall when, and in what regard.

Paul mused, a glimmer in his eye, *The twin will be happy knowing he's up for a medal. McLeod surely won't risk a libel suit by calling me a liar.'*

And so it was that Lowell, using his twin as a crutch, saved the survivor of the accident some embarrassing publicity. No matter that it was at Peter Thomas's expense.

An ambulance, red beacon flashing, had parked alongside the winding road in front of the auxiliary fire truck. As the whine of the sirens slowly died, white coats hastily emerged from the van and scudded down the pebbly incline, breaking into the crowd, gurney in tow. Taking the situation in hand, they motored the stricken young woman to the local hospital. Sympathy for her plight had won Paul over. McLeod, noting the chivalrous 'bookkeeper's attitude, thought that if he was covering up something the police needed to know, then his wry humor ought to be exposed. And he'd be glad to air it in his avid subscribers' living rooms.

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The receptionist switched Paul Lowell's incoming call to Lowell House of Plastic's plant office to check in, only to hear a sharp: "Paulo, ditch the cruddy sneakers! You're late! We've a downed press and you're needed here." Dicky Allison's bullfrog voice bellowed cantankerously in his ear through the punch-out presses' near deafening roar. The feisty 'master of the color pot,' face crinkled like a dried prune, never asked for what he could demand. Anything but humble, the crusty old gent had a knack for defaming the English language. Looking to a dressing-down, Paul stifled a curse. It wouldn't benefit him to rile Allison. He needed the one who'd taught him the plastic trade on his good side. And his measuring up to the efficient colorist's high standards was a colossal feat. The plant boys expected he'd be in the catbird's seat one day. But his getting there was mighty tough.

"Yeah, I hear your wake up call," Paul glumly acknowledged. Although, to be truthful about it, he hadn't. With the whine of the thermosetting presses grating shrilly in his ear, he'd yanked the receiver away from it. "Yeah, I'm late. It's cool, Dicky, your letting everyone know," he barked through the background interference and the backlash. "Broadcast it; shake the walls of the place if you want. Do you think I give a hoot?" Thank God for his mentor's impaired hearing. Thinking he should pat the old man on the back for sizing up an emergency, stiffening, all business now, he forged ahead. "Has P.T. looked at the disabled monster?" His broad assumption pretty much covered it.

"Sure . . . sure he has," came in sincere apology. "But he's got no feel for

electronics. He said I was to get ahold of you. He won't touch the blasted thing," glossed over P.T.'s scant knowledge of thermodynamics. You'd think the twin would have absorbed the field of plastics by way of osmosis, if nothing else drove it home. Why wasn't he considered a mechanical wizard, one might ask? Cause his tinkering with a disabled press had resulted in a major breakdown and everyone remembered.

At the time he'd specifically asked for Allison's appraisal of the situation. Something as minute as dust particles could overheat an operating press. Pete wasn't a repairman. Fear of anything electrical caused him to avoid involvement with machinery. Besides, so much rode on their aging equipment's functioning properly that whenever the twin moved in on a neurotic press goose bumps rose. Profits went zing when materials had to be scrapped, or a cracked mold ditched due to a hydraulic defect. Long shutdowns raised their overhead, reducing the output of salable goods. There were only so many machines they could put into use; the loss of even one could radically affect a production line's schedule. Prevalent among plastics firms was the concept that-aside from normal wear and tear- bad management figured largely in liquidation cases. Thus his mother relied on his ken of the trade to keep her ship afloat. He realized what he was to her . . . marketing man, petroleum procurer, efficiency expert, an adjuster of temperature gauges, the locator of lost shipments. When a press needed disassembling, retooled and supplied with molds according to the outside company's specs, then he fit in.

Ankle-deep in resins, he'd earned his stripes toiling in the plant, feeling the blisters of his labors, oil reeking from his clothing, embedded in his skin. His was a profession of multiple facets. P.T. on the other hand, had only the distribution of

company funds to take up his time. But Pete wasn't a slacker. He kept unerring books, maintained ample stock, scheduled raw material runs, stretching a dollar whenever he could to keep them solvent. It was only that Mae would never expose her lazy-eyed son to anything more vital than the writing off of their aged machinery as a tax loss. Paulo, you're the scapegoat she relies on for band-aids. Live with it. If he were being truly honest, he headed the clean up crew.

The thermosetting presses stood end to end along the lengthy factory aisles like ancient, huffing locomotives in wait of an engineer's oilcan. They were well-used, they provided the family's livelihood. Mother Mae, who, by no mere show of her petticoat, ran the business- and quite efficiently at that- could have issued the order to bring in the outside consultant they retained for major foul ups. Yet she preferred to hear the aspects of the mechanical breakdown from her son's perspective. What perturbed him was her need to have him ever at her shoulder. Delightful gal, the lady boss who treated him like some old shoe she kept around for mucky, minor crises such as slogging through management quagmires. At the moment one downed press wasn't worth sparing his twin's feelings. Not when his own problems needed his attention.

"Phone Cal Miller," Paul blandly advised the aggravated colorist. "He's being paid to handle snafus." Now that he'd authorized it, Allison agreed to buzz Miller. Nevertheless, he wanted him on the job

"Put Sam on the line. It's my dime."

"Barnes is in the shop, stowing his gear after a photo shoot. Do you want me to ask him if he can tear himself away?"

"Yes! YES!" Paul yelled. Dang, how could he have forgotten that Sam was

shooting a spread this morning? The idea of the company photographer not consulting with him first was not a jolly one. He could see easy-motion Sam shift his tripod from a tall to squatty angle, bury his sandy head in the viewfinder of his Hasselblad, and line up the lens to photograph their latest dinnerware display. Unexciting work, Sam had conceded, but what the hell, it paid the rent. Critical of the ancient plant's industrial lighting, the charming fellow harped incessantly on the inefficient output of electricity in the workplace. His plea for brighter candlepower was constant and abrasive. He'd use Allison's intrusion to chasten the shadows themselves for flowing liquid grey onto his subject matter, and then state somewhat rudely that the interruption had created a glare and spoiled the whole lot. Since Barnes was an ace photographer, such boners didn't occur too often.

Paul focused in on Sam's strolling unhurriedly through the shop aisles, his sights on the cubicle he dubbed a photo lab. He whistled his way through life, yet he was always punctual when meeting deadlines.

"Ho . . . Barnes here," the youthful drawl cut into Paul's vivid depiction.

"How's your morning going?" He was about to tell Sam he was sorry for disturbing him when, without as much as a break in rhythm, his buddy's familiar voice sang through the shrewish whine of the working presses, "Lowe, where in the name of progress are you?"

"Circumstances suddenly shortened my run." The candid apology sounded phony even to him. He didn't flinch when the photo-bug scoffed in his ear, "What else is new? You're always poky. The clock here says- "

"I know what time it is, Samuel. Like I said, I'm in a bind." *Man, it's just like him to*

*think I'm up to my neck in a political snag.*

“Yeah It so happens I needed you here, Lowell;” Sam chafed; “-and now I’m getting this pathetic excuse for your hot-padding it on the Ressie run. I waited over an hour for you to show up. So I made the shoot. It’s on film without your input. I didn’t have much faith in your coming in to work this morning anyway,” was said with an air of sharpness that would have shattered a lesser man’s ego. Sam didn’t let one down too gently. He punched and jabbed, if only to nettle his opponent into acting on his behalf.

Paul reacted calmly to the bald criticism leveled at him. “That’s a fair assessment of my frustrating ability to renege. You’ve just proven I’m not a vital part of public relations. Now-“ he said impatiently; “-if you’re finished jawing, would you glue your tin ear to the phone and hear me out!”

Baffled, Sam waited for the message that he was certain would upend his sense of company obligation. Subsequently Paul’s outcry, “Sam, are you there?” harshly assaulted him. The response was a simple, “Yeah, I am,” followed by an annoying silence. Paul growled, “Then say so. Say something, for lord’s sake!”

“I’m just waiting for your instructions.” Patience supreme.

“Oh.” A short pause prefaced a solemn, “Well . . . okay then. Check my memos. See if I’ve a luncheon date, and what time.”

“Where are you now?” Sam asked. “You didn’t say.”

“Downtown . . . the City Club.” Having dragged him-self up the stairs and into the club’s locker room he’d removed his wet clothes. Naked save for the white terry towel concealing his loins-a decent excuse for his not coming in to work, he’d managed to rile Sam with a simple misconception.

“Hold on. I’ll see what’s on tap,” Sam said obligingly.

The phone’s receiver being laid down hard thudded in Paul’s ear. He mentally calculated the photographer’s stiff-legged march from the photo shop to his prefab, executive corner. Since no steno was on call- actually the company payroll didn’t allow for one- he’d leaf through the disorderly pile of dog-eared invoices stacked atop his cluttered desk, not finding what he was looking for. Next the desk drawer would come open, revealing a leather-bound notebook and a scribbled county official’s name. Sam dubbed him a lackey who fiddled away too many mornings conferring with civil servants engaged in confab of no more importance than extending the city’s eastern limits. Oftentimes afternoons leaned toward more of the same. Needless to say, Sam didn’t sanction local politics infringing on company business.

“You’ve a meeting with Riche Towne . . . one o’ sharp,” came flatly in his ear. “Isn’t he a county commissioner? I met him once at some shindig. He here on city business?”

“Not in the usual sense. And I’d just as soon not show, but it takes precedence over anything *we’d* planned.” A snicker expressed Paul’s reluctance to carrying out his work-alcoholic mother’s wishes.

“When can you look over today’s pics?” was more important to Sam at the moment.

“Man, your work is superior. Anyone who makes the national mags is too smart for plastic tea sets anyway,” Paul gave high praise for his friend’s finesse with the camera.

“I still want your opinion,” Sam succinctly reminded him of just who he was.

“We’ll do it soon. Right now I need dry clothes. Go out to the house and pick up boxers and tee, sox, dress shirt and dark trousers . . . sport jacket . . . tie. The works. It’s cold enough outside for a heavy coat. And throw in a pair of loafers.” *Dining in sneakers with stuffy constituents would only bring stares.*

Sam didn’t consider Lowe’s request that unusual. He knew his wants almost as well as he did his own. His services were often required. Whom could Lowe rely on in political emergencies anyway but his best buddy?

“Thanks. I’ll be in the exercise room.”

The connection became a none-busy hum. Stripped down to a golden tan, girded by a rough, thin, well-laundered towel, lean, long, hard thighs bare for any club member to observe, Paul sauntered in the direction of the bath. He was anxious to be rid of the fishy smell he’d recently acquired. And if he were idling in the sauna when Sam arrived, he’d wait, if only to satisfy his curiosity.

Lulled into complacency by the steam heat and a soothing shower, Paul became submissive to a vigorous rubdown by Michael, the in-house masseur. The pro’s dexterously kneading his taut muscles into putty eased his troubles. He was on the verge of nodding off when Sam bolted in with his gathered up clothes in tow. His sluggish ah and uh-huh for the apparel now at his disposal expressed his gratitude.

“I ran into P.T. on my way out of the plant,” came through Sam’s hard exhalation. Shifting his lean hams to accommodate the hard bench he’d plopped down on, hunching forward, he explained, “He bad mouthed your run-in with McLeod. Said heaven wouldn’t disintegrate if you dropped dead. Or something to that effect. You knew where you could take your name switch. I think he was a tad off his feed.” The

coy smile playing on his fair, smooth face conveyed his awareness of the twins' sibling rivalry.

Paul flushed on hearing Sam's quaint depiction of his irksome twin's spleen. He could picture P.T. dramatizing the episode, nose out of joint. When the twin was hot under the collar, everybody knew it.

Eager for an accounting, Sam prodded, "Why so secretive? Is there a chance I'll be let in? Could you at least explain Pete's frothing at the mouth?" *What wild rendezvous will he divulge this time?*

Paul grunted. *So McLeod checked his facts. I'll give the man that much.* "My swapping names will afford P.T. something concrete to tackle," he explained. Considering the merits of the ruse, his grin resembled that of a sleek, contented tomcat.

Sam swiped unruly ash blond hair across his forehead, away from his sky blue eyes. He frowned at the politician's apparent smugness. "Whatever you're thinking, Lowe, I can see it has you god-awful pleased. Come clean now. I think this friendly guy who wrote you up big and made you the company hero is entitled to a vested interest in your wild junkets, don't you?"

"You want my medals, too, Bud?" Paul dared the photojournalist to complain. There was no response forthcoming. Sam's face had fallen. His somber eyes had darkening perceptively at the slam. His negativism toward war in general provoked a sensitive half smile from his colleague.

Unappeased by Lowe's blatant sarcasm, Sam resignedly sighed. He knew he couldn't compete with Lowe's strong sense of obligation. Dismayed, he ceased to think outside the box. With his friend's staying faithfully to a fitness regime, the overall view

he was taking in was superbly masculine. The lithe, fair-haired Scot's softly chiseled features and steel blue eyes drew the onlookers' notice. His standards in both business and the principles of politics were equally divided. P.T.'s countenance was a bit softer; he hadn't been tempered by time spent at war. Paul's vitality wasn't lost on a world that emulates heroes. He had a following he'd sooner have flicked off, but it came with the territory.

The masseur's roughly stroking his way up Paul's lean spine sparked a jerk that drew Paul's wide shoulder blades violently together. The inflicted pain induced a pleasurable growl.

Intrigued, Sam raised a questioning eyebrow. "What's so spellbinding about this morning that you can't tell me?"

Sleepy eyes lowered in boredom, Paul yawned. "Truthfully, Sam-" was followed by a wearisome sigh; "-today's glitch is rather dull for the telling. The specifics would only bore you."

"Try me." He wouldn't let him off that easy.

Paul hadn't refused to explain the situation he'd recently been thrust into. He was simply looking for the means to understate it. His clipped tale: "I fished a girl from the city pond a while ago and made P.T. the town hero," was prosaic. With his sluggish recapping of the incident, it did seem almost not worth mentioning.

Gaping, Sam blurted out a volley of questions. "W-what girl? Which pond? Today? This morning? Wow!"

Taking pleasure in harassing him, Paul teased, "Ah, such burning questions, Samuel. There's only one body of water in the whole of Rochelle big enough to properly

drown in outside of our muddy river. I was in the right place at the right time is all, which, I might add, was a bit of luck. I can't say as much for swimming as a winter sport. I near froze my buns". He clenched his teeth, mindful of the recent tingling of his flesh, the squash of sludge, his grappling with algae.

Considering the inclement weather and his buddy's valor, Sam's face registered uncommon awe. "That's why P.T. snapped me off. You gave him the credit for the rescue. What kind of fool do you think he is?"

"Oh, oh -he's no fool . . . not that one." Paul snickered. "He'll deal with it. He's a master at paying off scores. He'll have the last word. Seeing him resolve the problem is well worth the deception." His twin's repaying him at the earliest opportunity was a given. "There was nothing to do but implicate him," he spoke of the need for duplicity. "He should thank me for putting something cool into his ho-hum life." He'd make the shy boy stand up and be counted one of these days.

"Mae won't sing your praises for needling her prized boy," Sam chided. "Most likely she'll drop the ax. She's been sneaking about the lab, asking after you as if I'm being paid to watch over her special board member. If I've been appointed your personal bodyguard, which seems to be the case, I don't see any profit in it." His voice was suffused with regret for the monetary loss.

Paul said earnestly that he could not hope to please his mother. There was no use his trying. He doubted she could be won over, since he was a threat to her possession.

"And you're her possession," Sam iterated, puzzled by the vain presumption. "Well, you'd better tell her that I'm in your hometown at your behest. I didn't plan on

writing up the dirty war any longer and you were my ticket out. It's you who's cluttered up your life with pipe dreams. I've no interest in this city's need to incorporate your brilliant mind."

Paul's face reddened at the unabashed acclaim. He rather liked the flattery, but he wasn't impressed. There was nothing he hated more than to be tagged self-important. "How upset was Mae when I didn't make it in this morning?" he sounded Sam out as to his mother's spleen.

"She wasn't happy. I didn't advise her of your whereabouts. She can only accuse me of being loyal to you. I think she despises me."

"She thinks Vietime vets who became well acquainted are of questionable character. And she's probably right. Nam connected up a few oddballs. But, of all those I brushed elbows with, it's your friendship I treasure. Otherwise I'd never have asked you to come here. My job offer wasn't born of some warped desire to feed my ego. Moreover, I can't let you get away, now can I, with what you know about me?" The half smile grew more genial.

"Lowe, the lady hates me," Sam elaborated. "She thinks you dredged up some weird creature from the Orient to illustrate her wares . . . a cartoon character from Terry and the Pirates . . . the funnies, no less. That's about how she sees me. I don't suppose she will ever get around to knowing the real me."

"Oh, she reads you perfectly. And that's why she can't come to the table. If I were her, I wouldn't, considering- "

Sam sloughed off the bald criticism, hoping Lowe wouldn't expand on its validity. Refraining from bringing up a ticklish problem, he concerned himself with Michael's

continuing to attend to Paul's needs. The scene evolving before him pertained to 168 lbs. of bone and sinew gracing the massage table. Being physically fit preserved an image of youth Paul's elder statesmen envied. His strong bearing conveyed confidence. There wasn't a selfish bone in his superbly conditioned body, save a slight bent toward conceit. He was a hard man to know- righteous, exacting and fair. It seemed natural for him to be self-absorbed. How could so much verve be conferred on one damn good politician? He sighed for the reality. Lowell being so well endowed was a grievous sin. He himself boasted a slimmer variety of animal with no wish to undergo physical torture to preserve his youth. He didn't strive for perfection. He was a couch potato.

Paul sat up suddenly, his skin gleaming from the rubdown. "I should make apologies for my mother," he said as an afterthought. "Unfortunately what I did overseas includes you. If she really knew the sum of your good graces, Sam, she'd cut out your liver."

The photographer grimaced and swallowed his bile. "How was I supposed to know you couldn't handle the hooch?"

"The sauce besotted me enough to- ah, Judas!" Shame-faced, Paul hammered his tightened fist down onto the hard, leather table. Despite Michael's telling him to stretch out flat, he remained upright, long legs dangling, solid thighs noticeably scarred. His thin, long fingered, work-scored hands, knuckles white from stress, clasped the padded table with an intensity that belied his calm. His eyes were somber. He'd always prided himself in not seeking women for purposes of self-gratification. Despite his well-meant intentions he'd disgraced his family. The Vietnamese hadn't extended any praise

for his stealing Nhien Renart's virtue. They despised free love, stigmatized women presumed guilty of it, and ostracized those who bore a foreign soldier's bastard. They were branded common prostitutes. His having put his beloved in such a mean position made his skin crawl. Facing his misdeed honestly was hard, especially when their courtship was so short-lived.

Sam did not hold up what Paul had managed to accomplish as noble. Still, he waited until Michael had scooped up his equipment and departed before stating in low voice, "Convincing the Nam schoolteacher that you were scared-as-hell of the war was a lousy way to find peace of mind. It was a sorry excuse for your boozing it up." He gave no quarter for Paul's foolhardiness. He expected his condemnation to chafe.

Not disagreeing with him, Paul commented softly, regrettably, "You didn't question whether or not your donated whisky would slow down my war. Liquor makes milksops; it weakens the flesh. I don't doubt some of the other GIs who made the Vietnamese lovelies were high on liquor as well. They knew what the rules were, the same as I did. The fact remains, they could lay their daughters as long as they didn't get them pregnant. I broke the rule." *Gis were in the brig for lesser offenses.*

The culprit's shoddy reasoning put the cameraman on the defensive. "You should have thought of that before-" he scoffed. "Well, I didn't condone your being a jerk. And I surely didn't think you'd play chug-a-lug with the bottle I gave you."

Paul nodded in acceptance of the put down, "You couldn't have known what would happen. Although it doesn't change anything. Come on! Have a heart, Sam. My applying to the Viet government for a marriage permit long before I tripped up should have counted for something. If Nhien had lived, I'd have brought her home as my wife.

Hell, get off your high horse. You should consider yourself lucky not to have been caught in a similar situation. Besides, you didn't have to put your hide in the line of fire."

"Don't give me that bunk, Lowe!" Sam hissed in exasperation. "I hit the dirt, too. A correspondent doesn't necessarily park him-self behind a desk and sit out the battle. I wasn't the one who fell from grace, or one who should consider him-self fortunate to be alive."

Paul meekly accepted the dressing down. The tolerance extended him was more than he deserved.

Sam went on dully, "Seeing Nhien with child, you crossed my mind. I know that the young Romeo who'd left his Juliet to weep very nearly didn't make it back, and I don't think you meant to create a bigger war than the one you were fighting. All the same, you used poor judgment." He realized he was taking liberties in chancing his best friend's anger.

Paul readily owned up to taking advantage of his love. Since the act of conscience hadn't been mutual; he was paying for it. He'd never be free of responsibility for his bumbling. Perhaps it would have been better had he not made it out of Nam.

"I applaud you for having the backbone to bring the kid home," said Sam. "It's no different from army command, is it- your little family relegated to the boonies by the auspices of your mother-just like your transfer to the highlands. You were one tough cookie. You never cowered to the brass. So why are you accepting Mae's abuse now?"

Paul smiled indulgently. His widowed mother came first with him. He owed her for taking him back into the business. After all, she could have washed her hands of

him. Even prodigal sons had obligations. “No matter her faults, she is my mother,” he casually acknowledged.

“She doesn’t respect you and she damn well should!” Sam railed, despairing of his friend’s lowly status in the family household. “I’ve heard her say that, while you’re a whiz at world affairs, Pete’s much more useful to her.”

“The company isn’t mine- and as for my being a world-beater- She’s simply saying that my begetting an Amerasian child was crass. I guess she has a legitimate beef there. I’m important enough to keep on the payroll though, in spite of the rotten hobby she says I acquired while on my own.”

Sam exploded with indignation, “One lousy mistake shouldn’t ruin your whole damned life!”

“Politically speaking, I should be glad none of this has cropped up. It would raise a lot of moralistic eyebrows, right? I’m presumed to be above all that. I can’t afford to lose the exemplary profile I’ve worked so hard to build.”

“Especially when you have no legal claim to the kid.”

“If there was a way for me to prove she’s mine, she’d be answering to me, not to her maternal grandmother. Mae put the blame on the mama-san. Mores the pity, that old fox didn’t have eyes in the back of her head. It wasn’t only the hill country trek I feared that night. Pop’s dying and my not being called home freaked me out. I got myself blotto. Mae could have given me leave to make peace with Pop. She didn’t. With my running to the service the way I did, she’d written me off.” Since ‘Nam, her char-boy son had grown used to placating her. He thought of her inconsiderateness as no more irritating than a pesky fly.

Sam's face registered his amazement. "She doesn't know you couldn't face a soldier's lot without your father's absolution? That her ignoring your feelings-using clout to curtail you're marrying- encouraged your going on a binge?" *What's made him hold his tongue all this time?*

"I couldn't give her my worries, Sam," Paul answered honestly. "Losing a husband is far worse than putting up with an ambivalent son. The only thing she's aware of is that your bottle made me courageous. And so enters the truth of Poppy Li."

"You preferred the company of old Jim Beam to the exclusion of us poor slobs. That I do know. To me you were just another LT passing on a sad war story- one of those blood and guts tales that filled my daily columns. I thought an exclusive rated a bottle. I commiserated when I should have booted you on along with all the other scared kids I interviewed."

"If it got me free whisky, I was more than willing to give an account of the day's battle. I thought I had the right to slop all the booze I wanted. Unfortunately it only brought me a bigger headache."

"Guys lost parents. They didn't turn to drink or women for consolation. Did Nhien okay your sharing her bed?" he presumed to include the late Vietnamese teacher in his friend's backsliding.

"She loved me, and then she chilled- not that I could blame her." Paul stated, shuddering at the thought of being rejected for his brashness. "Gor, it made for a nasty scene."

Sam nodded his head in understanding. "She belted you one, eh?" he envisioned the teacher's outrage at being violated. "The next time you go to a woman for

sympathy, don't get so pushy. Being rash costs a bundle, fella."

*The next time? Ooh, there will never be a next time.* Humorlessly Paul emphasized the Vietnamese' tonal singsong adage, "Lesson learned at too high a price to repeat. Prudence more practical than hindsight." He sighed, his misty eyes glistening with reflections on what might have been. "You see, my friend- this hero . . . this Lowellsan . . . he much happy with namesake today. Have good job. Fine friend in cameraman-san. Serenity prevails today at house of Lowell."

Sam debunked the validity of his moral attrition. "You may think what you're saying is true, Lowe," he railed; "-but your old buddy Mouliani would say you're a sap to be so content. He's put in a claim for your Poppy Li. He claims he's her father. He's phoned three times this week complaining that he never finds you in so that he can argue the point. The guy won't let go."

Sam's news provoked Paul's withering frown. The whole blooming day, from its onset, had been freaky. And now his old army pal, LT Eliot Mouliani, recipient of the Medal of Honor- aptly dubbed "the mule" by their army team- was bent on entangling him in a web of deceit.

## III

Lowell lightly tramped down the flights of stairs, self-awareness in his gait. With time to kill, he strolled leisurely into the Club's Castilian Lounge, a refuge furnished in highly polished, walnut wood and brass. Lucrative business transactions came to fruition here more frequently than on the golf course. In his opinion espresso and light wines replaced liquor with a high alcoholic content, making expedient business decisions less complex. Members seldom occupied the salon at midday. Most were downstairs drinking their lunch.

Dropping his sports jacket onto a low accent table, resolved to shaking off his dismal mood, Paul wriggled his long, lean spine deep into an inviting leather recliner and sighed regrettably. The morning's run hadn't lent him the peace of mind he'd hoped for. Tragedy had hit on more than one front. Not only the downside of unexpectedly coming upon a fatal accident, but that its gruesome image lingered. As well as did the disquieting, valiant deeds of those dead warriors he remembered from war. He needed the quiet time, without the static awaiting him once he'd stepped out into the city streets.

The gilt framed waterscapes of naval battles whose muted colors were blurred in his wind-scorched eyes offered no respite from his malaise. Bone weary, hands folded in his lap, he let the comforts of idling take over. Mentally fatigued, his thoughts went to a mountain chain in Nam's highlands to where his mother's letter to the co had led him. It halted a marriage she considered beneath him. He'd found the indigenous Montagnards he fought alongside a basically peace loving people. He'd perceived a morbid sense of irony in their character. Their simple habitat

threatened, they'd employed the use of wickedly effective weapons simply to survive. They felled V C marauders with handcrafted pongee stakes and poison tipped arrows. Billeted among them, schooled in their mores, as ferocious as they, their war became his. He'd left behind in a southern hamlet a young, beautiful Indo-Asian teacher he'd hoped to wed. Fate, however, had dealt him another bad hand. It did not make that dreamt for joy possible. However blunt, it determined his future. Wounded in the fray, patched up and trucked back to the Aggraville where he'd been originally assigned, his stint in the highlands over, he'd encountered a massacre. He'd never be free of the gory scene . . . the dead bodies . . . Nhien's among them . . . like so many others who'd tried to make a difference. Bruised flowers and abandoned rifles solemnly spoke of the horrific wraith he'd encountered. Clinging to her dead body, he wept for his loss.

Laying claim to the illegitimate child he was told was his salved his grief to some extent. Mouliani, Nhien's guardian at his behest, swore he'd sired the child. And the "mule" might have been granted custody except that he'd lost an arm in an attempt to save Nhien from the Cong's blade. He'd almost wished Poppy had been Eliot's, for all the trouble it cost him. He came home with no means of supporting a child. Nhien's mare, insisting upon traveling with them to the states, only added to his burdens. His mother and her entourage despised his overseas dalliance. She had no use for either his nu or her mare and whenever possible excluded them from family gatherings. His working once more at the family's plastics factory was like taking crumbs from Mae's table. For his dependents' sakes he put up with his family's contempt. But Mouliani was another matter. He did not conveniently vanish from his life. He wanted custody of Poppy Li. There was no talking him out of it. He was in the process of telling his

nemesis where he could go when a loud voice jarred him from his reverie.

“Councilman? Yo . . . is this where Chicken Little spends his time?”

Startled by the harsh address, Paul muttered a disgruntled, “Huh?” His springing up bought the recliner into an upright position. His gaze fell on a familiar, stout, paunchy figure in shopworn tweed jacket and tacky cords. Annoyed being rudely wakened and hovered over, Paul winced. Confronting an overly inquisitive McLeod twice in one day was an affront. The glare from the florescent lights reflecting off the columnist’s wire-rimmed eyeglasses gave no indication whatsoever as to the message lurking behind them. But the assumption that *he’d* been goofing off was patently clear.

Paul looked about to see if they were alone. Highly provoked being disrupted from thoughts from the past, he rose to his feet to say, “This is a private clubroom, McLeod. You don’t belong in here.” Getting a better fix on things, Paul grabbed at the notion that the man had to have parted with a few bucks to gain entry to the club’s inner halls. Pressed for time, he proceeded to smooth his shirttail down into the waistband of his neat, close-fitting, knife pleated slacks, questioning McLeod’s presence the while. “I don’t have time for this,” he barked, highly agitated. “Say what you have to say, then get out!” What he didn’t need was to be deterred from keeping his scheduled appointment.

Ignoring Lowell’s brusque dismissal, McLeod coolly explained that he was just passing through. “Nice place,” he lightly commented of the finely appointed salon, looking around him, but not actually seeing much of the plush furnishings. Dallying, a purpose in mind, he gloated while Paul took on a slow burn. Clearly the councilman disapproved his casing an area where he had no business being, a reporter’s privilege. To relieve the tension, he rejoined, a raised hand conveying peace, “Oh- the reason I’m

here? I have something for you.” Drawing an unstamped postal card from his jacket pocket, he explained, “This is all the thanks you’ll be getting for avoiding this morning’s public acclaim. It doesn’t seem worth your protecting the good name of someone you barely know, but- ” Questioning the oddity, McLeod tapped his forefinger to the postal card on which a brief thank-you note to Peter Lowell was scrawled. Begrudgingly accepting the card, Paul’s eyes scanned the neat handwriting. The signature beneath the message meant nothing to him so he felt obliged to inquire.

Eager to enlighten him, McLeod sang out, “It’s from Frederick Galleon, the chap Josene Carrol- the gal you championed- called in to take care of things. He’s running interference. I mean- his sympathies, like yours, are mostly one-sided. It’s possible he’s seen more in the drowning episode than you thought anyone would. Mind you, he’s a God figure . . . a roman collar who abides by the precepts of confidentiality- a man after your own heart, I expect. If there were any irregularities in the accident, he’s not spreading it around. This personal reference to Peter is the first of the thanks to come for your doing this city proud. However misleading in content, I commended him in my column just the way you wanted. You could end up being a mite envious, since *you’d* earned the praise. Not to mention that you’ve paid your dues in the liar’s club. By the bye, I took the liberty of ordering you up a gin and tonic. They said downstairs that’s what you drink. A crow dinner is in order for your buck passing.” A smug grin exhibited his arrogance.

Paul grimaced at the light-minded gesture. “I’m to eat crow for not seeing things your way?” he snarled, irate. “McLeod, I follow my own agenda. I’m not a ‘yes’ man and you can take that to the bank.” A vexing frown furrowed his high forehead.

Dark, wiry brows uplifted in an expression of doubt, the curious reporter quipped, “I have been keeping tabs for some time now on what you’re doing politically. You worry me, Lowell. It’s not so much what you say as how you say it.” In light of the last election’s vocal skirmishes, he’d found Lowell slow in fulfilling his campaign promises. Surprisingly the public bought into it without reservation.

”Yeah, I hoodwink.” Shrugging, Paul owned up to the one minor flaw in his fabric. “So what? Is coloring the obvious a crime? Lowly councilmen don’t overstep themselves too often- nor do they get tripped up on their own rhetoric. Retracting statements may be common to your trade; in mine it’s mostly unheard of.” He’d vouch for his ironclad policies. No one could equate his clean-cut approach to public service with irresponsibility. Irked, he forced a half smile onto his wind-burned face for McLeod’s insinuating that his aims were mostly visionary.

McLeod had faint praise to give for the young politician’s obvious charisma. “You new ones on the block-” came with a quizzical shake of his dark head; “-you’re a bunch of movers and shakers with a bureaucratic view of a utopian society. To get what you want, you razzle-dazzle the public with your bleeding-heart rhetoric. As for those star-bright wishes you entertain for the benefit of your constituency? I wager you’ve reneged on two-thirds of ‘em.” Sighing, he settled down in a companioning easy chair, encamped for the duration, it seemed. His well-kempt nails scraping against the rim of a metal ashtray stand grated on Paul’s already raw nerves. Hearing McLeod subtly relay that his morning’s dodge and jab was a common misconception riled him even more. The provoking question, “Is indulging in shadow-boxing a fun sport with you, Lowell?” was the very last straw.

“You bought it. It killed the story.” Enough said.

In McLeod’s book it hadn’t even begun to answer an apparent cover up. Thus he rambled on, “You would be sitting pretty right now if you hadn’t palmed your good deed off on a twin. It only took one phone call to confirm-”

Coughing effectually at the unsurprising revelation, Paul took it for granted that McLeod wasn’t aware they were somewhat different, not only in appearance, but outlook. The ruse hadn’t been all that unproductive. His grunting derisively showed his tedium with the wearing conversation. In truth, the dull ache spanning his temples lingered like a dying albatross. “Pete and I are always at odds,” he truthfully conveyed. “He can take the flack for this one. Anyway, the bluff squashed your raunchy publicity. And that’s all I was after. How did Pete handle it? Not to well, eh?” At McLeod’s nod he added, “Being caught in the middle wouldn’t be to his liking. He’s easily motivated; he’ll handle whatever gets thrown at him.”

McLeod frowned on hearing Lowell state the matter of kinship so indifferently. He was of the opinion that most twins thought alike . . . had similar tastes and certainly maintained a close bond. A set of twins not conforming to the norm? *Come on.* “Do you and your twin exchange places often? Your doing or his?” he asked, intrigued.

“It’s not in our nature to interact,” Paul guilefully muttered, shrugging his broad shoulders at the misuse of his brother’s good name. To curb McLeod’s zest for the truth, he said, “Pete’s no lightweight. I’ll bet he was hot.” His steady blue eyes, gleaming blithely, compelled McLeod to rethink his argument.

“Eh? Er . . . he was astounded, actually,” McLeod informed him. “I’m not sure your scamming me was a smart idea either, but you did have it your way. I really can’t

see how you'd have anything to do with the accident per se." He'd backed down more graciously than Paul thought he would. "I'd probably connive, too, to avoid taking the blame," slid its way in afterward. "It so happens, you are in trouble up to your eyeballs. Since I wanted to know more about the accident, I approached the lady you saved." Paul's so-what shrug dictated his disinterest. Inclined to be serious, McLeod ran on, "My not passing on a follow up brought more information to light. It's surprising what one can learn after the fact. The interview bore out what I suspected." Glance averted, he shut his mouth.

Time lagged consciously while Paul studied the thick nap on the plush carpet his heels were crushing. Somewhere a clock was ticking, reminding him that the hour was growing late. Resentment heightening, he pressed, "Precisely what did she say occurred? Just a quick recap. I don't have time for much else." McLeod's delaying tactics were niggling at his inner calm.

The reporter's eyes widened at the young man's obvious discomfort. "The little gal was more than upset with her fearless rescuer. That's the way I got it," he uttered, wondering the while if Lowell had been truthful about the data concerning his heroics.

"Put out with me, was she?" Paul commented briefly. *She didn't appreciate being belted? Imagine that.*

Hoisting his frame upright, waddling closer, McLeod boldly came within close range of his prey. "She said you let her companion drown. Were you hoping to cover it up by diverting my attention from the real scoop?" he badgered.

*Get lost, you mud slinger!* Irked with McLeod's accusing finger jammed in his face, Paul pulled back. Damn, he'd been totaled by the very lady he'd run interference

for. “And y-you believed her?” he blurted, flustered. “Her version of what happened this morning is a fabrication. I told you the guy was dead. That’s how I found him. Dead!”

A moot point; hard to prove.

“With your whitewash, I’m not too sure she wasn’t being forthright.” McLeod’s narrowed eyes shone with distrust.

Jaw jutted out defiantly, Paul growled, “How can you be sure you got the truth from her?”

Amused by Lowell’s dismal stab at rebuttal, grinning, McLeod said airily, “She was absolutely charming. I had no trouble buying her story. I believe your fans would be inclined to take her seriously.” He bobbed his head in a most positive manner.

Concluding that the newsman had deliberately put a biased slant on inconclusive information, Paul’s speculative smile slowly widened. He surmised McLeod was flexing his muscles . . . especially his cottony mouth. Thus he said frankly, “Knowing you, you’ll make a federal case out of it.” He suspected McLeod was more interested in getting him than in promoting fair play. “You make me out to be the bad guy in this and I’ll cry foul . . . and loud! You got that, McLeod?”

Threatened, the brazen reporter’s nose elongated in Paul’s comely face. “I have no regard for deceivers,” came in defense of his stand. “Sue me, hotshot, and I’ll scorch your image to where even crow will taste good. I’d be happy to argue the merits of your disregard for the truth- scotch your splendid ambitions with the poop, regardless of its veracity. The pleasure will be mine.”

*Ah, the powers of the press.* Disgruntled, Paul ground his knuckles into his open palm, a habit that he customarily exercised when highly annoyed. He had walked a thin

line; thinking of his being smeared by bad press.

McLeod got in Lowell's face to say, "Well, I won't keep you any longer, councilman. I've other places to be. Oh, that crow dinner I promised? I'm sorry. It will have to wait. Enjoy the gin and tonic I've ordered you. A pity I haven't the time to join you. You know how it is when one has a deadline to meet." And he said at his leave-taking that the mixed drink he'd ordered him was a consolation prize that he could chalk up to the generosity of the fourth estate.