

2 YEAR STRANGE COUNTRY

Banquet of Choices

Arielle Hunter



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

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- Prologue -
Chasing the Dragon
Berkeley, California 1968

PICTURE THE TIME.

Picture the place.

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

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

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

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

A violet sky standing in exile

Tapping the pencil on his forehead, he crosses out what he wrote, then starts over.

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

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

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

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

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

Chasing the Dragon, they call it.

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

Too late I ride the dragon

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

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

No response.

"Daddy! Wake up!"

Nothing.

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

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

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



I

ON A CRISP Sunday morning in the Sierra Nevada foothills, just before the full bloom of spring, Pauline Harper stood at her kitchen sink washing dishes. The ticking of a cuckoo clock punctuated the quiet. She took an iron skillet from the stove and the smell of bacon wafted through the room. Sliding the pan into the soapy water, she looked up at an aging family picture on the windowsill above the sink.

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

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

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

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

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

"Pauleen!"

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

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

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

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

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

Turning back to the sink, she looked up to see a shadow passing by the kitchen window. Moments later the doorbell rang. A wirehair terrier bounded into the kitchen, yelping and scratching on the door.

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

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

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

A young Western Union courier held out a light tan envelope.

"Telegram for Mr. Buck Harper."



2

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

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

"Thank God, good vodka," he said under his breath.

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

Resting his forehead on the window, his mind wandered. *Brusco. Brusco Caggiano. Of everything I hate, I hate him most of all. The Sicilian. The member of Parliament. The Deputy of Derriere Wiping. Whose mistress was so expensive.*

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

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

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

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

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

"But Papa, I am the 'Bounty Killer,'" Donatello protested. "Leo, he is a priest."

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

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

"Dona, are you lunatic? You know Caggiano. Thanks be to God it was not his wife." Demetri looked heavenward, kissed his thumb, then made the sign of the cross over his chest and forehead.

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

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

"Oh Papa . . ."

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

"Your hair already was white," Donatello said.

Demetri shook his head. "No! I tell you why. Because you won't be good."

"But Papa . . ."

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

"Papa?" Donatello called after him.

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

"Caggiano?" Donatello whispered.

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

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

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

"Papa!" Donatello screamed.

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

"Papa!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But . . ."

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

"When can I come back?"

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

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

"Hey, Donatello!" Mark blurted. "Sorry I didn't get back to you last night, man. I was out late, but, hey, great news. I just about

got the part sewn up," he continued, rapid-fire. "They want you, man, they're dead serious, and by the time they start shooting, you should have the bandage off your hand, so, no problem. There's only one thing . . ." Mark paused for a breath. "Since they're making a romantic comedy, they want -- I mean they need you to do a screen test. Whadda' ya' say?"

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

"They need you to do a screen test."

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

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

"Accent? What you mean, accent?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But Mark . . . "

"It doesn't matter how big you are -- or were -- in Europe, you're here now, and if you don't knock off all this prima-dona crap, you're

sure as hell gonna be a has-been. And as you know, you're only as good as your last movie."

"But . . ."

"Here's the deal. They want you, but they're tired of screwin' around, either you do the screen test or they give the part to somebody else. Now, are you gonna do it, or not?"

Donatello exhaled a long sigh. "I . . ."

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

Icy silence.

"You got that?"

More silence.

"Well?"

"Si'. Si'. I call."

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

A sharp click and the phone went dead.

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

A noise from behind startled him.

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

He glared at her. "Mark."

She looked incoherently at him.

"Mark. My agent."

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

"Yes . . . no . . . I don't know!" Donatello threw his hands into the air. "Get out my way. Why did I believe the fortuneteller? You bring me no luck." Pushing past her, he stomped into the bedroom and slammed the door behind him.

Late-morning glare streamed into the bedroom. Reaching up to grab the drapes, he banged his bandaged hand on the windowsill.

"Damn!" He held the splinted mitt to his chest and jerked on the curtain with his other hand. The heavy brocade screeched as it came off the track.

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

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

He took another breath.

The oracle said I was born under fortunate stars.

Another breath.

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

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



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

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

"So boring," she muttered, looking around the suite. *Nice. But like all other hotels.* "He goes to dinner. He goes to parties. He goes to lunch. Does he take me?" *Never. I am a prisoner. Like a piece of luggage, I never leave the room. Not even to the pool. And this day will be like all the rest.*

She tapped the ash off the cigarette, then took another long drag and stared out the window at the late-morning haze. Then at the

people sunbathing around the swimming pool several floors below. A young man, tall and tan with an arrogant swagger, walked across the courtyard. He stepped up onto a diving board at the end of the pool and placed his feet on the edge. With his arms overhead, he sprang into the air, then straightened and pierced the water like a dagger.

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

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

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

"What has happened to me?" So young. Old. Lost.

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

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



3

HOURS PASSED.

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

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

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

"Try again," Pauline demanded.

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

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

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

No response.

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

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

"Al-ma . . ."

"Fine."

Another click and the line went dead.

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

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

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

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

"Hello."

"Who is this!" Buck snapped.

No answer.

"What happened to Steven?"

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

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

Silence.

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

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

"Steven overdosed."

"What?" the Harpers gasped in unison.

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

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

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

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

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

"Could -- couldn't Steven tell you the number?" Buck said.

"No. He can't talk."

"Can't talk?" His voice cracked again.

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

"Where is he?" Buck said, stiffening his jaw.

"He was in Oakland, but they're transferring him to another hospital in the city."

"What hospital? What city?"

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

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

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



4

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

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

Where am I? What day? What time?

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

6:46

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

6:47

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

“Why does this happen to me?”

Familiar voices replied.

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

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

"*Quel che sara', sara',*" he said, staring at his reflection. "I am Donatello Dragghi and I will conquer this."



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

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

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

"As always," she said.

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

Slovika stared blankly at him.

"You want go or not?" he said, twisting the chain of his crucifix around his finger.

She managed a feeble nod. "There will be dancing?"

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

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

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

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

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



5

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

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

"But it's Sunday night. The car rentals are probably closed," Pauline moaned.

"Then we'll get a cab."

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

Pauline followed her, then Buck got on.

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

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

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

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

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

"What do you mean?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No," Buck said over the jangling noise. "Now if you'll excuse us . . ."

The man held out the basket. "Hare, Hare . . ."

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

"That was totally un-cool," the man muttered.

Buck grabbed Pauline's hand. "Come on," he said, stepping over the artifacts of bliss scattered on the walkway.

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

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

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

Heading toward the highway, bedraggled transients walked along the road and hitchhikers loitered at the freeway on-ramp. All the human detritus disappeared into the rearview mirror as the driver accelerated onto the freeway.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Buck stiffened. "Our son's at Immaculate Heart."

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

"Don't know yet."

The driver nodded, then turned back as light changed.

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

Pulling into the hospital's circular driveway, the driver stopped at a covered loading zone. In a flash, Pauline was out of the cab

and hurrying toward the entrance. Buck waited as the driver got their suitcase from the trunk and took it to the curb. He handed the cabbie a roll of bills. "Keep the change."

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



6

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

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

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

"Don't park on the street," Donatello snapped, getting out and throwing the keys at him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He put his arm around her. "Is okay. 'The Bounty Killer' will protect you." A warm gust blew his silk shirt open and her skirt fluttered in the breeze. His steps fell in time with hers and he slid into a comfortable boot-heel swagger.

Slovika looked up at him. "Where we are going?"

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

Just then, a man dragging a large wooden cross with a bicycle wheel on the bottom, came around a corner, followed by a small entourage. He stopped, blocking the sidewalk. As Donatello and Slovika approached he held out his hand. "It's never too late to come to Jesus, man," he said with an impassioned smile.

Frowning, Donatello held up his crucifix. "That, I already did since I am a bambino," he said, motioning with his splinted hand for the entourage to move out of the way.

"That's not what I mean. Jesus wants to have a personal relationship with --"

Trying to pass, Donatello bumped into the bicycle wheel, knocking the cross off the man's shoulder. It tumbled to the sidewalk with a dull thud. Pedestrians stopped. As if the Sunset Strip had been drawn into a vortex -- people, cars, music, all seemed suspended in time.

"Hey, man, don't worry about it," he said as one of his followers picked up the cross. "Jesus loves you, and I love you . . . just the way you are."

Donatello shrugged his shirt back in place and glared at the man. Then, with a toss of his head, he grabbed Slovika's arm. "Come!" he snapped, stomping down the block. "You see, it is as I say, imbecilli everywhere."

As they came to the corner, the traffic light turned red. Donatello looked back. The man with the cross stood, staring at him. "Why does he say he loves me? He knows nothing about me," he said under his breath.

Slovika looked up. "What?"

"Nothing," he muttered, shaking his head.

The light turned green; he took her arm and they hurried across the street.

On the next block, they came to a line of people spilling from the entrance of a restaurant built like a large A-frame cabin, with an add-on upstairs nightclub.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The young Maître d' looked up from a list of reservations and frowned. "No, I don't have a table for you. Are you blind?" he said with an accent fresh from New Jersey. "Can't you see the line? It's at least a forty-five minute wait."

"Vincente is here?"

"No."

Donatello whisked the bill off the desk. "Then, get Alphonse. Tell him Donatello Dragghi wants a table."

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

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

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

Slovika tugged on Donatello's sleeve. "Maybe we should go in the line."

He shrugged off her hand. "No. You know nothing of these things," he said, waving as if to erase the thought. "My friend, Alphonse, he seat the, uh, customer by how rich or how important. This is the politica his ristorante. No matter the crowd, he will seat us. You see."

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

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

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

"But what about the other people?" the young Maître d' objected, waving in the direction of the line. "Why are you kissing his --"

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

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

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

"Don't mind him. He's my sister's kid from Jersey. She sent him out here to keep him out of troube -- "

"The table," Donatello interrupted. "A good table, not by the door or kitchen."

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

