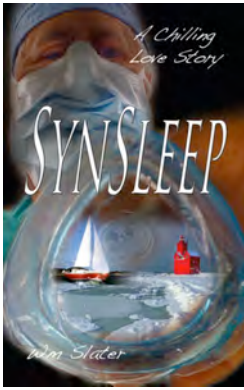




*A Chilling
Love Story*

SYNSLEEP

Wm Slater



The two couples are very close--do everything together. Well, almost everything, adultery is never considered. They love their spouses too much for that.

An obsessed man released from a California prison heads for Michigan. He thinks the cause of all his problems, and they have been myriad and incessant, is his wife's leaving him. That is the "what," and if he can find the "why," it follows that he will repair their relationship, and life will be as it was. But the "why" is beyond him, and he is stuck on the "what," and it is driving him crazy. Thoughts of her leaving have become all consuming, giving him "brain-whine" and there is nothing else. Then he learns about closure, and knows what he must do.

SynSleep:

A Chilling Love Story

by William Slater

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SynSleep

William Slater

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Chapter 1

Death of a Judge

The western side of Michigan is beautiful. It has the leeward shore, and that makes all the difference. With a fetch of over a hundred miles of water, the prevailing southwesterlies produce waves that grind glacier-tumbled cobbles into sand. Along the shore, the winds blow the sand into huge picturesque dunes. As the dunes are swept inland, they are covered by pine, birch, and beech.

About every twelve miles along the coast, clear flowing streams from the interior form lakes where they meet the obstructing dune line. Manateau Lake with the town of Manateau Lakes on its eastern shore, and Black Lake, a dozen miles to the north with its one hundred year old lighthouse at its channel entrance are typical. The natural channels formed where the water of these inland lakes find egress into Lake Michigan have been dredged and stabilized with rip rock and concrete to make harbors of refuge for the ships that sail the big lake. Since the late 1800s, the region has attracted vacationers from the densely populated Detroit area that has closer access to the flat and less interesting shores of Lake Huron.

In 1984, while vacationing in the Black Lake area, the Thorntons bought four acres of lakefront property. They had planned to build a home and move there when Judge Thorton retired from the bench. Four years before their dream could become reality, his wife, Alvira, died of breast cancer. Toward the end of her illness, she spoke of the home they had planned to build together and encouraged him to fulfill their dream when she was gone.

Soon after retiring, Judge Thornton sold their city property and moved to the newly built house on the lake, the home

Alvira had planned and never saw. In the summer, he listened to the wind in the pines, the cries of loons on the lake, and he fished. Winter came, and still he fished.

The old man loved his ice shanty. In the last years before his retirement, while sitting on the bench, drowsy from listening to case after case, he found his mind wandering to his boyhood in Minnesota and the days he spent spear fishing through the ice. He had loved to stand poised and alert, spear at the ready. Some atavistic urge was satisfied by the watching and waiting. One especially memorable time he speared a forty-two pound northern pike. His father was so proud that he put the pike in the back of their pickup truck and drove straight to the newspaper office where half of Main Street watched as the boy's picture was taken. Now, in the quiet coldness of his shanty, he could hear in his mind the sounds from so long ago, more distinctly than his housekeeper's morning call to breakfast of only hours past, as the barbed points sank in fish-flesh, and saw the shaft quiver, could still remember the silent admiration of other fisherman for the boy and his skill.

He had fished several days through the ice in his shanty on Black Lake before he ordered the spears from the mail order catalog. Oh, he liked to bait a hook and drop it in, watch the perch nose it, and occasionally take the hook and run. Sometimes he'd catch a pike or walleye. He always gave his catch to his housekeeper. He did not care much for the taste of fish himself, and was worried about reports of mercury accumulation in fish in some of the area's lakes, something his housekeeper just laughed off. Mainly, he just liked to smoke his pipe and drink beer, surrounded by the familiar trappings of his youth. The green, indoor-outdoor carpeting and the small wood stove were just like the ones in his father's shanty so long ago. The new fishing spears too, were in some ways

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just stage props to prompt his remembering. Spearing fish on Black Lake was illegal--this was not Minnesota. But after all, it wasn't fish he was after, but a completion of a circle, a return to experiences of his youth. Illegal or not, he had made a few embarrassingly futile attempts to spear fish, but his old muscles were too wasted and his vision too poor. However, the old hands on the spear's smooth wooden shaft helped him recall better times when his body was quick and strong, and his father was proud of him.

On a beautiful Saturday in late March 1998, the first day of that year that even hinted of spring, he entered the shanty at ten o'clock. Already the lake ice was crowded with people enjoying the weather, looking forward to what for many would be their last ice fishing of the season. "Too damn many people!" he grumbled. Once inside his shanty, he quickly locked the door against interlopers. He used a spear to break up the thin ice that had formed in the rectangle, and then scooped it out with an old coffee can. He sat down on the small wooden bench, and opened a Pauli Girl. He lit a pipe and stared at the light-filled water-world below him, relaxed and contented. Off and on he dozed.

Alarms in his head shoved him toward consciousness. The dark interior of the shanty with its sinecure of rectangular lake-light demanded his attention. Heart pounding, he strained to focus on the huge black shape that loomed toward him from the lake bottom. For a confused instant, he was sure it was the huge pike of long ago. A smile built on his wrinkled old face as he tried to straighten, but the shape broke the water's surface, and black neoprene covered hands grabbed his lapels. He felt himself being pulled down toward the icy water and heard muffled shouting.

"Remember me? You fucking shyster!"

But he didn't. Never did.

Chapter 2

Closest of Friends

It was 1974. A portable radio lashed to the sailboat's taffrail was playing Barbara Streisand's number one hit, "The Way We Were." Arcturus Mason turned his attention from the butterflyed main and genoa jib to his best friend's wife. Cindy Argosy was paying out the jib sheet, arms outstretched, shoulders forward, both hands grasping the Dacron line. Her position caused her bikini top to slacken forward, exposing to him alone perfect breasts, a nipple the color of desert sand. Perfect breasts on a perfect body. Without turning to look at him, she smiled in utter contentment, and he knew it was from his watching her.

Arc glanced back at Cindy's husband. "Rick, take the wheel. I'll go down and get a radio fix. We should be getting close to the channel."

Kaia's bow slapped a freakish wave sending a bit of cold Lake Michigan spray that drenched his wife, Maria, sitting on the stern seat. "The infamous rogue wave," she drawled. As he expected, she was affecting an expression of puerile irascibility: one of her many entertaining looks. Cute and sexy: Arc wanted to hold her in his arms. Rick laughed so hard Arc thought he could feel the vibration in the cockpit floor.

This is what he lived for, the four of them together, sailing. Both couples loved to sail. To Arc, sailing combined the physics of wind, water, and boat, all wrapped in unparalleled adventure. To "sell the sizzle and not the steak," a "cruising-racing" sailboat bought them Lake Michigan, a vast water wilderness where they could still go for a day without seeing another person. The Lake was clean, even drinkable where they lived. It had multiple personalities ranging from placid and serene to wild and unforgiving. Sometimes it gave

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warning: “Be careful with me today, I’m in a foul mood.” Sometimes it had surprises that even the weather service with its eyes in the sky could not predict.

Arc saw similarities between his practice of anesthesia and sailing. Safety mandated keeping his anesthesia machine in good working order, being knowledgeable, and prepared for all contingencies. Same with the sport, but the analogy would break down if he tried to compare an anesthetic machine with a sailboat. The sailboat was a living, beautiful thing that commanded love. He could feel it work, know when it was straining. It muttered and complained when beating too close to windward, or when wallowing in rough seas but sang to him when perfectly trimmed and slicing through those same seas. A sailboat, running before the wind, spinnaker rigged, swings her stern like a buxom woman sashaying proudly before a lover.

Like most of the yacht club members, Arc loved the organized races, but all sailors love to race if there is another sailboat, any sailboat going in the same direction. Given two equivalent boats, the one with the best trim will be the fastest. Its faster speed will speak to those who see and know that its skipper has the most knowledge, is most attuned to his boat, wind, and water. Competition is intense.

* * *

The race across Lake Michigan had started at seven, the previous evening. The start was perfect. They crossed the line seconds after the gun and drove *Class Action*, a boat owned by a malpractice lawyer, across the line early. A cold front moving in with its line of squalls complicated the race’s usual easy spinnaker run. Now that the race was over, the two couples were enjoying a leisurely sail homeward under clear

blue skies of high barometric pressure, and a warm late morning sun.

"To the perfect race," Maria said, raising her rum drink. The others raised their glasses.

"Perfect, except we came in fifth," Cindy said. She started laughing and spilled the cold drink down her front, a slice of lime catching in her bikini top. She took another swallow, and then trimmed the jib sheet causing the collapsing genoa to fill with a snap.

Rick Argosy held on to the wheel with one hand, leaned over and plucked the lime slice from his wife's cleavage and tossed it over board, watching it recede in *Kaia*'s wake. "Why did you think it perfect?" he asked. "As you pointed out, we didn't exactly win."

"Well, we did our best, and it was hard work." Maria topped off everyone's drink as she talked, stepping carefully barefoot, over overstretched legs, her own legs lithe and dark as the oiled-teak trim, accustomed to the boat's motion. Watching his wife, Arc felt proud of her and a desire that would have to wait until they were home.

"I counted eight times we changed sail," Maria continued: "There were gusts of thirty-five knots and zip between the squalls. I think night races are the toughest. My eyes were so tired I couldn't concentrate on the instruments for more than an hour. Next time, I think we should change off more often. Even with all that, it was so . . . so exhilarating. As I said, it was perfect."

"The lightning was beautiful," Cindy said, "but I was glad it stayed north."

Arc finished getting a fix with the radio direction finder. "We're about three or four miles north of the rhumb line. We better change our heading to 95 degrees."

Maria sheeted in the main a few feet and moved the preventer aft as Rick steered the new course. "Good! Y'all, it will make it easier to butterfly the main and jib."

"Yawl? Yawl? This is a sloop!" Cindy said, mimicking Maria's southern drawl.

Arc sat down next to his wife and put his arm around her. "Now hear this: I love this woman . . . even though she talks funny." He took another drink, then raised his glass in salute, "I love y'all."

"There, Rick, that's another reason why it was perfect," Maria said. "Is perfect. I'm so thankful we have such great friends. There's no place in the world I'd rather be."

Rick leaned over, one hand on the wheel, and gave Maria a quick kiss on her cheek. "We feel the same way." His momentary inattention to the helm caused the main to luff.

"Let my husband alone--you little home wrecker!" Cindy cried out in mock anger, "You'll cause us to gybe."

"See how much my wife cares for me? But she's really more bothered by my being careless at the helm than jealousy."

"I do care for you, you big handsome lug," Cindy said.

"It has been perfect," Rick said, turning to look at Maria. The big genoa started to collapse again. He spun the wheel to fill it, and said, "Here, you take it Arc."

Arc, wiry and muscular, jumped up and took the wheel. Rick, taller and heavier than Arc, sat down next to Maria.

"Well, teammate," she said, patting him on the knee, "I think we did great."

Arc had teamed with Rick's wife, and Rick with his. When a team was working, one member would take the wheel while the other worked the sheet lines. As the race progressed, an exhausted team would try and snatch fifteen or twenty minutes sleep in the v-birth among the sail bags. Even though at times

the v-birth pitched wildly, it was an easier place to sleep than the side births when the boat was heeled hard over. If they were needed to help with foredeck work or navigation, they could easily be called.

"I'm sure we did better than the 'B' team. Too bad we didn't keep track of time and distance so we could laud it over them," Rick said.

"I think we can figure out who did best," Arc said. "I put times down on our plot track. I think it was a good idea to split up. I was never afraid that Cindy would yell at me during some tense moment when Maria might have."

"You ought to have been," Cindy said. "Maria lets you get by with more than you should."

"Well, it was a good idea," Rick said, "I liked teaming up with Maria. Somehow it made the competing more fun. And that's the point, isn't it? Having fun?"

"Yeah, sometimes we can get too serious," Arc admitted.

"Never," Cindy said, keeping her eye on the genoa as she started the sheet line a few inches.

Arc glanced at Cindy, appreciating her intensity. Her blonde hair, the color of autumn aspens, lay against tanned shoulders in such perfect disarray that he thought it would have taken hours to achieve if it had been a planned supermodel photo shot. His eyes were drawn to legs that a New York model would envy, and he felt the need to take a deep breath. *Kaia* lifted on a swell. Arc turned the wheel gently anticipating the yaw. His eyes once again alternated between sails and compass.

"Sometimes I think you and Arc should be together, that we're mismatched," Maria said. "You're both so competitive and wrapped up in science and theories. Rick and I are more laid back. Delightful people are what we are, really."

Arc stopped minding the helm to look at Cindy's enigmatic smile, her attention apparently still on the sails. He glanced over his shoulder at Maria, and saw her watching him with humorous eyes, waiting for his reaction.

"Sure, Arc and Cindy are made for each other," Rick said. "They're interested in some things so . . . so uninteresting that they deserve each other. Maria and I would make an awesome twosome. Maybe for a few nights we could"

Cindy abandoned her jib sheet duties to give her husband a playful punch in the stomach. "I see where this is going. Stow that talk, mate. She deserves better than you."

The conversation reminded Arc that on two different occasions at the Yacht Club, members who had known the couples only briefly had mistakenly assumed Maria and Rick were married to each other as were Cindy and he.

Arc gestured toward the starboard bow, "I bet that freighter just turned north out of the channel. We'll be at the breakwater in another hour," Arc said.

Rick laughed. "Maria's so right . . . he's all business. Say, how long have the four of us been doing things together?" He leaned back against the port bulkhead, totally relaxed, hands clasped behind his head, biceps that no one could miss.

"You mean how long have the four of us been going steady?" Maria asked.

Arc was amused at his wife's choice of words and appreciated her candor. He saw Cindy's bare shoulders shake with gentle laughter.

"Well put, Maria, well put," Cindy said.

He turned his attention from the sails to look at Maria and mouthed, "I love you." Maria looked back at him, embarrassed, and said, "What'd I say?"

"Always the right thing, sweetheart, and in a way I never could."

Maria gave him a questioning look that told him she thought he might be making fun of her. He wasn't. Before he could make himself clear, Rick said in a voice that cracked with emotion, "I feel so lucky we found each other." The way he said it sounded like a defense of Maria, as if she needed one, and if Arc had not known his friend so well he might of thought it was the rum talking. Maria glowed. He thought Rick and his wife were both right.

When Maria and he moved to their home in a rural area, he was immediately immersed in his work at the hospital that required long days administering anesthetics and getting to know the surgeons, anesthesia colleagues, and others that made up the OR crew. He enjoyed meeting new people and making new friends, but thought often of Maria in her isolation with their small children, and the work of settling in that she had to do mostly without his help. He felt guilty about not sharing the drudgery of establishing their new home compared to the often exciting and rewarding work of his profession. His worries about Maria lacking friends was assuaged by a decision to take a break from "moving in work." On his first weekend off from hospital duties, he decided to check out a small yacht club another surgeon had spoken of. The yacht club was on a lake a convenient five miles north of them. It connected to Lake Michigan through a navigation channel maintained by the Corps of Engineers, and stretched inland about five miles with a maximum width a little short of a mile. Its shores were lined with birch, pine, and maple, and an occasional summer home. They immediately fell in love with the lake and the small yacht club positioned on the southern shore in a cove that faced the channel. They had never seen a more beautiful setting.

The Black Lake Yacht Club members were made up of families that were half local area residents and half summer

residents, many from the St. Louis, Missouri area. Membership seemed ideal from the start and they were excited to be asked to join within minutes of meeting the club's officers. Arc did not doubt the sincerity of those asking, their wanting new families, but thought the recent addition of ten new slips begged for the addition of new membership dues. What made it perfect was being introduced to Rick and Cindy Argosy, also new members, and learned they lived only minutes away from their home. What made it perfect was meeting Cindy Argosy. He knew he had experienced an epiphany.

Arc thought Cindy special from the first time they met. Before he met her, being in the presence of an exceptionally beautiful woman would make him feel uncomfortable, and he was sure other testosterone-fueled men felt the same. But Cindy made him feel at ease from the start, as if she were a hometown girl with whom he had grown up. Within minutes they were talking about the new DNA technology and Cindy asked how much of it he thought she should introduce to her biology classes, all the while managing to keep Maria in the conversation, showing sincere interest in her work as a registered nurse. After meeting Cindy, for Arc there were no more "exceptionally beautiful women." She was it. "God, she is beautiful," Maria had told Arc as they left, and smart . . . and nice. I didn't know you could be all three."

"I never noticed," he said, but Cindy's beauty was so obvious, they both laughed.

The two families quickly bonded. It was good to have close friends so close by. Arc found Rick refreshing, a friend who was outside of the medical community. He admired his practical sense and mechanical skills. Arc thought Maria and Rick were alike in many ways. They were social and low-tech, masters at small talk, a skill at which Arc thought himself

inept. Either could talk with anyone. Cindy once told him she admired Maria's warmth and openness. He did too, but knew he was more like Cindy in those traits.

Rick's son, Darren, was Kirk's age, and favored his father—possessing the body of a lineman. Big for his age. The Mason's had two children, Kirk and their daughter, Lea, a year younger than her brother. That fall when school started the three kids rode the school bus together. The school bus stopped in front of the Mason's home, and it became routine for Darren to stay with Kirk and Lea until Cindy stopped by on her way home from the high school where she taught. Her commute was about eighteen miles on backcountry roads, and with after school meetings and northern Michigan weather dictating travel time, she felt gratitude and relief to know Darren was in good hands.

Maria looked forward to seeing her friend and having some adult conversation, hearing about Cindy's day of teaching biology. Arc would come home and find the two of them in animated conversation over beer and dip, and if Rick were on the road, which was often the case during the week, Cindy and Darren would stay for dinner.

Darren was no trouble at all, and like his father, had a propensity to be helpful. It had amazed Maria to see Darren and her two kids raking the leaves in their large yard without being asked. She told Arc that the kids seemed to enjoy it. That night she asked Kirk whose idea that was—already sure it wasn't one of their kids.

"Well, Mom, we all have to do our part," sounding like Darren when he said it.

Cindy did not seem surprised.

"Yeah, he gets that from Rick by example. Rick's gone during the week selling those big earth movers, and then if the four of us aren't doing something together on the weekend,

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he's off helping some old couple from church take down their storm sash or fixing some widow's well pump or whatever. Often Darren goes with him. He worships his dad. I could not hope to be married to a better man, but sometimes I wish I saw more of him."

* * *

Although each couple had separate interests, with Arc and Maria attending County Medical Society functions and Rick and Cindy going to their church socials or her school functions, they had spent more weekends and holidays together than apart for almost six years.

If one couple went into town, it became routine to call the other and ask if they needed anything. They often found other ways to help one another. One night during a January blizzard, when Arc was in Tampa at an anesthesiology seminar, their furnace quit working. Maria was worried that the pipes might freeze and called the Argosys. Rick replaced the blower motor and had their home warm as toast by two in the morning. And the next winter, when Rick was snowed in at O'Hare International, Arc repaid his friend by staying through the night with Cindy, watching Darren when the boy had a high fever from a strep infection, waiting for the antibiotic to take effect. Darren had a history of febrile convulsions, and Arc could see in Cindy's face the relief and appreciation of his being there. Cindy told her friends, "You can't believe how comforting it was to have a neighbor who's a doctor and makes house calls!"

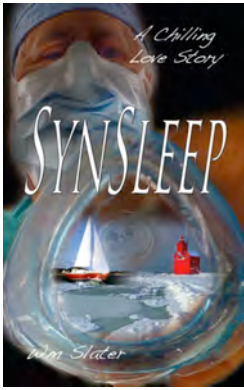
"I don't want to sound maudlin, but we've had a lot of fun together these past years. I don't think two couples could have enjoyed each other's company more," Maria said.

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“You’re right,” Rick said. “Here’s to the best of friends. May it always be this good.” They raised their glasses again.

“And smooth sailing!” Cindy added.

Dead ahead, they could just make out the breakwater guarding the channel opening. Off the port quarter to the northwest, a bank of dark clouds appeared. Cindy made a comment about how fast things could change.



The two couples are very close--do everything together. Well, almost everything, adultery is never considered. They love their spouses too much for that.

An obsessed man released from a California prison heads for Michigan. He thinks the cause of all his problems, and they have been myriad and incessant, is his wife's leaving him. That is the "what," and if he can find the "why," it follows that he will repair their relationship, and life will be as it was. But the "why" is beyond him, and he is stuck on the "what," and it is driving him crazy. Thoughts of her leaving have become all consuming, giving him "brain-whine" and there is nothing else. Then he learns about closure, and knows what he must do.

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