

CLEVIS DALTON lives a decent life. Betrayed by a man closer than blood, he withdraws into isolation. The wife who left him dies in an unbelievably sadistic way. Clevis is the only person who can find justice for her.

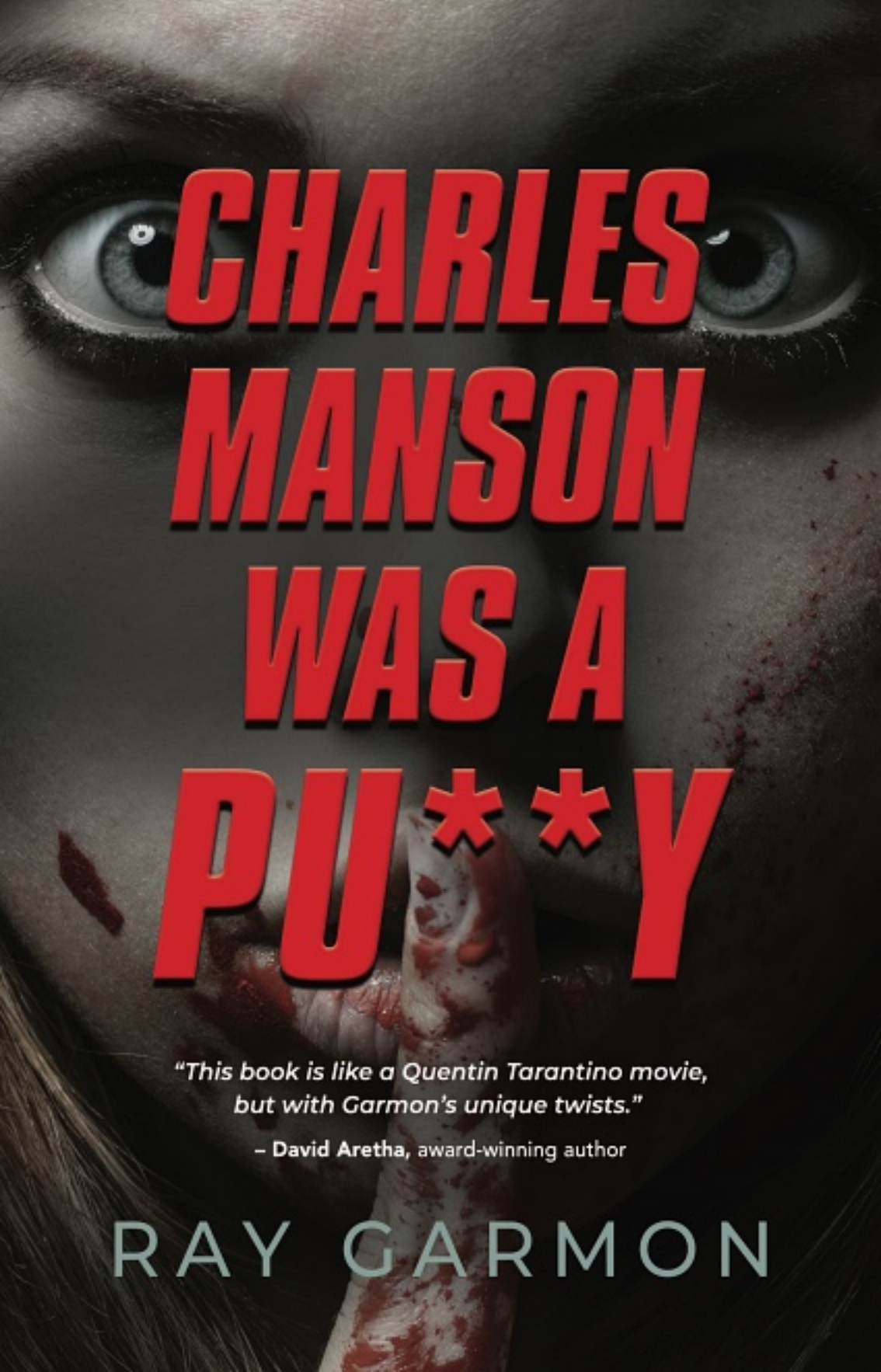
Charles Manson Was A Puy**

By Ray Garmon

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**CHARLES
MANSON
WAS A
PU**Y**

*"This book is like a Quentin Tarantino movie,
but with Garmon's unique twists."*

– David Aretha, award-winning author

RAY GARMON

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CHAPTER ONE

Stella was beyond excited as she parked her car that night. She stopped on the cobbled parking area of a manicured hilltop estate overlooking the Los Angeles Basin. The endless spangle of lights stretching to the far horizon looked more beautiful than ever. The house she'd come to wasn't as grand as her own, but it was definitely celebrity-level. The man who owned it was an honest-to-goodness movie star, working in Spain all summer. Stella didn't know that.

Stella's new friend and host, Hardin James, was only house-sitting. He'd never declared ownership of the place, just eased her into believing that it was his in his smooth, effortless way. Tonight's meeting with him and his team, people they'd been meeting with for a couple of months, would finalize everything they'd been brainstorming, and they could throw off the veil of secrecy they'd maintained.

She stood beside her car for a moment and gazed at the stars. Were the forces of the cosmos coming together in her favor? She never needed them before, never needed anything but herself. Her beauty, her innate decency, all the things ingrained in her persona, had always been more than enough to make her feel complete. Now, this. A thrilling *frisson* of newfound excitement shivered through her.

'Striking' was the word most often used to describe Stella, along with 'total package' and 'too good to be true.' Her face was described as a combination of Angelina Jolie and Audrey Hepburn. She always put in a certain amount of effort to keep her body toned and sometimes felt a twinge of guilt because the

physical rewards were far out of proportion to the amount of sweat invested. A major part of her height was legs, and they were sculpted. Her breasts were full and high, just a few gravity-defying degrees shy of disproportionate. Womanly hips and a rounded butt were set off by a neat little waist that millions of women would kill for. She credited her looks mostly to genetics but never took them for granted. There were times when she glanced at a mirror and was the most grateful woman who ever wore a subtle shade of eye shadow.

But she needed something more. Walden Wade, her husband, had showered her with probably too much of everything. The scope of his wealth, the power and influence of his family, such sheer tonnage of anything imaginable, had begun to dwarf her. For the first time, she felt a need to be more than she naturally was, to achieve and prove herself.

The group she'd come to meet was poolside when she walked around the house. God, she loved these people. When Walden Wade met them later, she knew he would, too. She paused to absorb the scene. Beautiful, unusual people, lit in the most flattering way by tasteful landscape illumination and underwater pool lights, everything around them elegant and close to perfect.

The giant named Morrell, nicknamed 'Big Molly', was on the diving board. Six and a half feet tall, he'd been a serious bodybuilder since his teens. He came off as gentle and sweet-natured, but Stella sensed a deep well of intensity in him.

The tiny woman named Serena was swimming laps, toning her exquisite, twenty-year-old, four-foot, eleven inch body in a bikini that might have been fabricated from kite strings. Her commitment to her chosen path was unequalled.

The beauty named Elena sat chatting with the young man named Fin. She had won beauty pageants and knew beyond any shadow of doubt that she could become more famous, more

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successful, more everything than anyone ever gave her credit for. Anyone except Hardin James.

Fin was average as water in appearance, but he'd graduated at the top of his USC med school class. Brilliant though he was, medicine just didn't have the magic he longed for.

And the host, Hardin James. He saw Stella and hopped up from his chaise longue.

"Hey, everybody! Look who's here!"

He was handsome and charming beyond words. An even six feet tall, he worked out a lot and stayed lean and strong and projected an aura of health and ability. Every article of clothing he put on, looked to have been tailored for him. He could pull off any style and look as if he'd just fallen out of a GQ article. He'd have looked that good dressed in salad trimmings. Great hair which looked perfect in any color or arrangement, great skin, great teeth, he micro-managed every iota of his appearance and was hugely successful at it. He had oozing charisma and animal magnetism enough for fifty men. His gorgeous face glowed with intelligence and awareness, his eyes always sparkled, his smile came easily and often. Stella had seen how special he was the second she clapped eyes on him. His four friends were more devoted to him than anyone she ever knew.

Anyone except Clevis and his devotion to her. She regretted with every breath the way she shattered such a decent man's life, a man she'd loved deeply and betrayed with his best friend. She hadn't spoken to Clevis in years. A couple of years after her betrayal, he was involved in a police action that sapped away his last few atoms of motivation toward trying to maintain his life and career. He walked away and disappeared into obscurity. She prayed that he hadn't jumped in front of a train or hanged himself in some desolate, remote location. These new friends helped derail a small portion of the sickening shame she felt for devastating a man she had loved passionately.

Her new friends embraced her and kissed her cheeks and acted thrilled to see her. They felt closer than her blood family ever had.

And now their project was a done deal. Financing was in place and the green light glowed like an electric emerald in her mind's eye. Walden would be stunned that she brought this all together without his money or connections. The profit would mean nothing to people as rich as his family, but Stella thought it was a fine way to keep score and measure success.

Hardin James stepped over to a glass-topped table where several bottles of Dom sat in glowing silver ice buckets. He expertly opened a bottle, easing the cork out the way it should be done. There were crystal champagne flutes on the table, buffed to a bright sparkle. He poured and passed around the glasses. He raised his and said, "To our Stella."

They all toasted and drank, then sat and gazed at the stars above and the city lights below while talking easily about the tsunami of money they'd soon be drowning in.

Stella felt better than she had in years. Her immediate plan was to take these wonderful people to dinner and introduce them to Walden, bid them goodnight, then go home and fuck her handsome husband like a wild animal.

After the first flute of champagne and a sip from a second, she remembered to call Walden and tell him where they were meeting. She set her glass aside and almost spilled it. Her hands were feeling disassociated from her body, thick and flaccid.

"Wow," she said. "That champagne went right to my head."

Hardin James looked around at his group. They were all smiling like vampires given keys to a blood bank.

"It's not the champagne, baby. While you were stargazing, I slipped a roofie into yours."

CHAPTER TWO

“Clevis, what do you look like?” Martha asked.

“Look like? I’m laying stark naked right beside you.”

“I can see,” she said, “that you’re lean and feel that your muscles are hard, but that beard and hair make you look like you’re wearing a tumbleweed on your head.”

Clevis hadn’t shaved or had a haircut in more than five years. He groomed to the max in his former life but wanted no reminders of that which could be avoided. His dark hair was shaggy and below shoulder-length and only gray at the temples, but his grizzled beard and mustache were shot through with it.

He rolled from her bed and walked into the adjacent kitchen for a glass of water. The fragrant candles and soft lighting in Martha’s plushy-furnished cottage lent the atmosphere a feeling of peace and relaxation. Adelle could be heard on the stereo. Martha loved Adelle.

“It’s time we talked,” she said through the open door. “Real talk. I’ve had enough of your mystery man routine.” She spoke as if describing a done deal. “I’ll tell you some of my CV and you’ll tell me some of yours.”

“No,” Clevis said sharply. “I don’t talk about myself. What we already have between us has to be enough.”

“Are you up here hiding from somebody? Or the whole world? That why you don’t talk about yourself?”

“No,” he said. “It’s just that venting or processing or whatever ain’t something I do.”

“Well,” she said, “after all the hours we’ve fucked without a word, I’m entitled to a little vocal action. Not just oral. I’ll start.”

She began speaking quickly, obviously having her part of the dialogue planned in detail and eager to get into it before Clevis could escape at least part of it. She was counting on him being too polite to simply turn his back and walk out. “I was born to old money in Philadelphia. My parents considered me an inconvenience. I hung out with kitchen staff because they were more parent-like than my real parents. They taught me cooking and I loved it. I developed this obsessive conviction that I’d grow up to own high-dollar restaurants all over the world, hop between glamor spots in designer clothes and my own jet, get a TV cooking show, write best seller cookbooks, maybe have a movie star husband.”

She lay quietly for a few moments, staring at the ceiling, probably swallowing regrets. She was a tall, flat-chested, fortyish woman. She wore her flaming red hair in a short buzz and glasses with thick, black frames. She never wore any makeup. Clevis thought her look was unique and he liked it. He thought she might be waiting for him to comment on her pipe dreams, but he just leaned against the kitchen island and drank water.

“I turned twenty-one,” she continued, “sued for control of my share of the family fortune and set out to make my dreams come true. Long story short, I started off small and tapered to nothing. Should’ve studied business or something, finished college, but I was so arrogant I thought I could skip the boring parts. I worked myself nearly to death, just trying to get one restaurant open with no idea how. Anybody could see that I was just a little rich girl and almost everybody I tried to do business with cheated or stole or hacked me over some way. I started using coke for energy when I was working day and night and then I started liking it way too much. I think I might own the mother of all addictive personalities.

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Started freebasing. Then smoking meth. Crack. Heroin. Any goddam drug I could get my hands on. My life went downhill like an Olympic luge contestant. Lost every penny I had and lied, cheated, and stole from family and friends to feed my addictions.”

She lay quiet again, face blank as slate in the dim light, waiting to see if Clevis would comment or pass judgement. He continued leaning against her kitchen island and drinking water, waiting for her to reach the end of her spiel so he could bid her an appropriate good night and leave.

“I rehabbed a bunch of times,” she said. “Took this gig here in the mountains to get away from dealers and partiers. Cooking for you and the staff and the guests is easy-peezy compared to using drugs ‘till my head nearly exploded, then slurping down a gallon of vodka so I could lose consciousness and rest up for the next escapade, which usually included waking with a stranger’s cock up my ass. I don’t spill my guts like this to just anybody, Clevis. Your turn. Tell me something. Anything. Make something up. I know a little about you already.”

“Really? Like what?”

“Tidbits I overhear from the guests now and then. You were a rock star cop in L.A. You and another guy had a nickname that sent fear through the criminal community. The GTOs or something.”

“GTGs,” he said ruefully. “Initials for Go To Guys. The Police Chief started calling us that.”

“Sometimes,” she said, “you’re so passionate it’s almost violent. Probably why I like it so much, but you never sleep over. The one time you dozed in my bed, you called for a woman named. . .”

“Doesn’t matter,” Clevis interrupted. “I don’t sleep here because I snore. Keep you awake all night.”

“Bullshit,” she snapped. “Fair’s fair, Clevis. I’ve opened my life to you. Give a little back, goddamit. You may’ve noticed, I’m a woman. Lots of us need a little of this sometimes.”

For the first time since he’d known her, Martha was showing real irritation. Clevis thought they might not continue the electric, almost brutal coupling that was his major outlet for pent-up passion and rage unless she felt she’d scored a point or two on her interro-meter. He told himself that she was worth it. He hated to admit, even to himself, that he instinctively felt a need to associate with a woman, even if doing so reminded him of his wife.

He decided to concede and make a gesture toward placating Martha, even though she’d never hear him speak of the gut-wrenching, devastating, mind-numbing pain inflicted upon him by his former wife and his supposed best friend, or how everything he’d done for several years was to distract himself from it.

“Okay,” he said. “You win. I’m from Arkansas. Mother was a bookkeeper for a furniture store, Dad drove trucks for the county. Finest people I ever knew. They both passed away years ago and I still miss them. I did three years in the Army after high school.”

“Probably saw a lot of combat,” she said with a knowing nod.

“No, saw a lot of keyboards. I worked in logistics, filled out requisition forms for pallets of Humvee replacement parts and requisition forms for more pallets of requisition forms. Never heard a shot fired in combat. Don’t expect combat if you can type. I had a buddy from L.A. who got discharged a couple months before me. I slept on his couch while I decided I liked L.A. Didn’t want to go back to Arkansas. I got recru . . . got hired by LAPD. Went to night school and got a degree on the G.I. bill.”

“What was your major?”

“What does it matter? After some stuff . . . happened, I left L.A. Somebody put Ricky the Greek in touch with me. Still don’t know who and Ricky won’t say.”

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Clevis had given up on properly pronouncing the man's name and called him 'Ricky the Greek' like almost everyone else. Ricky was obscenely, insanely wealthy. He owned the estate of several thousand acres where Clevis lived, a mile high in the San Bernadino Mountains. There was a palatial main house surrounded by thick forest. A dozen cottages were scattered among the Ponderosa pines and junipers that encircled the mansion. Clevis had one cottage and Martha had one, the remaining ten available to guests who wanted more privacy than even the vast spaces in the big house afforded.

Clevis spoke by phone with Ricky now and again but had only met him twice. Ricky had properties all over the world and the San Bernadino Mountains place didn't seem to be a favorite. Its primary function was writer's retreat. Ricky loved writers and considered himself a literary patron. He made the place available to those who wanted quiet and isolation in which to work. There was only one in residence at the moment, a psychiatrist named Wulfhertzen, working on a self-help book. He and Clevis got on very well, often taking meals together and talking for hours about a wide variety of subjects.

A full-time staff of ten lived in the big house, plus Martha and Clevis in their cottages. Clevis was nominally head of security, but that seldom amounted to more than shooing away a bothersome bear once in a while and sometimes stepping between guests who disagreed so vehemently on politics or social issues or whatever that they wanted to get physical. Mostly he worked out and read and ran the mountain trails with his backpack heavily weighted.

He loved the place. The piney mountain air on winter mornings brought sweet memories of hunting with his father when he was a kid in Arkansas.

"I came here to be security and watch over the place," he said to Martha. "That's really all there is to it."

“You haven’t left here since I’ve known you except once a year for dental maintenance. I don’t see family or friends because they all hate my fucking guts, but don’t you have anyone to visit sometimes?”

A burst of anger lasered through his mind and he almost yelled but managed to say, “No” in a civil tone. “There’s a terrific gym here, I run on beautiful trails, you make healthy food, and I like to read. Besides us being together, or whatever we are, I can play cards and shoot pool with the house guys. Got everything I need.”

“Hard to believe,” she said. “You’re a complex man, anybody can see that, and . . .”

Clevis’s cell phone sounded on the kitchen counter. He picked it up gladly, happy to terminate the heart-to-heart Martha was fixated on without slamming an emotional door in her face. The caller was Olan, a Filipino who managed the big house. Ricky liked Asians as domestic staff and paid them well.

Clevis said, “What’s the haps, Olan?”

“Clevis, there’s two guys out front. Just standing there, like they’re waiting for something.”

The Pinoy sounded as if he were about to jump out of his skin.

Clevis said, “So if that’s not cool, ask them to leave.”

“Clevis, you don’t understand. They’re both big, mean-looking men. Giving off some kind of vibe, like not doing anything but still aggressive, you know? I’m not going near them. You’re security here. That beard and hair make you look older than these mountains but you’re an Alpha guy and you can handle this. I know. My gay-dar never fails.”

“Okay, pull up your big girl panties,” Clevis said as he walked into the bedroom and started dressing. “Don’t panic. I’ll check them out.”

“Problem?” Martha asked.

“Probably just somebody whose GPS died, asking directions. Good night.”

He was zipping his jeans as he cleared her door and walked through the night toward the big house, breathing deeply of the clean air and looking at the stars. With so little ambient light, they looked as big as softballs.

He entered the back of the mansion and passed through the Michelin-grade kitchen, a humungous dining room and a couple of other magnificent chambers. He reached the foyer, which was bigger than any house he ever lived in. The giant front door was cracked open about three inches and all ten staffers were peeking out toward the cobbled roundabout beyond the marble steps.

“They just stand there, Clevis,” Olan whined. One of the other men was holding one of Ricky the Greek’s Purdy shotguns and fidgeting like a meth head who couldn’t score. The gun was nearly as tall as the little Asian man. Clevis peeked over the heads of the others through the small gap and recognized the men outside. He thought he’d have a little fun and jerk the staff’s chain a bit.

“Myan, put that gun away. The recoil would kick you into the middle of next week. You start shooting, chances are better than even you’ll hit me. I’ll do any shooting that gets done. I know these guys. I might have to kill them.”

A collective gasp rippled through the group. Johnny Rivers could be heard from some distant part of the house. A couple of the staff were Thai and played Rivers constantly, although they hadn’t been born when the recordings were made. *‘Mountain of Love’* provided a weird counterpoint to Clevis’s declaration of possible homicide.

Clevis pushed through the group and out the door. A gleaming, new, navy blue, Lincoln Town Car sat in the middle of the roundabout. Two men leaned casually against a fender. Both were

XXL dudes. Clevis knew that they were fond of violence and feared nothing. He'd known them for years and had always been one of their favorite people. The last he heard, they were on the ragged edge of losing their LAPD jobs and pensions behind excessive force complaints.

One man was Lamarr Biggins, an African American plated with muscle. The other man was Dan Fishman, a sandy-haired Caucasian, just as physically impressive. They made an improbable pairing but were devoted to each other. Both were wearing tailored black suits over black, silk T-shirts.

They'd been called 'Salt and Pepper' for years, but every combination of black and white personnel was hung with that sooner or later and they tired of it. They demanded that their nicknames become 'Poon' (black) and 'Tang' (white). Nobody was willing to argue the point.

Clevis stalked slowly toward them and growled, "You scuzzy sacks of shit just stepped on your own dicks."

The big men were taken aback.

"Wait one," said Poon, "we're just . . ."

"You think I give half a maggot fart what you're 'just'?" Clevis snapped, walking deliberately as if into a gunfight in an old western movie. "If you're 'just' looking for a high-intensity ass whuppin', you're at ground zero. Who gets his clock cleaned first?"

The men put their hands on the pistols at their waists, but recognition suddenly beamed into their eyes, and they rushed Clevis, sweeping him into a hard embrace and pounding his back. It felt grand.

"Clevis, goddam," laughed Poon. "Almost shot you before I recognized you. Shoulda known you'd be the one with the stones to 'front us, you redneck bee-otch."

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“So fuckin’ good to see you, man,” Tang said as he squeezed another embrace out of Clevis. “After you hit that David Copperfield lick and disappeared, we worried you might be laying dead somewhere with a self-inflicted.”

“Gotta tell you, Bruh,” Poon said, “that face forest and down-to-your-narrow-ass hair’s some gnarly shit, but you look tree-fuckin’-mendous, otherwise.

“Y’all look good, too.”

“Hear that ‘y’all’ shit, Poon?” Tang laughed. “He’s still talking like some squirrel-eating hillbilly or hood rat nigga.”

“Not that I ain’t glad to see you,” Clevis said, “but the hell’re you doing here? Sheriff of this county’s got the only jurisdiction. Weren’t y’all busted off the force in L.A.?”

“It was headed that way,” Poon nodded, “till the Deputy Chief drafted us for his security detail.”

“Deputy Chief?” Clevis said. “You don’t mean . . .”

“Yeah,” Tang said. “He’s been sitting here, working up the nerve to ring the doorbell.”

Walden Wade stepped out of the car, looking like a male model in the sodium vapor roundabout lights. He wore a simple, elegant, black suit tailored for nobody else on the planet. A snowy white shirt and a tie so brilliant yet subtle that it probably cost the net worth of Paraguay. His bespoke wingtips gleamed like Simonized chrome. He wore no bling except a vintage Patek Phillipe watch peeking from under his cuff and a simple, gold, wedding band. The only objects in the environment whiter than his shirt were his teeth. Every strand of his extravagantly casual haircut was in assigned position and he was tanned golden

Wade looked as rich as he really was. He took a salary of one dollar per year because he had more money than he could ever spend. The salary of a Deputy Chief of the LAPD wouldn’t nearly

cover his daily nut, anyway, and his family fortune could smother a walnut orchard. He could have chosen any career path in the world, but Top Cop was all he ever wanted.

Seeing Wade felt to Clevis like being whapped upside the head with an outfield fungo. His heart suddenly seemed to be crawling up his esophagus, strangling him from the inside out. The years he'd spent pushing himself physically and intellectually to distract his mind from what Wade had done to him were swept away like a straw in a hurricane. His teeth clenched hard enough to bite through a railroad spike.

"You never gave me a chance to say how sorry I was," Wade said. "Am."

The hatred radiating from Clevis was a palpable force. He felt an internal chill begin under his scalp, a sort of icy, itching tingle that progressed downward through his entire awareness.

Clevis managed to choke out words and ask with fake ignorance, "What've you got to be sorry for, Walden? Oh, maybe . . . could it be backstabbing a man who loved you more than any other man since his father? Sorry for shitting on him after he saved your life more than once?" Clevis's voice had quickly roared into an almost inhuman volume. "Sorry because he took your heat and committed crimes with you? Sorry about any of that?"

Poon and Tang stared in blank-faced embarrassment at the trees. Clevis counted to ten and took deep breaths and got his voice back down near his normal register.

"Or . . . lemme see . . . could it be you're sorry 'cause I considered my wife a goddess and you made her into just another lying, cheating, two-faced cunt? She in the car? You bone her in the back seat on the way here just to rub my nose in it? Get her out here. I'll knock her down and grudge-fuck her 'till she squeals like a goddam shoat. All three of you can't stop me. I loved her more than I know how to say, and you made me hate her. Can you imagine what that feels like, motherfucker?"

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Wade was wringing his hands obsessively. He said, "Clevis, I couldn't help myself. First time I saw her, it felt like somebody put a load of double-ought through my ten-ring. You're the best friend I ever had and even knowing how it would hurt you, I just had to have her."

Clevis said, "First time? That would've been when I came to ask for a loan to buy her engagement ring. Sorry about that?"

"You'll never know how sorry."

"I'll listen if you want to explain it," Clevis said, "after I rip out your spine and cram it up your ass."

He leapt at Wade but Poon and Tang moved with speed that belied their size. They literally grabbed him out of the air. Poon held him in a tight bear hug from behind, pinning his arms to his sides. Tang stood between Wade and Clevis so that Clevis wouldn't kick. They knew that his Krav Maga kick could be lethal.

"We love you, man," Poon said, "but we gotta protect the Chief. That's our gig."

"If they let you go and you beat me to death, Clevis," Wade said, "it won't change how shitty I treated you."

Clevis screamed, "Fuckin' A it won't, you mongrel squirt of shit."

Wade continued wringing his hands and paced in a tight circle, obviously working up enough nut to say something momentous.

"I'm fifty-one now," Wade chattered nervously. "Makes you what, forty-seven, forty-eight?"

"Makes you a fifty-one-year-old bucket of monkey cum," Clevis spat. Poon continued restraining him like a strait jacket.

"Not for nothing," Wade said, "that shrubbery around your head makes you look from the neck up like a hundred-year-old derelict living out of a shopping cart. Just sayin'."

“Come all this way to make fun of my looks? Okay, done. Now get the fuck outta here, bitch.”

Wade paced some more.

“He obviously ain’t up to speed on this, Chief,” Poon said. “Longer you wait, harder it’ll get.”

“Can’t you figure why we’re here, Clevis?” Wade asked. “Don’t you watch TV news or read the papers anymore?”

“Avoid them at every opportunity. You destroyed the only part of the world that meant anything to me so I don’t give a drizzling shit about the rest of it, you slimy toe rag.”

Wade stopped pacing and looked at the stars for a moment, then took a deep breath and said, “Clevis, Stella’s dead.”

“You lying cocksucker,” Clevis raged. “You . . . You’re trying to make me lose control or something, make me do something so . . . terrible you’ll feel justified in taking her from me. Or something.”

Poon said, “I’m sorry, Bruh. It’s true.”

The world went still and silent around Clevis. It flashed through his mind that being inside a bubble of vacuum might feel like what was rolling over him. Even after she betrayed him in the most excruciating way, there remained a pulsating fullness for her in his heart. He wondered continuously if the hatred she caused might grow to outweigh that fullness. It hadn’t yet.

“No, please, no,” Clevis begged. “Cancer? Accident? What happened?”

Tang looked off into the blackness of the forest and said, “Murdered, Clevis. Worst I ever saw.”

Clevis projectile-puked a thick, stinking sludge that splashed down onto Wade’s shoes. A massive tide of acidic, scalding, loss, regret, and hatred smashed through his entire universe, and he wept. He wept and wept until his bones seemed to go mushoid

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and he sank to the cobblestones. Poon and Tang knelt beside him, rubbing his back and keeping him propped in a sitting position because it looked as if he might collapse prostrate and maybe suffocate on his own vomit.

“I know you hate me,” Wade said when Clevis seemed capable of understanding speech. Wade watched partially digested salmon sliding off his shoes as he spoke. “I’d hate me, too, if I was you. But we need to talk. There’s a patio around beside the house where we can have more privacy.” He glanced at the front door where ten pairs of eyes were bugging out through the little crack.

“The fuck you know about what’s around beside this house?” Clevis demanded through clenched teeth as he wiped snot, tears, and vomitus from his face with the handkerchief Poon gave him.

Wade answered, “Ricky the Greek bought this place from Dad.”

Wade led the way around the house with Poon and Tang following, Clevis wedged tight between them. They reached the patio.

“I always thought the world of you guys,” Clevis said to the two big men as they gently guided him to a seat on a picnic table bench and sat on either side of him. “But if I have to go through them, I’ll find a way to cripple you, Walden. Stella’d never be in a position to be hurt if she was with me. This is on nobody but you, motherfucker. Who killed her?”

Wade sat across the table and said, “We don’t know yet. I’ve got an entire task force of our best people on it for as long as it takes. I’m paying extra criminalists and scientists and anybody who might help out of my own pocket. Nobody can stay out of our sights for very long.”

“Tell me how she was killed.”

“Clevis,” Wade said, avoiding eye contact, “you really don’t want the details. Trust me.”

“Trust you? *Trust you?*” Clevis screamed, pounding his fists on the picnic table. “Where’d you find the time to grow a pair of balls big enough to ask me, of all the people on this fucked-up planet, to trust a streak of weasel shit like you? Tell me, goddamit. I got a right to know.”

“Okay. She started spending time away from home and wouldn’t say why. She said she was doing something special that would make me proud of her. Hell, I was already proud. But I didn’t push, I trusted her.”

“I know what you mean,” Clevis said. “I trusted her that much. Trusted you that much, too.”

“I know you did. So, I got home around seven one night and she was supposed to call and tell me where to meet her and the people she was dealing with for dinner. I had no idea who they were or what they were doing. This dinner would be the grand reveal. She swore that their thing would be a showstopper. She even quoted you and said it was ‘guaranteed to knock my dick in the dirt’. Her car was gone, purse and cell phone, no evidence of abduction, just looked like she went out as usual. I waited an hour and started getting nervous. Her phone went straight to voice mail. I called our country club, restaurants, stores where she shopped, every place we were known. Nobody’d seen her.”

“He damn near went batshit crazy,” Tang said.

“I called every hospital and jurisdiction for a thousand miles. Called the feds, pulled in every favor owed me. Called the governor. Put a shit-ton of extra pressure on informants. Her car was a new Bentley, should’ve been easy to find but it wasn’t. Not a sniff anywhere.”

“Most extensive missing person investigation I ever saw,” Poon said.

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“She was missing nearly three weeks,” Wade said. “No credit card activity. Then an old guy was walking his big rottweiler on Latner Drive. Side street off Laurel Canyon. There’s a hillside lot where a house burned down years ago and nothing’s been done with it since. There’s a corner of a foundation wall about seven feet tall still standing where it was built into the hillside. Some flooring over the top of it didn’t burn, makes a kind of roof. Really scuzzy space back in there. Druggies and homeless might crash there but it’s so nasty they don’t if they’ve got any choice.

“There’s an entry where people used to roll in lawnmowers and stuff for storage, I guess. It was covered over with trash. Cardboard, scrap wood, dead brush, you know, common litter you’d find on the roadside. So the rottweiler goes berserk, drags the old man off his feet, and starts digging through this trash like crazy. He claws away enough stuff for the smell of decomp to blow out and make the old guy puke.

Wade stopped speaking and stared at the tabletop for a few beats before continuing.

“Clevis, you sure you want to hear this? We can wait for . . .”

“Fuck you,” Clevis growled, “and fuck waiting. Tell me, you putrid hunk of phlegm.

“Okay. Stella’s body was in there, hanging in chains. She . . .”

Wade mumbled through a tale of horrendous torture and rape and mutilation. Clevis was numb through and through when Wade reached the end of the tale.

“The coroner,” Wade said, “thinks she died the same night she disappeared. Stomach contents included a little alcohol and Rohypnol. We got biologicals from five individuals from her body. Three male, two female. Time and environment degraded them so badly it’s taking a long time to narrow the suspect pool, but our very best people worked everything strictly by the book. Then I hired the guys who wrote the books and had them do it all again.

They swabbed every square inch of the place and started more DNA testing. A little intel's trickling in but we haven't made a connection to anybody yet."

They all sat in silence for a time, letting the information tumble through their brains. Walden finally broke the silence.

"This can't be much of a life up here for a man with your brains and guts, Clevis. I don't understand . . ."

"I give a scab off a dead rat's ass what you understand? I understand that Stella's dead. Fuck you."

Walden tried to keep a dialogue going and said, "Pretty obvious you're not throwing money at barbers these days."

Clevis said, "Walden, what I do or don't will never be your business again. Stella's dead. Fuck you and fuck your whole family and the horse you rode in on and fuck the fugly snotwad who sold you the saddle."

Clevis spoke so vehemently that the table was plunged into silence again before Wade continued to try conversation.

"I hope you haven't withdrawn from the world because of those kids. Not your fault you can shoot straight."

Clevis said, "Now that I think about it, you probably greased my stress pension through channels."

"Wasn't easy. You were what, forty-one, forty-two? Not many guys that young bail with the full package."

Clevis thought of snatching a gun from Poon or Tang and shooting Wade, but the angles and access weren't right.

"Before this goes any further," Tang said, "killing those kids seems like what put you over the edge. You need to know, ain't nobody got a bad word to say about you behind that, my brother."

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It went down a couple of years after Stella left him. Clevis dodged crashing into meaningless shards by being a cop 'round the clock, using the job as a life more than a profession. Wade and Stella tried to reach out and Clevis rejected every overture. Wade continued his steady climb up the promotions ladder while Clevis went with SWAT. His marksmanship was excellent, and he became one of the long guns.

A karate club of black teenagers opened a bank account to save for a trip to a distant tournament. They went to withdraw their savings, entering their bank just ahead of two Russian mobsters who'd grown bored with Medicare fraud, fricasseed their brains with L.A. Glass, and gone looking for new thrills. They gunned up with AK-47s and nines and had at it, deciding that robbing a bank might be a fun distraction.

A teller saw the weapons and hit a silent alarm. Two radio cars arrived almost immediately. One car secured the rear of the building while one took the front. Two officers in front were maneuvering on foot for a look into the bank when one of the Russians hosed off his entire seventy-five round AK box magazine, filling the bank with thunder, smoke, tinkling cartridge casings, and ear-splitting screams while transforming the front door to glass crumbs and pellets, and reducing Officer Stanton Dunlop to one hundred eighty-eight pounds of dead. The Russians tried to flee but Dunlop's partner drove them back inside the building with shotgun fire while screaming into his shoulder microphone.

Every cop for miles around roared to the scene. Dunlop lay in the sun, skull shattered, sprawled in the thoughtless arrangement of limbs brought on by instant death.

Clevis hopped out of the SWAT van as it stopped a half block from the crime scene. He quickly found a perfect shooting position, proned out atop a two-story building across the street from the bank. He ranged his Remington .308 and settled in for

the siege while trying to avoid his usual preoccupation, thinking of Stella. That proved harder than usual when Walden Wade arrived.

It was a hot day. News and police helicopters thwapped overhead. The Russians had fifteen hostages on the bank floor and were babbling on speed and adrenaline and couldn't speak much English, anyway. The LAPD hostage negotiator tried to keep the situation calm while a Russian-speaking policeman was located. That didn't happen nearly fast enough.

The Karate Kids whispered among themselves. When the Russians were perfectly positioned, one Kid sprang to his feet and kicked a mobster in the groin so hard that he was lifted off the floor before crashing into a heap of impotent misery. The Kids snatched away his guns just as the second goon spun around and was met with a well-thrown front kick to the solar plexus that folded him in half and dropped him to the terrazzo. The Kids grabbed the guns and stomped and kicked the downed bad-asses into a moaning, whining, soggy pulp, all the while yelling and exulting in their victory and happy-dancing around the fallen felons.

Every nerve outside the bank was live-wire tense. The police heard the shouts and knew something had happened but not what.

'Come on, yo,'" one Karate Kid said to his boys. "Let's go show 'em we got the guns and shit's been handled. Po-Po gon' love us taking out these bitches killed their boy."

And three tall, athletic, excited teenagers ran through the rectangular space that had recently been the bank's front door. Two were waving the AKs and the third brandished a nine in each hand.

The lieutenant in tactical command panicked when he saw weapons rushing in his general direction and screamed over the comms net, "TAKETHESHOTTAKETHEFUCKINGSHOT!"

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Clevis had been fantasizing that just such a thing would happen so that he could maybe put a bullet through Walden Wade's rotten heart and pretend to know nothing of how that happened.

First through the door was Arthur Yates, age fifteen, six feet tall. Clevis banged a round precisely into Arthur's center mass, stopping his heart as if somebody had thrown a switch, twisting him violently down into his own shadow and Dunlop's blood, sending the AK clattering across the pavement.

The sound of the first shot caused all the other officers to duck for cover while Clevis cycled the bolt action of his rifle as smoothly as honey sliding down a young woman's inner thigh, re-acquired his sight picture, and fired a second round, killing Joey Sands, also fifteen, instantly.

Tae 'Kwon Jeffs was third to clear the door, running too fast to reverse directions even as his friends died a few feet away. He was fourteen years of age. Clevis let daylight through his torso. Three dead in less than five seconds.

Hat trick, Clevis thought.

It was all on video from several cameras and iPhones, complete with soundtrack, and there was never any suspicion of fault on Clevis's part. Still, he put in for a stress pension and walked away from the job and the life and floated around like driftwood until Ricky the Greek contacted him.

Poon broke the awkward silence around the picnic table.

"Clevis, before we start seeing you on the regular, you should know the only problem we ever had with Chief Wade was behind you and Stella."

"Seeing me on the regular?" Clevis said. "What do you . . ."

"Damn truth," Wade nodded. "They almost quit the job because of it."

“We told him,” Tang said, “he did a sorry-assed thing to a man been as good a friend as you. But . . . Bruh, this is tough to say but when we got to know her a little, we couldn’t help but understand. Sorry, m’man, that’s just the way things go sometimes.”

“We never felt no different about you,” Poon said, “but I’d crawl naked through a hundred miles of blood, shit, and broken glass if she asked me to.”

“I know the feeling,” Clevis mumbled.

“You and the Chief and Mrs. Wade are our trifecta, Blood,” Tang said. “We’re staying close ‘till this shit’s straightened out. We ain’t super slick or smart or nothing like that, but if the time comes y’all need a little help breaking off a foot up these sick muhfugger’s asses, we’re gon’ be there.”

CHAPTER THREE

If he ever had a doubt about his brilliance (which never happened, anyway) the seamless way Hardin James put together his crew would have been imminently reassuring.

He studied and researched for nearly three years before he went for it, pursuing what he'd need with the nearly nuclear intensity he blasted into everything he did. He immersed himself in the murky depths of every cult, every religion, every charismatic evangelist, every guru. He submitted to several cult initiations and was 'saved' by several evangelists. His twisted mind and other talents let him easily fake his way through and take his leave with more grist for his planning mill. He studied psychology endlessly and ingested multitudes of histories of aberrant personalities. Every tiny detail, every telling morsel of knowledge.

Much of his research could be done from the anonymity of his computer but he did need to go among the people now and again. He always dressed down and avoided attracting undue attention and came off to the multitudes like somebody they might be familiar with but couldn't quite place. He styled his hair in a John Q citizen way for these outings and wore glasses and easily projected the image of a handsome man who didn't really know it. He displayed an uncharacteristic modesty and was adept at looking away from cameras. He played likeable and found people who eagerly assisted him, believing that he was working toward a degree or some such thing. His erect bearing and soul-searching gaze made some women and quite a few men swoon and consider aiding him a privilege. Even with his efforts toward blending in, he stood out as a handsome man with a lot on the ball

but he was slicker than deer guts on a doorknob and never became uncomfortably entangled.

He developed a series of tests to determine whether someone who fit his bill of particulars could be taught true faith in him alone. He defined faith as believing the unbelievable and was perpetually amazed by how many otherwise logical people could be maneuvered into buying into that concept.

Hardin painstakingly delineated a personality profile he could manipulate to extreme degrees, and he knew just where to find those personalities.

First was Elena, tall and gorgeous and dumb as a stump. In her high twenties, she had pretty much floated through life on a magic carpet of beauty. Harden intuited how she resented her slow thought processes, and he divined that she could be controlled as easily as house-breaking a puppy with the proper motivators. The first point in his favor was scored by paying attention to her but not gazing with that deer-in-the-headlights look that afflicted so many men when they tried getting close. She was intrigued. He played her like a fiddle and seldom hit a sour note, slowly allowing her to draw closer until he became her cherished confidante. She cried and whined and bemoaned her lack of achievement. He knew how to convince her that no negatives in her life were her own fault; she simply needed the right mentor. Hardin James.

Men had promised her the world since she hit puberty. Hardin promised to give *her* to the world and allow mankind at large to perceive her majesty. She wanted and needed to believe him. She truly felt it. Hardin convinced her that she *owned* it. Elena became so devoted that she'd have unhesitatingly jumped off the roof of Trump Tower if she thought that would please Hardin. Everything he put in front of her, no matter how bizarre, criminal, whatever, was another appreciated way to demonstrate her commitment. He impressed upon her that human life is finite and would someday

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end for everyone and, if some lives impeded him or her, they simply ended a bit sooner than planned.

From the first minute he knew her, Hardin pumped up her self-esteem, her self-worth, her self-everything, always reinforcing in her little peanut brain that every good feeling she had was because of him.

Plus, she could suck a watermelon through a garden hose.

With Elena hooked good and proper, Hardin reasoned that his long-range plan might require more muscle than he could supply alone. Morrell suited Hardin's needs, right down to the ground. He was freakishly tall and had been a hardcore bodybuilder since age thirteen. He wasn't as stupid as Elena but he was no rocket scientist, either. He gave off an animal aura which, combined with his huge musculature, caused many people to instinctively fear him. He liked that and felt it caressing his inborn cruelty. When smaller, weaker men were given opportunities of any kind, he always felt that he was being passed over unfairly. Morell was indifferent to anyone else's suffering and perpetually angry at society in general, making him work the weights harder and give the world more of himself to fear.

Maybe Morrell was too big to play like a fiddle but Hardin James played him like a philharmonic orchestra. Slabs of stone-hard muscle didn't protect his mind or id or ego for one second when Hardin vectored in on him.

Hardin was just the man to prey on the giant's weaknesses while praising his strengths. Morrell fell into Hardin's plan as if he'd been waiting all his life for it. The crowning achievement of that life, so far, was Hardin awarding him the nickname 'Big Molly'. He swore on everything he knew that he'd savor killing anyone Hardin wanted dead and, if asked, he'd gladly eat the bodies. Hardin helped him develop the day-to-day persona of a stereotypical gentle giant, but pure evil lurked beneath Big Molly's pumped-up outer shell.

Plus, Big Molly sucked cock ever a tad better than Elena.

Then Hardin connected with Fin, a man with a brilliant mind and an empty soul. None of his scholastic triumphs and accomplishments, no attained goal, came close to covering the bottom of the hole in his existence, never mind filling it. He was a blank canvas waiting for the right artist to splash on the streaks and lines and colors to make it a complete entity, albeit an abstraction. Hardin James was that artist, like Picasso on steroids. Fin was as pliable as Play-Doh in Hardin's hands. Hardin worked him and groomed him and became his *raison d'être*. If Hardin claimed that he could fart ballistic missiles and piss napalm, Fin would have sworn to it before god and every angel. Plus, there was no downside to having an in-house medic.

Also, Finn was asexual. He demonstrated no sexual or romantic interests in either women or men, eliminating jealousy issues before they popped up, and Hardin didn't even have to fuck him.

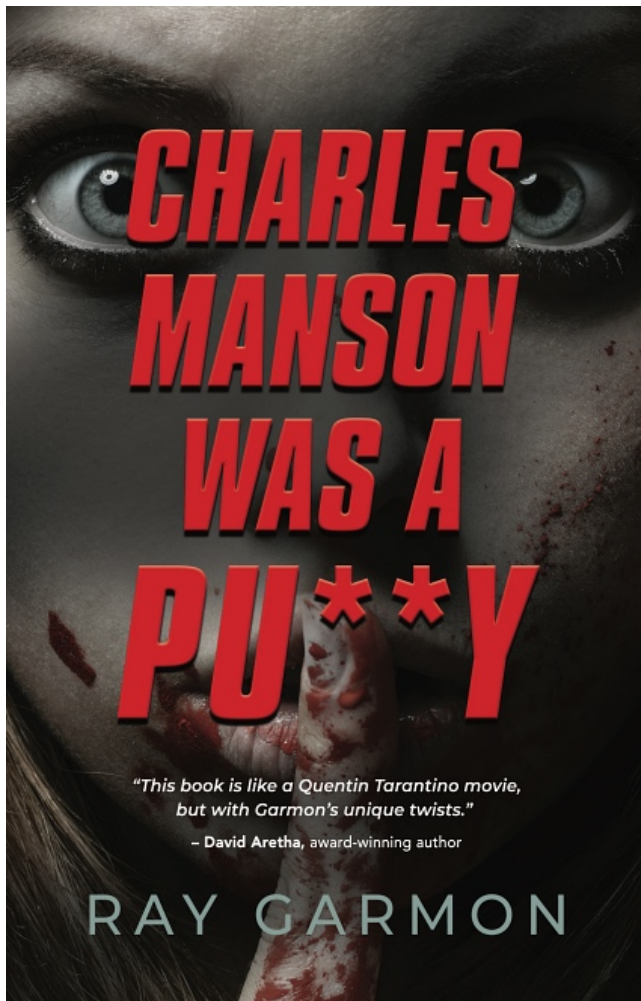
Then Serena. Darling, cute as a Chinese baby, tiny in size and huge in appetites, sweeter than honey with Hardin James and vicious as any grizzly bear toward the rest of the world when she could get away with it, Serena. Barely twenty years old, an inch short of five feet tall, Serena carried a radiating sexuality and soaked up Hardin James like a dry sponge dropped into a puddle of warm, muddy, water. She was primed for something monumentally outrageous even before they met, and he looped her into his scheme with the greatest of ease. Serena was ready for whatever and, if whatever helped toward attaining her goals, she was ready for a lot of it, no matter if someone got hurt. *Especially* if someone got hurt. While being cautious and not giving Elena and Big Molly cause for jealousy, Hardin feasted on her perfect, little, body.

Called into a guidance counselor's office for fighting in high school, Serena had been asked if she was familiar with the Napoleon Complex. She answered that all she wanted to know

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about Napoleon was whether he was somebody she could lay a hard hurtin' on.

Hardin James trained them and taught them and utilized their varied skill sets and took complete control of their minds and emotions. He made them believe that whatever they did was predestined by him. Nobody else mattered, nothing was worth worrying about, except doing his bidding and feeling the stunningly wonderful satisfaction of knowing they pleased him.



CLEVIS DALTON lives a decent life. Betrayed by a man closer than blood, he withdraws into isolation. The wife who left him dies in an unbelievably sadistic way. Clevis is the only person who can find justice for her.

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