

Red with Rage is a story of life's iniquities. The courage and willingness of a group of disfranchised inhabitants of Atlanta, Georgia helps a bigoted police force catch a serial killer of young, gay men. The mystery centers on several possible suspects including a state senator, a mentally disturbed, successful businessperson, and lastly members of the gay community itself.

## **Red With Rage**

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A STEVE ARMSTRONG MYSTERY



red  
with  
rage

Michael Vieira

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## Chapter 1

It was only the beginning of June and already Atlanta was in the middle of an oppressive heat wave. The city was like a smoldering brick oven; the bars had stayed packed most of the night with out-of-towners for the upcoming Pride weekend.

Around 4 a.m. in the morning, Peachtree Street, usually deserted in the downtown metro area, was dead silent except for an occasional car barreling by with some lawless jerk behind the wheel, accompanied by a few more of the same. This was an unusual reprieve for a road that ran the entire length of the city and was generally teeming with throngs of its near four million occupants. The wee hours before the first light belonged to the night owls.

Jake had been out all-night partying with friends at the local gay bars, had too much to drink, and he had passed up two promising offers earlier on. His last stop was down the block at Bulldogs. The full moon helped supply added light to the dimly lit boulevard. He was growing impatient as he waited on a street corner, shifting his stance from one leg to the other; his cousin was to give him a ride home twenty miles or so north of town. The air was thick and humid; it was hard to breathe just standing still.

The empty streets were quiet and it gave Jake an eerie sensation of foreboding standing there alone. The buildings were all dark and deserted. He wished his cousin would hurry up. This part of town could be dangerous for a lone gay male. There had been several bashings in recent years. It is best to travel in numbers; Jake knew that, but he had stayed too long at the bar and the crowd had thinned out considerably. He was a sitting duck clad in tight jeans, red tank top, and new tennis shoes not yet broken in—a dead giveaway out there alone on the sidewalk. Anyone passing would surely think he was gay, a

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prostitute or both. He would have to stay put though, or risk missing his ride. The temperature reached ninety-five degrees, even at 4 a.m. and Jake was beginning to sweat out some of the booze he had consumed throughout the evening.

A lone car with several rambunctious occupants, making catcalls, whizzed by him in the street. He reached in his right, back pocket and withdrew the dark blue handkerchief, which marked him as a bottom. He mopped his brow while cursing his cousin for taking so long.

Jake had waited about forty-five minutes when he spotted a tall dark stranger rounding the corner at the end of the block. The man headed his way. He looked harmless enough, Jake thought—well-built, and good-looking too. The swagger alone in the stranger's walk was enough to turn him on. He wondered if the guy was on the prowl after leaving the bar without scoring. If so, he might have found a place to stay in town for the night. Jake's eyes met those of the stranger who wore tight leather pants, heavy black boots, and no shirt. He could not help notice the guy's muscular arms and ripped abs. *Now there's one of the few men that does credit to Tom of Finland*, Jake mused.

The stranger slowed his pace in passing, and turned his gaze toward Jake. He had a cigarette hanging from the left side of his mouth. His eyes black and lifeless as a shark's, locked onto Jake's natural pale-blues. Without breaking eye contact, Jake pulled a lighter out of his pocket, but before he managed to snap the flint, he felt his body slam against the brick facade of the nearby building. In most cases, he would be able to take care of himself in a one-on-one, but his assailant had caught him off guard. His chest felt crushed, and his legs went limp with fear. The larger man had a stranglehold on Jake's throat; Jake was gasping for air and his body flailed wildly. He could not breathe; his heart pumped violently. The attacker had lifted his lean physique off the ground and was holding him against the

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building by the neck. It was impossible to make a sound. Everything went black. The man's empty gaze was the last thing that Jake ever saw.

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They say the mirror does not lie, but for some folks that harsh reality is unacceptable. He had promised himself not to allow these occasional relapses into the past. He had decided that he would be a man and that was final, but the desire to lapse back into what he once was, lingered as strong as the drive for self-preservation. *I cannot stop now*, he thought. The makeup ritual was more than half-complete; it seemed somehow comforting, the easier mantra to bear. It was a constant struggle living amongst the masculine population. A few adjustments with the eyebrow pencil and the transformation would be complete.

"All dressed up and nowhere to go," Carl said aloud to himself. He was used to being alone. It had made life easier for him growing up the way he did. He was immersed in his transformation when the phone rang. It was about two o'clock in the morning, almost time for him to start the hunt. The boys in Atlanta did not start to venture out until well after eleven, and even then, it took time for things to heat up. He had already decided which of his particular haunts to visit for the night. Almost all of his ventures proved fruitless, but the compulsion was impossible to overcome. More often than not, Carl was ignored by the men at the bar, stared at with distaste, or made the brunt of cruel jokes.

"Damn it! Who could that be?" He snatched the phone off its cradle. "This is Carl Betz. Oh, it's you. What is it, Brian? I'm busy at the moment." Carl listened in quiet desperation as his brother prattled on for several minutes. "I'll have to think about it. I will have to check the accounts first, when I get back to the office. I can't give you an answer right now."

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Brian was upset and began to spew a stream of profanities toward his brother over the phone.

"Brian, I'm not going to listen to any more of this. You may come by the office tomorrow, and I'll have an answer for you then."

Carl hung up the phone. He was red faced and furious. His brother had come up with another hair-brained scheme to throw money down a rat hole. In the past six months Brian had squandered his entire yearly allowance; now he was back begging for more, as usual. *Something has to be done with that little bastard*, Carl was thinking to himself. He could hardly control his rage as he studied his reflection in the mirror. He lost focus on what he was doing when the phone had rung. The constant aggravation that his brother had become consumed him. It was getting too much to bear. He thought more and more, in recent days, about how much he wanted Brian out of his life. It would make *his* life much easier if Brian were not around. The thought had crossed his mind to hire someone to kill his brother, but he did not have the slightest idea how to go about it. The family wealth insulated him from people that knew about things like that.

Carl's family moved from Atlanta to Vancouver, Canada following his birth, where they relocated the headquarters of their diamond and jewelry business. It was not until years later, after the parents had passed away that Carl decided to move the operation back to Atlanta, Georgia. Almost all the people who had known his parents either were dead or had forgotten about Carl and his brother. Jean Settle was one of a few people who knew the family before and Carl was sure that his secret was safe with her.

Carl's parents left the business to their two children. Carl had control of running the operation owing to his superior intellect, while Brian held controlling interest by a small

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margin. In this way, the parents ensured the survival of the family business and their two sons, or at least they thought. Carl hated his brother. Brian was lazy, demanding, and a constant drain on their assets. He never let a day go by without taunting Carl in some way about his past, and held it over Carl's head that he could reveal his secret at any time he saw fit. Carl thought about killing Brian many times. However, he knew that he lacked the nerve to carry out a criminal act on his own.

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True to form, Brian showed up at his brother's office in the morning. Carl closed the door and locked it in anticipation of what was sure to come. Brian loved to make a fool out of him every chance he got; he knew there was not anything his brother could do, and he knew Carl would do anything to avoid a scene at work or in public. Brian dangled the family's secret over Carl's head, as a cruel child would taunt some unfortunate animal.

"What is it this time Brian—A new car, new business venture, or perhaps a villa in the South of France? The family fortune is not an infinite resource, you know. It still takes work; there are employees to pay, overhead to consider, and a hundred other things, not to mention the state of the economy. How can you be so foolish with your money? I simply cannot justify giving you another dime right now. You will have to get a job of some sort, but I will not have you working in the business. The last time we tried that, I lost several loyal employees because of your cruel antics."

"Fuck you, Carla," Brian said in his usual sarcastic tone. "It's my money too; don't you forget it. I am the one who lets you run the show, you little freak. Maybe, I'll arrange to call a meeting of the board and have you removed—how about that?"

"Don't delude yourself Brian. You have controlling stock, but the corporation set up by our parents has specific



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stipulations to protect the family business, that father built, from your ineptitude. Why do you think they did not leave you responsible for the business in the first place? You can't get rid of me anymore than I can get rid of you."

Brian was getting impatient. He had to come up with something to convince Carl to give him what he wanted. He reached into the lower pocket of his cargo shorts and pulled out a pocketknife. He threw his chair back in a wild rage, as he rose and approached his brother in front of the desk where Carl stood over him; he grabbed him by his tie. Brian placed the knife to Carl's neck. "You'll give me what I want you son-of-a-bitch or I'll cut your goddamned throat. I mean it."

Carl showed little emotion. He had been through this scenario before.

"Really Brian, do you think that it would be easier for you to convince a board of directors or a group of stockholders to give you what you want? You are not going to kill me. Besides, you would be doing me a favor. At least I wouldn't have to deal with your lazy ass any longer."

Brian retreated from the threat of physical violence, but he always knew in the end how to corner Carl like a trapped rat. He moved toward the intercom on Carl's desk. "I think I'll tell the secretary that my sister Carla would like to see the sales reports for yesterday, and when she comes in I'll explain the name reference to her. Nothing travels faster than office gossip, now does it?" Brian depressed the call button. "Shirley..."

"Okay! Okay Brian, what is it you want this time?"

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Carl sat with his chair turned toward the window. With a blank stare, he watched the traffic flashing by on Peachtree Street below. He wondered why he bothered to go on with his life; it had been nothing but confusion, shame and misery since the beginning. *How wonderful it must be to have the looks and*

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*the carefree attitude that Brian has always had*, he mused. Carl felt drained after the frequent confrontations with his brother; they left him depressed with a total loss of self-worth. Life was a hell from which he needed an escape, more now than ever. He was at the breaking point.

Another altercation between him and his younger brother had just ended. Carl looked at himself in the mirror, displeased as ever at what he saw. He often wondered how a person could possibly know for sure if they were in self-denial. He was confused, that was certain. The reflection in the mirror gave little in the way of distinguishing between the sexes. He stroked his smooth hairless face and ran his fingers through the hair on both sides of his head. With his hair pushed back, he imagined himself more mannish looking, but more like what one would expect of a bull dyke. The facial features looking back at him were equally nondescript. Carl could feel the rage building up inside each time he studied himself this way. He often imagined doing away with his parents, if they were still alive.

How could anyone know what his life was like? Almost from the day he was born, right up to the present, it has been a living hell. The mental trauma was a constant nightmare. He knew he was different. It took years of therapy to conclude that he needed to make a change in his life. The change, however, turned out not to be the 'end all' he had expected. Carl's state of mind remained constant after returning home. Marta his devoted housekeeper broke his thoughts.

"Another one of your brother's temper tantrums, Mr. Betz?"

"I'm afraid so, Marta."

"May I get you anything?"

"Not at the moment. Thank you."

Marta was one of a few people privy to Carl's disturbed past as a child and young adult. She sometimes wondered how Carl managed to have turned out as well as he did. For some, it took

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much less to become monsters in society. She recalled watching the news reports when the police had arrested Jeffery Dommer. She did not excuse that Dommer's crimes were so atrocious, but wondered if it was the complete fault of anyone who came from dysfunctional surroundings. Marta worried about Carl, his past, and how he used to enjoy torturing little animals; she wondered how he stood the continual harassment from Brian. At times, it was hard for her not to overstep her bounds and get involved in one of their arguments. She would do anything for Carl, and she was always there when he needed someone to lean on. Carl had viewed Marta as one of the family — he considered her family more so than he considered his own brother. The housekeeper wiped her hands on her apron and returned to the kitchen.

Carl would spend the rest of the day enveloped in a fit of depression. It would usually initiate a downhill slide lasting for days. It would only be a matter of time before he reached his limit. He reached for the telephone. It was time to take care of business.

"It's Carl Betz. I think it is time we took care of that little problem we discussed earlier. I don't care how you do it, just get it done."

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The warm, early-morning sun was beginning to radiate through the bedroom window hitting Steve in the face. The Druid Hills Road townhouse was quiet where Steve and Josh lay in bed at 10:30 a.m. Bill and Ed were in from New Kingston for the Pride festivities. The group of friends and their hosts had stayed up most of the night catching up on what they had been doing since they last met. Steve was still sound asleep, while Josh decided to get up, make coffee, and get to the Sunday paper first. He tried to rise without notice, but an arm reached out and grabbed the waistband of his shorts pulling him back down on the bed.

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“Where do you think you're going to *boy*?”

“I’ve got your boy hangin’, replied Josh, as he pulled Steve up for a good-morning kiss. They both had a good laugh and started wrestling in the sack.

“Okay, enough, I was on my way downstairs to start some coffee and get the Journal.” He started for the bathroom to wash his face and comb his hair before the others caught sight of him. Despite being an attractive man, even in the morning, Josh looked like a squirrel after a long winter’s hibernation with his hair standing straight up from tossing and turning in bed at night. He and Steve continued to be happy together since their trip to Tuscany two years ago, after the death of Steve’s former lover, David. Josh Walsh was a detective in the Atlanta police department at the time, investigating the murder of one of Steve and David’s neighbors. He asked for Steve’s help in getting cooperation from the gay community to aid in solving the murder.

Josh trudged out to the front steps of the townhouse in his sleep pants, T-shirt and bare feet to get the oversized plastic bag stuffed with the Sunday edition of *The Atlanta Journal & Constitution*. He straightened up and turned in time to catch the gay couple next door descending their adjacent stairway; he caught them staring at a good shot of his butt. They all smiled and nodded to one another.

It was a Sunday morning ritual for Steve and Josh, and sometimes their close friend Kate, to sleep in and later sit around the kitchen and peruse the newspaper department store ads. They would enjoy a leisure pot of coffee until sometime around noon, before venturing out. This Sunday was no different, despite having company in from out of town.

Kate was already in the kitchen when Josh came down to retrieve the paper; she had the coffee brewing. Josh pecked her on the cheek and greeted her with a cheery, “Good Morning”.

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Steve followed suit shortly afterward, entranced in the savory aroma, as *he* entered the room. The others were still in bed asleep while the threesome started to pick the paper apart as it lay on the table before them. Everyone had their favorite sections and went straight for them, lest someone else beat them to it. When they had finished staking their claims, the coffee mugs got passed around.

Kate fetched the pot and began to pour. “I take it everyone is having Java this morning,” she said. “I’m going to play Miss Domestic and make everyone breakfast.”

Josh sighed, “Oh, I was hoping you’d say that.” He loved it when Kate fixed breakfast. She did everyone’s eggs the way they liked them, especially his. He liked them over medium without being runny. “You missed your calling dol. You should have opened a diner; you would have done well for yourself.”

“Thank you, but I’ve done quite well for myself as things are. Besides, even though I love cooking for you guys. I don’t know if I could do it on a grander scale.”

They sat for several minutes each engrossed in their particular portion of the daily rag, when Josh said with surprise in his voice, “It looks like there’s been another murder downtown. Another young gay male has had his throat cut from ear to ear. This is the fourth one in the last month. I wonder what’s going on.”

“Where did you find that?” Steve asked.

“It’s here on the back page of the first section. Not much information in the article except to say what happened. It took place around 4 a.m.

“Four murders, four gay men with their throats cut, and the story gets back page coverage! Go figure. The only good fag is a dead one, isn’t that how it goes?”

“Now Steve, Don’t get your feathers ruffled,” Kate whispered in his ear.

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“Look at the front section, Kate. Does the short story about the current price per barrel of oil strike you as earth-shattering news these days?”

“Okay, okay I get your point. But, what can we do about it?”

“Well”, he grumbled. “There are rumors circulating in town about a possible full scale demonstration during Pride weekend. I’m sure that would shake up some important people in town, if they don’t get their act together.”

Josh spoke up again, “The victim’s name was Jake Barnett. He was about 5 feet 5 inches in height, fair complexion, sandy blond hair, around twenty years old, with blue eyes, and a slender build. That’s odd!”

“What’s odd about it?” Kate asked.

“Well, all the other victims had much the same description.” Josh looked up. “What’s wrong babe, you look as though you’ve seen a ghost?”

Steve looked at the others. “I knew Jake Barnett. He worked at the hospital a few years back. He was a decent, hardworking kid. Why would anyone want to do something like that to him?”

Bill Ferguson and Ed Stanley had entered the kitchen. “Who did what to whom?” Bill asked.

“There’s been another murder, Josh said; Steve knew the victim”.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Can I get you both some coffee?” Kate offered.

“Yes, thank you.” The fellas replied in unison.

Steve picked up the section with the write-up. “It says he was found around 4 a.m. He must have left the bar shortly before that. That is when Bulldogs closes. Someone must have discovered the body within minutes of the murder. I wonder if somebody at the bar followed him out, or if it was a chance happening.”

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Jean let out a deep sigh as she fidgeted with the knot in the back of her apron. She did what she could to help Kate in the kitchen and then immersed herself in the conversation taking place concerning the newspaper article. She often referred to the gay men in the community as her boys; many of them referred to her as "Mother".

"Oh, Ah just can't stand hearing about another one of those killin's. When are the police going to do something? Ah cannot imagine anyone wantin' to hurt any of mah boys. If Ah could get mah hands on that maniac..."

Josh patted the seat of the chair next to him. "Sit down Mother and relax."

When they all sat down again, Steve looked at Josh. "Why don't you see what you can find out about this case, he asked. You must still have some connections at your old job."

"I was thinking the same thing." Josh reached for his address book on the counter.

"Oh, I don't know if I could handle the excitement of another caper like the last one." Ed said in his best Stella Dubois' voice, as they all looked at one another and smirked.

Remembering the last time they had all got involved in tracking a killer, Kate said, "Steve, do you remember the time we had a loaded gun pointed at our heads? Are you sure you want to pursue this?"

"Josh is going to see what he can find out about these murders; that's all. It's not as though anyone has asked for our help this time. Don't worry sweet-thing. I wouldn't let anyone hurt you." Steve noticed the doubtful expressions on the faces of the others as he exclaimed, "*What?*"

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The following morning, Josh left the house to pay a visit to his former partner Lieutenant Paul Conklin. He was in a good mood and felt optimistic about the day ahead. After showering

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and getting dressed, he studied himself in the mirror for a brief moment.

Clothes make the man, so they say. Josh with his boyish good looks and well-developed frame was no exception. He looked professional enough, but not overdressed is what he was thinking. His schedule at the University was open for the morning and he would be free to take his time and invite Lieutenant Conklin out for coffee. Josh was sure he would be able to get his friend Paul to confide in him a few facts about the case he was working on.

Shortly after Josh left, Steve was off to work. Later, Steve was going to meet his friend Ronnie for a quick lunch at the Landmark Diner. Ronnie wanted Steve's opinion on a few issues that had come up among members of the parade committee. Ronnie had been active on the committee for the past two years; he trusted Steve's judgment and admired his people skills. He had been trying to get Steve to join the committee for some time, but Steve wanted no part of it.

Josh and Paul Conklin left the precinct and headed straight for Starbucks. They secured a table by a front window that was a little ways away from the others. This allowed for a bit more privacy for their sensitive topic of conversation. Paul had been a homophobe for almost all of his life. It was not until the last year or two that he began to show a change in his opinion of gays and lesbians. It was a shock to Paul when Josh came out of the closet following the case that Steve and his former lover helped the police solve. Paul knew that Steve did not like, or trust him much and he could understand why. He reasoned that if a man's-man like Josh Walsh could be gay, he might have the wrong idea about them, but he had not made up his mind yet. He had learned a lot about the gay community while working on that case with Josh. In addition, Josh always thought that Paul was a fair-minded man, despite his former homophobic views.



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The two men were good friends and partners while on the force. They sat face-to-face on opposite sides of the small round table, each with a "Grande" cup of coffee.

"It's good to see you again Josh. I miss having you around. How is the new professorship at Emory going?"

Josh loved his new position. He had liked being a detective too, but that was before Steve came into his life. He now had a job and a life outside of work.

"Thanks Paul, the job is going great. I think I have found my niche, and Steve and I are doing great. He's also getting on well at his new job as Call-center Manager. Things could not be better right now. How about you? Anything new going on at the precinct?"

"Nothing ever changes around there. You know that. Nevertheless, what brings you over to this end of town again? I know it wasn't me or the coffee."

Josh smiled. "Well you've got me there. I wanted to talk to you about the recent string of murders downtown involving those young, gay men."

Conklin was amicable, but direct; he looked at Josh for a moment. "You know the rules buddy. I'm not at liberty to say."

"C'mon Paul, it's me you're talking to. I want to know if you are making any headway on the case. I hear there are rumblings in the gay community of a full-scale riot over what they sense as indifference on the part of law enforcement."

"Well okay, off the record, there aren't many clues. We found four victims with their throats slashed from ear to ear and left for dead. The victims, covered in blood, each had a red poker chip found near the body. We have no idea what that's supposed to mean, except that it might be the killer's calling card."

"A red gambling chip, huh."

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“Yup, a red gambling chip. Curious though, they appear to be of a fancy sort of poker chip. Not like the plastic ones, you get with these new games. They look as though they are made of some kind of stone and they all have some intricate design in the middle. We’re checking into that now. That is about all I can tell you at this point. There does not seem to be any connection among the victims, except that they were all gay. Whether they knew one another or not is anybody’s guess. Is that what you were looking for?”

“Sort of, one of the victims was a friend of Steve's and I promised him I would find out what I could about what is going on. I do appreciate the information, Paul.”

“There is one other thing, Josh. We have one suspect. He was seen leaving the bar with one of the victims the night he was murdered. He admits being with the victim that night. Says they had sex and when he left the victim’s house, the guy was fine. That is all we got out of him. He has an attorney already. The guy’s name is Will Lang. We’re digging up what we can on him now.”

“Does it look as though robbery was the motive?”

“All the victims had their wallets on them with money inside; two of the victims still had rings and watches on. It doesn’t appear to be your average hate crime perp' either.”

“No,” Josh said. “It would seem the motive is more like revenge than hate. These murders were gruesome and brutal.”

“Looks that way, doesn’t it. However, we have to keep an open mind at this point until we have all the facts. If you have any ideas Josh, we could use all the help we can get. The closer it gets to Gay Pride Day the more restless people are getting. You wouldn’t consider scoping out the gay community for us, would you, off the record, of course? Y’all did do a fantastic job on the Carrington case.”

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“I’ll do what I can under one condition. You will have to let Steve help us out too. He has drive and determination when it comes to dealing with an injustice,” Josh insisted.

“You may use any resources you have, but remember Josh you’re not on the force any longer. Don’t break any rules, or step on any toes while y’all are digging for information. Understood?”

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Josh had time to go by the university library to finish preparing for a scheduled class in the early afternoon. He would call Steve later to let him know how the meeting with Lieutenant Conklin went. Steve was sure to be pleased with the information he had gathered and Paul’s permission to snoop around. He had to admit that he too had become excited about the prospect of dabbling in detective work again, even if for a brief period.

The library grew crowded with the usual throngs of students involved in research of one kind or another, with groups coming and going in a continual stream through the array of large glass doors leading into the vestibule. The bantering and chatter stopped on entering and started again on leaving. The students all gave the same respect to others that they expected. Emory’s expansive, modern library offered the best in equipment and body of knowledge for the tasks Josh had in mind to tackle.

It occurred to Josh while he was at the library to check the psychology reference books for clues to the mental state a person would have to be in, in order commit such pointedly brutal crimes. A month prior, he had also met one of the professors of psychiatry that lectured for the department. She was as amiable as she was attractive; he remembered her credentials were impressive. She had an extensive background in criminal psychiatry. Perhaps he could consult with her about this serial killer. It was something to consider.

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Steve's friend Ronnie had at last roped him into serving on a committee for the Gay Pride parade. Steve had a committee meeting to attend while Josh was meeting with Lieutenant Conklin. The meeting took place in a large conference center in one of the larger hotels on the I-285 perimeter. Several city officials attended with several leaders of the gay community. Steve felt out of place. He had not been active in this particular cultural setting before and he knew little about its inner-workings.

"I'm sure it won't take you long to get into the swing of things, Steve. Before you know it, you will be running the show. Let's get something to drink and I'll introduce you around to some of the key members of the committee."

"Sounds good to me, Ronnie."

Ronnie led Steve in a large circle around the border of the conference room a couple of times, while pointing out people with whom he thought Steve should get acquainted. One key player in particular, he explained, was Carl Betz. Carl was a wealthy Atlanta executive who took a great deal of interest in the Pride celebration each year. Ronnie pointed to a group of three men engaged in serious conversation.

"You see that big boned, odd looking fellow with the dark rimmed glasses?"

"You mean the one over there with the pouty lips that looks like Truman Capote?"

"That's the one," Ronnie nodded. "He spends much his own time and money getting this parade off the ground each year. He loves working with gay people, although he is not supposed to be gay himself, but that's another subject altogether. Anyway, I will introduce you to him in a moment. You'll be working as an assistant to him while keeping notes on anything that he needs reminding of later that would need his attention. Don't worry; he's" easy to get along with. I worked with him myself year

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before last. Carl is a little strange; he takes some getting used to, but I think he is okay. After all, how okay can a person with his kind of money be? Just don't try to get too personal with any questions and you should get along fine. Before you know it, you'll be caught up in all this craziness."

As soon as they had finished with the round of introductions, the committee meeting got underway. Steve was fascinated with the details of the parade that he had never thought about before. There was a lot more to it than meets the eye.

The occasional meetings gave Steve a chance to get out of the office and earn volunteer points that his company looked on with favor. Carl turned out to be an easygoing person, although Steve still found him eccentric and odd looking in a poignant sort of way. "*Well, we can't all be beautiful*", he thought. He was surprised to find out what a genuine person Carl was. Carl put Steve at ease with what he expected of him as his assistant. There was more to it than Ronnie had led Steve to believe. Even so, Steve was looking forward to working with this enigmatic, well-respected business leader. Steve believed people like himself could learn a lot from someone as business perceptive as Carl. With his new position as Operations Manager, Steve needed to hone his people skills and Carl took a liking to his naive assistant and admired Steve's enthusiasm.

That evening Steve and Josh discussed possible scenarios for the murder of the latest victim, Jake Barnett.

"Look Josh, I'm inclined to think that Jake picked up a trick at the bar and the guy murdered him."

"If that's the case, why would the killer do his dirty work on the street, right in the open? Why take that chance? Besides, none of the other newspaper articles on the previous murders pointed out the victims left the bar with another person. I think the murderer is picking his victims at random."

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“I thought you said Conklin told you that their only suspect was someone seen leaving the bar with one of the victims.”

“That’s correct babe, but that information wasn’t in the paper. And, my guess is their suspect is not going to pan out anyway.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Just a hunch, I still have some of the detective in my blood. Now, let’s get some sleep.” Josh reached over and pulled Steve into a tight embrace. Despite having a king-size bed, the fellas always slept close through the night. They kissed and held a long embrace, long enough for arousal to set in. Sleep would have to wait a while longer. They grinned at each other and dropped under the bedcovers.

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In early afternoon, under cover of the shade trees, Jean Settle was out pruning flowers. She had Iris of all varieties in various beds around her home and those of Steve and other close friends in the small community of townhomes. The strict home association and the contracted gardener looked the other way, since she did a superb job of making the grounds look so appealing. It was Jean’s way of getting out of the house for exercise and fresh air since the start of her retirement. She could catch passersby in their little community while they were coming and going, for a chat and the latest gossip. It was her way of keeping abreast of what was going on in the neighborhood. Anyone could tell you that if one wanted to know something, all one had to do was ask Jean Settle. Most of the gay guys in the area were fond of Jean and she considered them her boys.

Jean straightened up and brushed off dirt from her gardening gloves as she saw Steve and Josh pulling in to their driveway. She waved them over to say hello.

*MICHAEL VIEIRA*

“Well strangers, how are ya? What ya been up to lately? Nothin’ I wouldn’t do, I hope.”

Steve and Josh both gave her a big hug. “We’re just getting back from the store.” Steve grinned. “The flowers look beautiful. Need any help?”

“No, I’m almost finished. It’s starting to get a little too hot out here. I’ll finish up this bed in the evening when it’s a little cooler. How about something to drink? Come inside and fill me in on what has been going on with y’all. Haven’t seen you two in days and I like to keep track of mah boys.”

“Sounds good to me.” Josh held the backdoor to the kitchen open for the others. Something smelled delicious inside. Jean had baked something, as usual.

Once they had settled themselves in the living room, Jean offered the fellas a drink and some cookies she had made earlier.

“What kind of cookies did you make, Jean?” Josh asked.

“Your favorite”, she replied. “I was going to bring them over to your place later. You saved me the trip.”

Josh bit into one of the cookies with a look of total ecstasy.

“Are you wet?” Steve asked.

“Damn right, I am.” Josh shot him a wide grin.

Jean reentered the room from the kitchen with a cup of tea for herself. She sat in her usual chair and looked intently at the two men. “Now, tell me what you think of the murders that have been taking place. The papers ain’t sayin’ much. I suspect the police have enough on their hands with Gay Pride coming up. Have they arrested anyone yet?”

“Not that we know of,” Steve sighed. “We were wondering if you’ve heard anything from any of the guys that have visited you lately.”

“Well darlin’ if I had, you would have been the first to hear it from me. No, I haven’t heard a thing. But, I always keep my

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eyes and ears open, you know that.” Steve and Josh looked at each other with a smile.

Josh told Jean of the conversation he had with his former partner, Lieutenant Conklin. He related to her their willingness to help the police in gathering any information they might be able to muster from the gay community.

“You know I’ll do what I can to help find out what any of the boys know. Hawney, we have not had any excitement like this around here since getting Vicky Carrigan arrested for murder.

“Jean, do you remember Jake Barnett. He worked at the same hospital I did, and he came by one day to drop off some papers for me when I was out sick. You were at my house and I introduced you two that day.”

“Wha yes, I remember him. The paper mentioned that same young man as the last victim. Oh how awful, I knew that name rang a bell, but I didn’t make the connection right off. I guess things are gettin’ too close to home for comfort. I see why y’all want to help catch this criminal.”

“Exactly,” said Steve.

The threesome sat and talked for some time exchanging tidbits of minor gossip about the goings-on in the area. Steve mentioned that he was working on the Pride committee as Carl Betz’s assistant.

“Carl Betz?” Jean said. “Oh, what a shame about that poor family. I knew his mother well. We were both telephone operators at the phone company years ago. Ms. Betz felt cut off from the rest of the world, her doctor thought a job outside the home, and contact with others would do her some good. Lord knows, with their money, she didn’t need to work.”

“Why do you say, ‘that poor family’ Jean?”



*MICHAEL VIEIRA*

As Jean was about to explain, the phone rang. It was Kate Bishop. The two women exchanged pleasantries and Kate asked if Steve or Josh was there.

“Hawney, they sure are. Would you like to speak to one of them?”

“No,” Kate moaned. “Remind those two lemon heads for me that they were supposed to pick me up at the car dealer’s repair shop thirty minutes ago.”

“Oh dear, I’m sorry. I’ve been talking like a Myna bird over here. Don’t blame them, Kate. It’s not their fault they’ll be right over, bah-bah.”

Steve and Josh knew instinctively who it was on the phone and began to hustle themselves out of the house, saying a quick good-by to Jean and thanking her for the hospitality.

The guys drove to the car dealer's lot fighting the speed limit all the way. Steve sat deep in thought, without his usual backseat instructions to Josh. He wondered what Jean meant when she referred to what a shame it was about 'that poor family'.

## Chapter 2

When the guys arrived back at the townhouse, the others were getting ready for the night's festivities. Steve and Josh had received an invite to a big party thrown for Nathan Caldwell's lover. The invitation included friends. Neither of the guys was that fond of Nathan. He was much too pretentious for their blood. They would have preferred to skip the whole affair altogether, were it not for the opportunity to corner so many would be birds of a feather that one could cajole into singing. There would be about seventy people total in muster; several local dignitaries connected with the Pride celebration were to be present also.

Nathan was throwing the party for his lover's fiftieth birthday and the parties he threw were always legendary. The entertainment was top-notch as usual; so were the astonishing waiters and bartenders hired for the occasions. Everyone was keen about going. Since there would be a good number of gays present, they all knew it would be an excellent opportunity to do some probing for information about the murders. The gay populace is a communication device, in and of itself. Everyone knows something, or knows someone who knows something about what is going on, all the time. It is just a matter of getting people to open up with their little secrets that are usually kept within the confines of a clique. However, booze is one of the best antidotes to tight lips and it loosens the tongue when taken in quantity, which makes information gathering easier.

Nathan Caldwell inherited the elegant estate home, in the Pharr road area of Atlanta, from his grandmother, a wealthy dowager. The old house was a mansion of not too gigantic proportions; its appeal was not in its size but in its design. Decades ago, the house, erected to last by artisans who knew how to build a good solid house, lived up to its expectations.

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The homes of today could never stand up to the rigors of time the way that old home had. It still had the original barrel tile roofing outside and all of its unspoiled woodworking inside. Their parties were usually in the large second floor ballroom—such rooms were common in well-to-do homes several decades ago.

Steve, Josh, and the others arrived fashionably late at ten in the evening. The party was well under way. At that hour, they would not have to wait long for people to limber up. Steve heard someone call his name from the edge of the crowded room. It was Ronnie waving him over. The group approached and exchanged pleasantries.

"Steve, it's been ages. How are things going? I see you and handsome here are still an item."

"I'm afraid he's stuck with me for life," Josh said to Ronnie.

"Mmmm, *I* wouldn't mind sticking to you for life," Ronnie crooned. "Let's get y'all some drinks and find somewhere to chat. Our host won't be down for a few minutes yet.

"That sounds good to me," Kate added with an agreement from the others. "Just look at these beautiful decorations and the food on that buffet. Nathan obviously spared no expense for all this."

Josh turned to Kate. "I hate parties; I find it exhausting making small talk with people I don't know."

"You know me, Steve and a few others. Stick by us and avoid everyone else, if it will make you feel better."

The front bell rang continuously, as more and more guests arrived. Everyone in Atlantawas attuned to the fashionable hour to arrive at any given function.

Members of the city's gay elite, the bar crowd, proprietors of the leather shops and various other "family" owned and operated businesses stopped in to partake of the free booze, dinner, and festivities provided by Nathan and his lover. They

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spared no expense when it came to parties. The chatter and laughter of the crowd grew louder by the minute. It was getting difficult to carry on a conversation anywhere in the house.

Steve and Ronnie took the drink orders and wandered off toward the crowded open bar chatting in animated fashion as they disappeared into the congested room full of guests. Josh, Bill, and Ed found a vacant sitting area in a small room bordering to the ballroom. There would be enough time to join the festivities after Steve filled Ronnie in on their plans to get as much information as possible from the other guests about the recent murders. Ronnie knew many people and proved invaluable more than once when Steve needed to know what was traveling through the local rumor mill.

When Steve and Ronnie returned with the drinks, the group sat discussing the business at hand. Ronnie was more than willing to help, as usual. He gave Steve what little information he had on Jake Barnett, and who he had seen with Jake in recent weeks. Ronnie also knew the names of a few people who had been with a couple of the other victims before they wound up dead. *This is a start in the right direction*, Steve thought. He and Josh now knew where to start their questioning. Some of the people Ronnie mentioned attended the party.

Ronnie glanced toward the crowded ballroom, attracted by the swell of "For He's A Jolly Good Fellow". "Well, it sounds as though our guest of honor has joined the festivities. I suppose we should go in and wish him the best, before they roll out the cake. I guarantee it will blow you away. I got a glimpse of it out the window when it arrived from the caterer."

Steve and the others wished the birthday boy all the best and split up to mingle with the other guests so as not to seem cliquish. Kate was introducing Ed and Bill to some people that she knew while Josh and Steve paired off in another direction. Steve scanned the congested room and met the glance of Carl

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Betz engaged in conversation with a dignified looking man. They recognized each other with a nod. Steve pointed Carl out to Josh.

“That’s Carl Betz. The man I’m working with on the Pride committee.”

“Oh? I couldn’t tell whether the other guy was talking with a man or a woman. I’m not being cruel, but he has a generic appearance. I mean gender wise.”

“You know; now that you mention it, I knew there was something about him that I just couldn’t put my finger on. Though I understand he’s a nice enough person. From what I hear, he contributes a great deal to the gay community in our city.”

Carl Betz stood about five feet tall with light brown hair that showed graying at the temples which he combed straight back behind the ears. With his round face, smooth features, and an odd stance owing to a pear shaped physique he could easily be mistaken for a lesbian depending on what he was wearing at any particular time. Clothes sometimes don’t give any clues these days.

Steve had no sooner finished his sentence than they noticed Carl approaching. “Well Steve, this is a surprise. I didn’t know you were going to be here. It’s good to see you. And, this must be your other half?”

“Yes, Josh, this is Carl Betz. I’m working as his assistant on the Pride committee that I told you about. Carl is one of our local business leaders and a contributor to the Pride festivities.”

“It’s an honor. Steve has told me a lot about the committee, and how much he has learned about what goes into the making of the Pride celebration. I think he’s enjoying the diversion from his day-to-day routine.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it,” Carl said in his nondescript voice. You boys enjoy yourself this evening. It was nice to meet

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you Josh. I'll take your leave and get back to a friend over there to finish a little wager we were making.”

After Carl left, Josh and Steve mingled with friends and new acquaintances keeping in mind their primary quest for information gathering on the local murders. Kate and the others would most likely be doing the same. Several guests they had spoken with offered information on a couple of the victims, whom they were last seen with, and who they were known to be seeing shortly before their untimely deaths.

Steve looked at Josh and remarked, “It’s amazing how much information you can get from these folks just by asking. They have so much to tell; I can’t understand why they don’t come forward with it.”

“Look at it this way; most of those people haven’t exactly been treated fairly by the system during their lifetime. There’s a lot of justified mistrust on their part.”

“I’m aware of that. But, there are times when we need to do something besides hide out in the closet.”

“Relax babe. Let’s get another drink and find Kate and the others. What’d you think of that cake? Ronnie sure wasn’t kidding when he said it was no small work of art.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Steve replied. “That cake alone must have cost a small fortune. I guess the love fires are still burning in that relationship.”

Josh looked at Steve. “I wonder how we’ll look to each other when *we’re* in our fifties.”

“You’re expecting that long a relationship?”

Josh gave him a dubious slug in the arm, followed by a long passionate kiss. “Yes, I do.”

Much to his surprise, Josh spotted a former police colleague in the crowd. He wondered if he was a straight friend of the hosts', or if he was gay. If he was homosexual, Josh never suspected.

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“Steve, there’s Cal Whitmore over there; he’s a cop I used to work with. Let’s go over and talk to him.”

“You go ahead babe. You two will start talking shop, and I don’t want to be a third wheel. I’ll be around; when you’re ready, come and find me.”

Steve stood by one of the ornate old bureaus that adorned the walls of the ballroom sipping his vodka and tonic. He was thinking how little he knew about antique furniture when a handsome looking older man approached him. He introduced himself as Howard Copeland an old friend of Nathan Caldwell.

"Nice piece isn't it?"

Steve looked bewildered. "Beg your pardon?"

"The Louis VX bureau your standing next to, I used to dabble in antiques some years ago, but there are so few available now. Not much money in that anymore, the real money is in good quality reproductions these days. Though I am sure you’re not interested in hearing about that. I understand that you boys have been making inquiries about the case involving a few 'family' members."

"Word sure travels fast in this city."

"I'm not trying to pry into your business; I merely meant to offer my services, if you should need any help. Let me give you my business card. Give me a call sometime next week.

Steve was impressed with Howard Copeland, but he did not know what to make of him. *I wonder what he meant by his services*, Steve thought he should follow up with him, since he gave me his card.

A few days after the party, Steve called Howard's office. The business card listed him as an attorney for Styles, Copeland & Sharp, Inc. one of the more prestigious law firms in the city. Their offices were located outside the I-285 perimeter.

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Steve and the others gathered after a couple of hours to compare notes. Everyone had enlisted the aid of several people in the gay community to keep their eyes and ears open for any information that could be of help in tracking down the killer. The general feeling about the whole affair was one of anger and resentment that progress on the case was slow to nonexistent by those that should be doing something, or at least nothing was being made public. Rumbblings of a full-scale demonstration were in the works for some time during Pride weekend.

"That doesn't sound good," Steve said. "I think the first suggestion we might make to Lieutenant Conklin is to start getting some information about the progress of the investigation out to the general population."

Bill agreed with Steve. "It's not as though they have to give the whole story or any relevant information out. All they have to do is let everyone know that they're working on the case." Everyone nodded in agreement.

Josh said, "I think it's also important that we try to talk with some of the people who are in the forefront of planning this demonstration. We have to try to convince them that it would not be in the best interest of our community. It might even bring an end to the Pride parade as we know it. Once it starts causing major problems, the city could start cracking down on the festivities, despite all its good for the local economy. Their tolerance will only stretch so far, even if that particular weekend does bring in several million dollars in revenue for the city."

Kate agreed, "You've got a point there."

"Well, I know of one person involved," Ed offered. "I was just talking to him a few minutes ago. He sounded like a real militant -- an angry sort."

"Good going y'all. We'll compare notes again tomorrow, and then we'll decide in what direction we need to take this. I'm beginning to feel that we might be able to make a difference



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in this case. I know some of you must have reservations after the last time we got involved with a police investigation."

"Ohhh honey!" Ed was psyched up. "You know how I love the excitement. It's so much fun being around you folks. I'm just now recovering from the last caper we got ourselves involved in."

Steve had a word of caution for the others. "Well, let me remind y'all that no one has to be involved with any more than they feel absolutely comfortable."

Bill looked at Ed. "Yes dear, it's too soon to get your panties in a wad.""

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After Josh related to Steve that Paul Conklin asked for their help, he explained that he had also arranged to view the body of Jake Barnett. Steve was apprehensive. He tried to argue his way out of it. It wasn't the site of a corpse that bothered him. This was someone he knew; he wasn't keen on seeing what had been done to him.

"What purpose is that going to serve?"

"Sometimes a body can give a number of clues that could help lead to the criminal's identity. A lot of training as a detective is showing us how to interpret various signs on a corpse that might not be readily obvious as clues to most people. The medical examiner can also give us more information based on tests that he ordered and the results of the autopsy. Besides, I want you to take a good look. You have a knack for seeing minute details that most people would overlook."

An hour later, Steve was standing alongside the body of Jake Barnett with Josh and the medical examiner. His initial reaction was to turn and vomit, but he overcame the temptation for fear of looking ridiculous. He had seen corpses during his

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hospital days, but none in the condition of this victim. *Had the others looked this bad*, he thought.

The corpse of the young man before them had a white waxy hue. A bloodless gash surrounded the throat from side to side, exposing tissue and bone. The boy's scalp had a small patch of hair ripped out. It made angry as hell. Josh studied Steve's expression. He seemed to be daydreaming; but in fact, Steve was thinking about the wound inflicted on the victim's neck. The incision appeared higher on the left side than on the right.

He stared long and hard at the ravaged body of the young man he had once known. "It would appear that our killer is left handed."

"My thoughts exactly, the wound on the neck is angular and starts higher on the victim's left side."

"From what you mentioned before, the killer must have backed him up against the building and cut off his air supply. When he collapsed, he grabbed him by the hair and cut his throat. That would explain the damage to the hair and scalp."

"I don't remember the pathologist mentioning it, but I'll double check to make sure he came to that same conclusion. Good job, babe. We'll make a real detective out of you yet."

"Thanks, but no thanks."

During the drive home, Josh filled Steve in on the other facts about the case that Paul Conklin gave him earlier.

"A red gaming chip?" Steve asked. "What could that possibly mean?"

"That's what we need to figure out. I figured we could get Bill and Ed to make a trip over to the Emory University Library and do some research on antique gambling chips. The ones found on or near the bodies of the victims were not your run-of-the-mill poker chips. They looked much older, a type made of a different material than the plastic ones that come with games today."

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"That's a good idea. I think Bill and Ed would enjoy the diversion from sitting around the townhouse reading and doing chores."

As the guys drove down Peachtree Street, good-looking men were seen everywhere -- some jogging, some in business clothes, some downright erotic.

"Look up there." Steve gestured with a nod toward a third floor balcony of an apartment building. A hot number standing in a glossy, bright aquamarine Speedo was watching the traffic go by and another in a candy-apple-red Speedo with a dark tan sunbathed on a chaise lounge.

Josh glanced toward Steve. "Hungry yet?"

"No, I was just looking. I have better than that right here." He looked back at Josh. "Oh! You mean for food. Yes!" He looked embarrassed and turned toward the window.

"Yes, I mean for food," Josh smirked. "It's lunchtime. There are lots of good places around this area that we could go for a bite to eat. What do you feel like having?"

"How about the Philly Connection for a cheese-steak sandwich? There's one just down the street a ways on the right."

"Sounds good to me." Seconds later, Josh pulled into the parking lot.

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Steve was still puzzled why Howard offered his help at the party last Saturday night and how he would be able to help with the murder investigation. They agreed to meet around 2 p.m. , at Howard's office in the tinted, green glass high-rise behind Perimeter Mall.

He was prompt and arrived at 2 p.m.; the secretary showed him into Howard's office. Howard sat behind a large cherry wood desk; it remained organized, polished, and fitted with a matching silver desk set, complete with a pointed blade letter opener. The handle sported a knight in armor complete with

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royal crest. It was a corner office with two of the walls composed of floor to ceiling windows overlooking the busy street below. The carpet was a plush blue-gray with an eighteen-inch border of a complementing darker shade all the way around the room. The lithographs that hung on the walls were antique originals. It did not take an expert to know that. The office was impressive to say the least—no doubt intended to impress clients and intimidate the opposition.

"Mr. Armstrong, it's good to see you. Please, have a seat. I'm glad you decided to meet with me. May I call you Steve? I feel as though I know you already."

"Please do. I have to say you've stirred my interest with your offer to help with information about the killings of the gay men in town."

They shook hands. He was in a hurry to get right down to business and started to speak, but Howard interrupted.

"Before we get into that, I must have your complete assurance that my part in this whole thing will remain between the two of us. Several people have assured me that you are a trustworthy, and a well-respected individual. All I need is your word that what information I give you is in complete confidence."

"You have my word on that Mr. Copeland."

"Howard, please." He paused for a brief moment, turned and stared out at the street below.

"You know, the city's getting bigger every day. In the past, we had to deal with old-fashioned ideas and prejudices, and now we have new ideas and new prejudices. In a way, nothing really ever changes, does it? The people at the top have privileges that those at the bottom do not. My job as an attorney is to try to ensure that the law smoothes out some of the larger bumps or injustices. We cannot always accomplish everything we would like to; we have to make concessions and sometimes

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face the situation. And there are times when we have to use alternate means to justify the end, if you follow me." Howard looked Steve in the eyes.

"I think I do." Steve answered in a cautious manner.

"This firm represents some of the utmost important people in the state of Georgia. Those of us in the firm are privy to a great deal of information that the general public is not. We have a reputation to uphold to stay on top in this business. That's why I have to be careful with whom I share information."

"I fully understand your position. My partner and I are helping gather what information we can from people in the gay community about the murders. We want to try to get the gays in town involved in helping track down this killer. It's possible that someone has information that could be useful. We're also trying to stave off a demonstration during the big weekend. Is there something that you know that might be of help?"

"I have some information. I do not know how much help it will be, but I am willing to take the chance on giving it to you and Josh Walsh. He *is* your partner, correct?"

"That's right," Steve assured him.

Howard Copeland sat on the front of his desk and looked straight at Steve. "You know, I think you're one of a few people in the city that can take up the yoke and see this through. I heard about your dealings with the police awhile back when you helped find out who killed your neighbor. You and your friends came up against some tough hurdles, you, especially. While I cannot involve myself at this point, I can be here for you if need be, perhaps with legal advice if nothing else. There is someone in the city with a good deal of political influence. He's a wealthy man. I would suggest that you keep an eye on him. He could lead you to your man. I have it on good authority there's a good chance that he may be the one, or at least involved." Howard gave Steve the name in confidence.

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Astonished, Steve gasped, "You've *got to* be kidding. What reason would he have to do these young guys in?"

"I can think of a couple of reasons," Howard said. He related them to Steve. Steve could not believe what he was hearing; it was too bizarre. *People can be devious*; he struggled to resolve with himself what he had just heard.

"Share this information with Josh and no one else," Howard insisted. "If it gets out where you got the information I'm ruined and this firm will be too."

"I have to say I'm shocked. I wondered how you were going to be able to help when you suggested we meet. Now I know, but it wasn't what I was expecting."

"I'm sure you know by now Steve that the powers-that-be care little about gay people in general. We as a group are no more than a political pawn in this world, both in history and the present-day."

"You said *we*?"

"Yes, that's right. My marriage is a cover for both my wife and me for reasons of our own. I have had a secret lover for the past twenty-five years. Now, can you understand why I have a stake in this case? I have had to stand idly by in the past and keep quiet about legislation that strips more and more rights away from gay people, but there is a limit. When it comes to out-and-out murder, something has to be done. I may be old fashioned, but I swore to uphold the law. It has been my life."

"I understand. You can expect complete confidentiality from me. I am also interested in seeing justice done when it comes to gay rights. I believe that any group of people can and should lead their lives as equals with the rest of our society. Unfortunately, too many of us are afraid to take a stand. You can count on me, Howard."

The two men shook on it and Howard gave Steve a pat on the back as he showed him out.

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Howard smiled to himself. It crossed his mind that he should give himself a pat on the back for having convinced Armstrong to aim for a United States senator in conjunction with the rash of recent murders.

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Howard Copeland had done some sleazy things in life, but putting the screws to his old colleague Senator Conn took the cake. It was not always that way with him. He started out as a promising young lawyer at the top of his class at Emory University School of Law. He was ambitious all right, but not yet morally deficient. Somewhere along the line though, Howard picked up a taste for money and power; it increased over the years to the point of becoming an obsession. To say that he was a double-crosser would be an understatement. Those who knew him well enough, knew better than to turn their backs on him. Howard's charismatic air and helpful manner had misled Steve Armstrong. Howard always had a hidden agenda when helping anyone.

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Josh was on his way to the university cafeteria when he ran into another of the professors, a trusted friend, he had confided in about the murder case.

Josh extended his hand. "Terry, it's good to see you. Where have you been the last couple of weeks?"

"Been to the mountains camping. I needed a break. Things here were getting hectic and I stressed out. You know how it is. Sometimes you just have to take some time for yourself and get away from it all."

"Yeah, I hear ya. How about joining me for lunch?"

"Sure thing, I was just on my way to get something. Say, how are things going? Are you finding leads on that serial killer?"

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"We've come across several interesting bits of information from various sources. I'll fill you in after we find a place to sit."

Josh filled Terry in on what the group had found thus far. He wanted to get Terry's take on things. Terry was one of the leading prosecuting attorneys in the city before he retired to teach law.

"We've also got some information on Senator Conn from a confidential source."

"Who's the source? You can trust me Josh c'mon."

"It happens to be one of the attorneys at Styles Copeland & Sharp."

"Whoa! You are not telling me you got information from Howard Copeland! Man you had better take whatever he gave you with a grain of salt. That guy is totally unreliable when it comes to the truth. If he offered his help without a request, he has a reason for it. He either wants something or he's trying to do someone in."

Josh looked astonished. Terry had hit the nail right on the head; he had not even mentioned of whom he was speaking.

"Man, am I glad I ran into you today. This could shed more light on where we need to focus our attention."

"Tell me exactly what Copeland had to say."

Josh gave him the gist of the conversation between Howard and Steve.

"I wouldn't believe a word of it." Terry cautioned his friend.

"Howard Copeland hates Senator Conn. He did everything he could to keep Conn from winning that senate seat. He made a fool of himself in the process and he almost lost his billing with the firm."

"Wow, I guess you're right." Josh sat back in his chair and sighed. "I don't know what to think of him now."



*MICHAEL VIEIRA*

"Don't get me wrong, Josh. Styles Copeland & Sharp is a damn good, reputable law firm. I'm not speaking about the firm. It's Howard alone that I'm speaking of."

"I understand what you're saying."

The two men chatted while finishing their lunch and afterward, Josh returned to his office before his next class. He was eager to call Steve and fill him in on what he had found out.

## Chapter 3

Everyone assembled at the townhouse for Thursday morning breakfast. Kate made scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast. Moments before the others came downstairs, the coffee awaited; the aroma filled the house and lured everyone to the kitchen. They were all in good spirits for the start of the day. Bill and Ed were the only two that did not have to report for work. As during their previous visits, they insisted on keeping things picked up around the house while the others were away for the day. They would shop for, and prepare the evening meals.

Breakfast started out with the usual banter among the couples and Kate. Bill picked on Ed. Josh and Steve needled each other about how much time each took in the bathroom. Everyone got on Kate's case, now and then, to keep her on her toes. The atmosphere was lighthearted, with plenty of laughter. They had become a close-knit group of friends, all dependent on one another. Kate's fiancé would on occasion join them when his busy schedule allowed. A top-notch architect needs to travel extensively and he sometimes took Kate along, when she was not traveling or attending to her own business venture.

Kate depended on her extended family for companionship. Steve and Josh both loved having her around. She did not get in the way of their relationship in the least. The three kept no secrets among themselves. Bill and Ed were as close, but they lived in New Kingston, New York and visited occasionally, especially for the Pride festivities.

The mail delivery at the townhouse was early, being first on the postal route, usually before Steve and Josh left for work. Steve heard the mail drop through the chute in the front door, as it landed on the floor of the foyer. He got up from the table to retrieve it, so he and Josh could look it over before leaving for the office. The delivery amounted to three envelopes. One had a

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strange looking bold print lettering on the face, addressed to residents of their unit. Steve opened it and said, "Look at this, Josh. The shit has already started."

"What is it?" Kate asked.

Josh announced to the others that it was a threatening letter. "It says here, 'Y'all better mind your own business and stay out of the murder investigation. Watch out or you'll end up like the others'. There is no signature, of course."

Bill smirked. "Well, that didn't take long."

Ed is the "screamer" in the group, but no less lovable. He said in his usual distaff manner, "I for one am not afraid."

Kate, as usual, became concerned for everyone getting involved in another dangerous situation like the one before. She too enjoyed the thrill, though she would never admit to it.

"Okay everyone; it's time to reaffirm our commitment or non-commitment to the task ahead of us. There is no shame in backing out, if anyone wishes to do so. In fact, it's probably the sensible thing to do," said Steve. Josh nodded in agreement.

As in the previous murder case they had all taken part in solving, everyone was insistent about taking part. With blank stares on their faces, the next few moments they spent in silence sipping coffee preoccupied with their own thoughts.

"Gotta go," Steve groaned as he pushed his chair back and stood to leave. Kate complimented him on the fit of his dress slacks and how good he looked in the dark blue shirt that Josh had given him for his birthday. She gave him a hug and a peck on the cheek and wished him a pleasant day at the office.

"How about me? Do I get the same? I have to leave too." Kate obliged Josh willingly; she cooed, "Who could refuse a gorgeous man like you."

Ed leaned toward Bill and whispered in his ear, "I sure as hell couldn't."

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"Well boys," Kate said to Bill and Ed. "Shall we start cleaning up this mess?"

Ed escorted Kate to the door. "You go to work sweetie; we'll take care of the house, the shopping and whatever around here. See you tonight for dinner?"

"Sure thing," Kate smiled. She gave Ed a hug and headed off to the gallery.

Kate drove through town with the top down on her convertible, enjoying the fresh air and the wind in her hair. Her mind wandered as she maneuvered the route on autopilot that she had taken many times before. She could not help thinking about the last time she and the others had got involved in a murder case. It was not easy getting over finding the body of her neighbor on his kitchen floor one morning as she stopped by in response to his email. This time, of course, she would not be a prime suspect, but there were bound to be some tense moments, if they continued to involve themselves—not that she was thinking of backing out mind you. Kate loved her gay friends and she has always been a staunch supporter of their struggle for equal rights. Her fiancé, Dean, felt the same. She could never be with anyone who felt any different.

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Steve arrived at his office and began signing onto his computer when a call transferred through from the front desk interrupted him. He picked up the receiver; before he could speak, he heard his mother's voice.

"Hello dear, I know you just got in, but I just had to call and let you know the good news. Your father and I are coming to town this weekend. We'd love to see you, if you and Josh aren't busy."

Steve loves his parents as much as anyone, but the thought of this poorly timed visit caught him off guard.

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"Why of course we're never too busy for you and dad," Steve said. "We have company staying at our place right now, but I'm sure we could make room for two more."

"Oh no dear, we wouldn't think of imposing. Besides, we're already booked at the Hyatt Hotel on Piedmont a few blocks from your house. Your father has a three-day business conference to attend. I thought perhaps we could get together for dinner one evening."

"I'm sure we could arrange that. Let me talk to Josh and I'll get back to you sometime this afternoon."

"That will be fine dear. Give my love to Josh and the others."

"Will do, mom. Give mine to dad. Bye."

"Good-bye, dear."

His parents' unexpected visit flustered Steve. It was not so much his dad, but he did not want his mother to find out about their involvement in the case concerning the recent slayings in the city. Although Steve is close to his mom and dad, he cringes at the thought of their occasional visits. His mother, despite being well off and an attractive woman, has a taste for the gaudiest jewelry. In addition, she often, but unintentionally finds some way to embarrass him in front of his friends, relatives, and on occasion the general public. For instance, there was the time his mother yelled out from spectator seating, after he took a fall at one of his Navy boxing matches: "You are wearing your supporter, aren't you dear? One can't be too careful." He always felt so juvenile after one of those episodes.

*I'll have to tell the others that she's going to be in town,* Steve reminded himself. They have met her before; there should not be any need to prepare them in detail for what to expect. Josh and the others found her amusing, but that did not assuage Steve any.

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Steve was still reeling from the information given to him by Howard Copeland when his mother phoned. He wondered how he was going to keep these new facts from the group, or *if* it would be right to keep it from them. Now, on top of all that he had to worry about his mother and dad being around. He questioned himself and wondered if it would be a good idea to get involved in tracking a killer again. He was beginning to lose trust in the world around him; the whole power structure in the country looked to him as though it were corrupt and biased, in one way or another. It was time to clear his head, for the time being, and get down to work. He would have to deal with the other issues later. He was aware that he used that escape mechanism all too often.

Steve was not normally the type to avoid problems. The business acuity he had picked up during his years as a hospital nurse was the main reason he landed the position as call center manager for one of the nation's largest insurance companies. He fit the bill perfectly and quickly gained the respect of his subordinates, as well as his superiors.

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The heat and humidity in the city continued without let-up. The weather predicted no change for the next several days. Everyone agreed it was too hot to cook; they decided to go out and eat in the evening. Steve had a rough day at work and was glad for the change of routine, as were the others. They agreed on the Landmark Diner on Roswell Road, as the best choice for the evening meal. The Landmark, a large roomy diner built in retro-design with sleek lines and a shiny chrome exterior was a favorite with the group. Besides having an excellent menu, it has an in-house bakery with glass cases strategically placed near the entrance, surfeited with all kinds of cakes and pastries. There is not much of a wait during the week and it would be no

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trouble finding seating for six—they had included Jean Settle in their plans.

Steve had a suggestion. "Before we get our meeting started, let's order."

Josh was eager. "I'll second that,"

Everyone relaxed and began to unwind over something to drink, when Steve began to fill everyone in on his meeting with Howard Copeland.

Steve made note: "It appears, there's a lot more to these murders. We've been asked to help with something much deeper than we expected. Copeland gave me several pieces of information that make me wonder whether it's a good idea for us to continue with our involvement in the case. For one thing, there could be some political agenda behind these murders as well as the usual prejudice against gays. It doesn't appear on the surface to be just a bunch of hate crimes, but there's more to it than that—much more."

Kate looked puzzled. "It sounds as though you're having second thoughts."

"Yes, I have to admit, I've begun to wonder if we could be getting ourselves in deeper than we should. I can't shake the feeling of dread over what the last escapade cost us. I care too much for all of you to suffer the loss of anyone. Josh can handle himself; I know that. He's got the background and expertise, but I'm not so sure about the rest of us."

"Well hawney," Jean Settle said in her usual drawl. "I for one don't have much to lose. I'm too old to worry about dyin' and I knew two of the boys that were murdered. I don't want to lose anybody any more than you do, but we can't just stand by and do nothin'. Can we?"

The others were chattering among themselves and wondering what in the world had changed Steve's overall outlook.

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Josh took the floor. "Hey babe, it's not like you to give in so easily. What's going on?"

"Well, okay. I have information given to me at my meeting with Copeland that I swore to keep between Josh and myself but I cannot, in good conscience, have y'all involving yourselves without including you in on everything. I've been struggling with how to handle this. The information would ruin Howard and his law firm if it gets out to the wrong people. I trust y'all implicitly, but I also think that a promise is a promise. Nevertheless, I feel that something has to put an end to what is going on in our community."

"I'm sure I speak for all of us when I say the information you've been given will go no further than this group," Josh added.

"I sincerely believe that too," Steve said. "But, I have had to wrestle with my conscience and weigh the pros and cons of sharing this information. Without keeping y'all in suspense any longer, I believe it would be in the best interest of solving this case to share everything."

Ed let out an audible sigh, "Sweetie you're killing us. Just let it out already!" Kate and the others agreed. They were all as eager to hear what it was that Steve knew. They had all taken part in finding the murderer of their neighbor Jeff Landry and they had all experienced some tense moments during that time. Everyone was sure that this time would be no different. Josh put his arm around Steve and said, "Give us the scoop babe. I think we're all prepared."

"Okay, here it is. Howard Copeland told me that he overheard a conversation between two influential members, after a racquetball game, at the country club, while getting dressed on the opposite side of a row of lockers. He could not identify the voice of one of the men, but he knew the other well, despite their conversation being hushed to avoid someone



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overhearing. Howard could hear most of the conversation, with the door to his locker open. The gist of the conversation was that Senator Conn wanted to stir up trouble in the gay community to make him look good by quelling an impending riot before the Pride celebration got underway. He has been a staunch supporter of gay rights in the past and believes that he has enough influence within our community to get them to listen to him. If keeping the crowd under control did not go his way, the blame could be shoved off on his opponents. It would be a win-win situation for the senator, come the time to throw his hat into the ring for the presidential race. He's the favored democratic candidate from Georgia."

Kate gasped aloud. "That dirty rat. All this time he's been courting the gay vote and now we find out he's a fraud."

"The question is: What is he doing to cause all this trouble before the Pride celebration? That conversation doesn't necessarily mean that he's behind the murders, Steve".

"That's true Josh, but I think it's worth checking out, don't you think?" Josh agreed.

Bill came up with a good point. "Well this puts a new slant on the case; suppose your SenatorConn has the police in his pocket. What then? We might just be spinning our wheels."

Josh interjected, "The thought has occurred to us, but we can't just assume that if we plan to accomplish anything in this case. We will have to be careful whom we deal with and with whom we share our information. Steve and I don't want to get any of you into trouble, but we still think you've proven yourselves to be useful in gathering information from our associates in the community."

After the food arrived and the waiter retreated, Steve continued to brief the others on information that would be crucial to their search for suspects behind the egregious murders.

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"The killer left a couple of clues that Josh learned of from his old partner, Lieutenant Conklin. The most important of which is the red antique gambling chips placed beside the body of each of the victims. At this point, no one knows what this means. The police determined the chips were rare antiques. Josh is going to try to get one of the chips for us to look at."

The discussion lasted throughout the meal. Afterward, everyone made a trip to the front of the diner to select a desert from the vast array of scrumptious delights available in the glass showcases.

During their meeting, no one noticed how crowded the diner had become. The mixed crowd appeared to be favored in number by couples and groups of single gay men. The atmosphere had grown more festive since Steve and his party arrived. The guys noticed that their table was the main attraction of several other patrons.

"It looks like a pre-bar gathering in here and you fellas are providing the eye candy to get the evening started." Kate and Jean enjoyed a laugh at the expense of their escorts.

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The BMW seated all six in relative comfort for the drive home. Jean was her usual jovial self, poking fun at the guys and making suggestive remarks about their recent flirtations at the diner. Ed joined her in the banter. Kate found this amusing, much to the chagrin of the other fellas.

Bill walked Jean home when they arrived at the townhouse.

Within minutes of their arrival, the phone rang. Steve answered the call in the entry hall, while the others went to make themselves comfortable in the living room. No one suspected what was going on during the call except Bill, who had returned by the front door. Steve looked agitated and his voice was low, but firm.

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"You can take your threats and stick them up your ass, whoever you are. This is not the first time we've had to deal with people like you and your kind. In addition, you can tell your boss that we're on to him. He won't get away with his dirty little plan. I intend to see that he is exposed for what he really is." Steve replaced the receiver short of slamming it down.

"Trouble, already?" Bill asked.

"It seems to be, I don't know how they got the word so soon that we were looking into the case. Anyway, let's join the others and I'll fill y'all in."

Steve handed Bill a couple of glasses. Bill supplied them with ice and handed Steve his preferred bottle and the two fixed themselves a drink before sitting down with the others. Josh had turned on the news. Something about the most recent murder was about to come up in a few minutes following a commercial break. They were all eager to see how the media would cover the situation, and the resulting problems the city might face in the next few weeks. Steve decided to wait until the news crew covered the story before telling the others about the phone call. Bill said nothing and left it to Steve.

After the news flash, that was all too brief, Steve started the conversation rolling.

"All right folks, we've got something to think about already. I just got a phone call from someone who says he knows what we're up to, meaning he knows that we're in the market for information leading to whoever is behind the murders. How or where he got the information I do not know; he didn't say. He *did* say that any one of us could wind up like the other victims, unless we keep our noses out of his business. He sounded serious enough. If anyone has second thoughts, this is your last chance to get off the bus to hell. No joke." Josh and the others were silent.

Kate spoke first. "What's our next move guys?"

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Steve looked at Josh who had the background for this area of detective work. "Well, we do have a few leads from people that we spoke to at the party. I suggest we divide the leads and follow up on those to start. We can have Jean make some calls from home to her extensive network of contacts. She might just be able to come up with someone else who knows something useful. We also need to tell her about the phone call. While we appreciate her willingness to help, I would like to keep her at as low a profile as possible. I'm sure y'all understand."

Bill and Ed sat close on one of the comfortable love seats, while Josh sat beside Steve and Kate on the matching sofa. Kate curled a strand of her ebony hair between her fingers as she stared in a trance at the television screen. Bill and Ed were making quiet conversation and Josh was nuzzling his face in Steve's neck.

"Well, since I'm the third wheel around here, I think I'll go see what I can whip up for cocktails."

The guys were all for it. Anyone of them could testify to Kate's facility with booze.

"Poor Kate, I wish her fiancé would get back home soon. I know she misses him and it would be nice to spend some time with them together." Steve looked after Kate like a brother.

After the Apple Martinis, she whipped up—a delicate mixture of apple vodka, apple pucker, and sour mix—they all settled down to watch a movie. Steve and Josh escorted Kate home afterward and saw her safely inside before returning to the house. Besides checking out the house for her before she entered, the guys always enjoyed the evening stroll with Kate. "What would we do without her," Josh remarked.

"I'm sure I don't know, but I hate to think what will happen once she and Dean marry."

"Has she said something about that?"

"No. However, I'm sure it will happen sometime."

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"Well, let's not get ahead of ourselves," Josh said. He stopped and turned Steve by his shoulders to face him. He pulled Steve to his chest and squeezed him tight while kissing him, unconcerned about whom might see.

Steve laughed. "I don't know about you, but I'm getting wood."

"I am too and I know just what we can do with it when we get home." Josh took Steve by the hand and started walking up the sidewalk at a quickened pace.

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Bill and Ed were watching another movie when the guys returned to the house. Josh told them that he and Steve had some clothes to try on that they had bought; they started for the stairs.

Ed called after them, "I hope you bought the Magnum XL's boys."

Bill punched Ed in the arm. Ed screamed and said, "Ohhhh that felt good. Do it again sweetie."

Josh poked a rigid forefinger against the butt of Steve's shorts as they climbed the stairs to their bedroom. "Stop that!" Steve warned. He reached back and slapped Josh's hand out of the way. He hated it when Josh did that; he did it quite often. Steve turned at the top of the stairs and grabbed him. They stumbled into the bedroom and kicked the door closed. Josh was showing already. There was never any doubt when he became aroused. Steve always became aroused himself when he saw the enormous package in his lover's pants. The one image that beat it was to see it raw. No pun intended. Steve nuzzled his face in the crook between Josh's neck and shoulder; he loved his natural scent. His right hand slid underneath Josh's shirt and up toward his ample pecs. He could barely encompass one of them with his hand spread fully open. They stripped and dropped to the bed. Steve straddled Josh and held his arms back above his

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head as he stared down at the boyish good looks of the handsome man he loved. He moved his tongue down Josh's length starting at the neck until he reached his intended target with its large head and broad girth. His aim was to bring him short of a climax and then screw his brains out until they both came together.

Steve was pumping Josh's shaft with a tight fist. "Ohhh yeah," Josh shouted. "Keep going; don't stop. I'm going to blow any second now."

"No way," Steve laughed. "I want that stuff, but not before I blow inside *you*."

He placed his shoulders under Josh's legs and pulled him toward the edge of the bed.

"That's it baby. I'm just getting you into position. I'm going to lube up that gorgeous butt of yours, so just relax and enjoy the ride." Steve placed the throbbing head of his rod against Josh's sphincter and applied slow, steady pressure. "Oohhh baby, does that ever feel good." He slowly drove it further in and enjoyed the feeling of firmness surrounding his extremity. Josh was new to this part of the scene, but he was more than willing and gained a potent liking for it. "Oh man," Steve said as he pumped longer and harder. "I'm getting close!" "I'm getting close!" His body tensed as he ejaculated into his lover's body.

"Ohhh yeah, give it to me baby," Josh cried. "Give me all of it." Josh's sphincter tightened around Steve's shaft and Steve knew that Josh was about to blow his wad. He loved that feeling.

There would more than likely be a reversal later before going to sleep, but it was still early and they had business that needed to be discussed with the others now that playtime was over.

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Josh waited until after sex to give Steve the news about Howard that he got from Terry. It did not sit well, to say the least.

"Jesus! Whom can you believe in this world anymore? Just when you think you're getting somewhere, it turns out the information is false."

"Welcome to the world of a detective. You can't let these little setbacks get you down, babe. Somehow, everything will add up eventually. Always keep one thing in mind; no one is who they seem to be."

Ed was insistent. "I for one do not like the way our approach to the case is going; I think we need to start planning our strategy before it's too late."

"I agree," Steve said. "Let's start by following up on the leads that we've picked up so far from the people we've talked with already. Josh has some colleagues from his previous job that he's going to consult with, and I have some research to do on a few clues left by the killer. I think we should all get an early start tomorrow."

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Steve invited Kate out for an evening on the town. Most problems seemed smaller in size by the beckoning city lights of Atlanta. The dark cloud of confusion hanging over their heads was beginning to take its toll. A killer was still on the loose in the metro area and had already murdered one of Steve's friends. Before heading to dinner at one of the more popular spots, they agreed to take a leisurely drive around town. Kate's convertible was the best choice for the venture; the evening air was cool and inviting. Their conversation was relaxed and, as usual, they enjoyed a few laughs. The sight of a few newly erected buildings along Peachtree Street evoked a couple of not-to-distant memories in each of them.

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“Steve, do you remember when I first suggested that you move to Atlanta. I had already been here for several years; I missed you something terrible and I told you what a charming city it was, 'a new city in comparison to many,' I said.”

“Yes, it had an impressive skyline of architectural masterpieces even back then. I remember thinking it looked to me like the Emerald City in Oz as I drove in on I-75 South for the first time. It hasn't taken long for it to change; it's amazing what twenty short years can do to a place. Many of the old-timers, who were used to their ostensibly genteel and homogeneous slice of society, didn't accept the new multicultural mix of people, at first.”

“Do you think it has been worth it,” Kate asked as she pushed a lock of hair away from her face. “It smells delicious around here doesn't it? I think it's the Greek sandwich place over there.”

“Who can say? The changes have been good for us, with respect to our careers I mean.” Steve made a sharp right turn onto Ponce de Leon Avenue. He could hear the tires squeal beneath them in response to his heavy foot on the accelerator. “Are you getting hungry yet?”

“I was just thinking that somewhere along the way Atlanta has lost its southern charm. Once, perfect strangers would exchange greetings as they crossed a parking lot. Now, fistfights break out over a single vacant space. Everyone is in a frantic rush to get nowhere, it seems. A whiff of Steve's cologne broke her train of thought. It was the Lagerfeld she had bought him last Christmas—his favorite. He was still among the top ten most attractive men she had ever known. “I'm not that hungry just yet. This is pleasant. We don't get to spend time like this together much anymore.”

Despite the dwindling light, they decided to stop and take a short stroll in Piedmont Park. The colossal buildings were still



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visible above the lush, green tree line. Many large, new, multi-occupancy condominiums and apartment buildings of every imaginable design now hemmed in the green space. They lingered for a while and then continued on their way. They both knew that their close friendship would be forever.

Red with Rage is a story of life's iniquities. The courage and willingness of a group of disfranchised inhabitants of Atlanta, Georgia helps a bigoted police force catch a serial killer of young, gay men. The mystery centers on several possible suspects including a state senator, a mentally disturbed, successful businessperson, and lastly members of the gay community itself.

## **Red With Rage**

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