

LORENZO DEL RIO

At first glance Lorenzo thought a dog lay crouched down in the pile of rags. As he got closer—where the alley dead-ended into Indian Canyon Way—he stepped lightly, lest the animal jerk out of a sleep and attack. He thought he ought to try and throw up again before leaving the alley. He still had a block to go to where he'd parked his car. When the wind that had followed him ruffled the rags, he saw the bloody hair. He staggered backward almost falling. Who would run over a dog and then drag it into the alley to die?

He leaned forward, sticking his finger down his throat but still unable to throw up the rest of the scotch. The mottled rags moved again in the desert wind and he saw the chains. Silver links wrapped around half-skinned legs. He turned and tried to run but his feet wouldn't budge. He jerked his left fist to his mouth when he saw the foot. . . a bloody stub where there used to be toes. A skinless anklebone. The other foot wore a boot with a missing heel. The wind kept plucking at the rags uncovering a half-skinned stomach, pea gravel stuck to the raw flesh. His eyes jumped to the boot again—he noticed the boot had double stitching at the edges of blue and red diamond patterns—then to the foot with the missing toes. He jerked his gaze back up to the torn stomach, squinting at a rupture where he thought the bellybutton should be, on down to the stubby remains of a penis.

He knew this scene would be with him forever. He turned away from the body, cupping his mouth and nose as if the wind carried an evil smell.

He looked down at a brown belt locked in denim loops gripping the ankles. Had some maniac pulled the man's jeans down before wrapping his legs in chains? He kept his hand over his mouth. Shreds of a red leather jacket, still zipped, squeezed the ribcage hiding the face.

Maybe the bloody pulp under the rags would yell out in agony, some final gasp that would help unravel this horrible moment. He wondered why some primal instinct didn't force him to scream.

His gaze focused on the boot. Had he seen this fancy boot before? While his half-closed eyes watched the boot, it moved in the breeze. A slight pull upward.

Lorenzo leaned forward and started to puke. Then stopped.

Could anyone see him? Suppose the perpetrator, parked across the street on Indian Canyon, watched, waiting to see how soon someone would discover the body. Maybe to strike again.

What sort of deranged monster would drag this man over gravel and then dump him in a corner of this wretched alley? And then try to hide the body in rags? The rags were just a part of the debris lining the alley. Tumbleweeds and garbage and scraps of paper roamed freely. One side of the alley housed the backside doors of storage warehouses; on the other side a chain-link fence held off roving dust and clusters of creosote bush. Lorenzo watched midnight winds kick up midget dust devils beyond the fence.

Was seeing this punishment for all his repressed sins?

He yanked a handkerchief from his rear pocket and scraped up his vomit. He folded it and shoved it down into his jacket pocket. For a moment his head cleared, yanking him back into a lucid sobriety. Don't get involved. You can't afford to be connected to this stinking alley. He kicked at the stain as if the sole of his boot would erase the last few minutes.

He had never planned to cut through the alley. He was sober enough to remember that. On Friday nights the parking lot in front of the Glad Hand Saloon was jam-packed. He'd parked his Ford Expedition on Indian Canyon next to the alley. He could either cut through the alley and walk half a block or he could take the long way—a block down Indian Canyon, turn on Calle Dos Palmas and walk another hundred yards. Earlier this evening, he'd taken the long way, arriving at the Glad Hand Saloon a little before seven-thirty. But back then he hadn't been disgusted with himself. Or drunk. At two o'clock in the morning, traveling on unsteady legs, the alley had seemed his only choice.

He watched the moon slide away from the highest peak of the San Jacinto Mountains. Had that round-faced sky giant silently watched as the killer dropped the chains and hurried away? For a moment he stood watching rickety shadows dip down the slopes stretching to catch lopsided peaks. He backed away afraid he might see more than just a fancy boot. Would it be someone he knew?

He ran.

Lorenzo's dreams always started with him running. His lungs heaved as he sped away. Sometimes he teetered on a tightrope, afraid to fall. When

he dreamed in Spanish, a red devil screamed *pendejo* and poked a pitchfork in his belly every time his wife's face peeked through spidery shadows. Sometimes in the dream a black cloud grabbed him by his penis and hurled him back through a time tunnel—he stood alone, ten years had vanished and he was free to make new decisions. It even blotted out the Casa de Mexico Imports that he and his Perla had worked together to make successful. But foremost, the black cloud eliminated his obsessive focus on Wade Doyle. The cloud always pitted Wade's face before it faded into a murky detachment. At the end of every dream he fell off the tightrope, tumbling through a tunnel lined with naked men. Those times he'd awakened, screaming, scaring Perla half to death.

This day Wade had called him at the store. "I need to talk to you. It's fucking amazing." Lorenzo had thought it strange because they hadn't talked in almost a month. They agreed to meet at the Glad Hand Saloon.

"Hey Lorenz," Wade said. "Eight o'clock *en punto*. My time. Not Mexican time." Wade spat out words as if rushed but still kept him on the phone, babbling away and paying no attention when he told him he had a customer waiting. "I've met someone *mucho* hot, *muy caliente*," Wade said. "Met him on line. Won't send me a face photo but his lower apparatus, breathtaking. Wants to meet me at the bushes."

Lorenzo held the phone close to his mouth, "That's lunacy," he yelled. "What the hell's wrong with you?" He wondered why he was even surprised. He knew by now that Wade would go out of his way to raise the danger bar.

From the beginning, Lorenzo knew Wade had a longtime lover. Joe Collins, the gossipy bartender at the Glad Hand Saloon, had introduced him to Wade and Elwood McFarlan soon after they'd moved to Palm Spring from San Francisco. Joe had said, "Wade Doyle would jump in a den of mating rattlesnakes just for the thrill of seeing how they fuck." It didn't take long for Lorenzo to catch Wade's roving eye. He considered Elwood the more striking of the two—the chocolate hair, graying sideburns and a nut-brown mustache tipped in white outdid by far Wade's black cowlicks. Wade may not have been the better looking, but he exuded a promise of instinctual sex and he strayed and everyone knew it.

In a calmer voice, Lorenzo said, "You've seen nothing but a photo of this guy's dick and you agreed to meet up in those sleazy bushes?" He knew of the bushes, what the cowboys at the Glad Hand Saloon were now calling the new fuck club. Had Wade jumped from body to body during the weeks when their untroubled sex left him limp and wringing wet?

Lorenzo left the store early. Charlie would lock up. He'd make sure the new ceramic pots, just in from Puebla that he'd lined up outside the front door were back inside and the security system turned on. When his wife decided to quit the business to stay home to be with their girls, Charlie

Hall had been a godsend. He was the first person Lorenzo interviewed and he knew right away he had a winner. Charlie told him during the interview that he was HIV positive and that four years ago he'd lost his lover to AIDS. Charlie's sales skills had nothing to do with his looks—his nail-straight hair never remembered whether to give him gray bangs or to place a part down the middle of his head. His charm was his in-depth memory. Women listened to his uncanny knowledge of every item in the store: what temperature the kiln needed to be to set the coloring of a blue and green Talavera tree-climbing frog, or how *equipales* chairs from the village of Zacoalco de Torres were stitched together. They loved his lighthearted smile and twofold handclasp—men became nervous and stood behind their wives for fear of a backslapping hug.

Earlier today, they had unpacked an overdue shipment from the village of Dolores Hidalgo. Each Talavera bowl or clay pot, carefully tucked in shredded newspaper, had been dusted or washed before Charlie found the exact spot for customers to discover.

The exquisite craftsmanship of the Mexican imports pulled Lorenzo away from the complexities of his hush-hush existence. In the store, the mysteries of hand blown glass assuaged the anxieties of a secret life, that even a year ago would have been so alien. . . *not alien, Lorenzo. You knew a long time ago you traveled two roads.*

He cleaned up in the back room. While he showered and shaved, he thought about Wade. He never got to know this king of fidgets. Even during ejaculation spasms, he sometimes thought Wade's mind wandered. He changed into Levis and watched the mirror as he flexed his pecs. He slipped on the black polo that matched his hair. He'd joined Gold's Gym and it showed. He bought the black boots while on a trip to the border town of Algodones, Mexico. He'd wear the beige leather jacket that hugged his waist. Maybe he'd grab something to eat at the Glad Hand's diner. He smiled thinking about the juicy tidbits the bartender would lay on him. He liked Joe, always squeaky clean in his red vest, black-and-white-checked shirt and bolo tie—whose leather matched the blonde tips of thick brown hair.

At seven-thirty, the cocktail crowd had thinned out. Lorenzo watched Joe's mocha eyes soften as he pushed a scotch and soda toward him before he got seated on a stool. "Well if it ain't the top connoisseur of used goods. Heard you lost your passion for kinky but we know how that can change, don't we?"

"*Que tal amiguito?*" Joe threw his arms in the air. "Everybody knows about your failed fling with our friend Wade Doyle."

"Wade's supposed to meet me here at eight."

"Lately," Joe said, "Señor Wade's presence has been very scarce in these parts. Some people around the Glad Hand might say Wade's shy. His air

of surprise attracts some—we never know when that child’s walking a straight line, never know what anxiety he’ll bring to us.”

You do ramble on, Joe. I didn’t expect you to throw the humble bartender’s lament at me.”

“I never divulge anything personal.”

“Because no one in their right mind would dream of telling you a secret.”

“Listen Lorenz, you wetback spic, you sure know how to make a girl feel used.” Joe leaned over the bar. “Now let’s kiss and make up.”

“*Con esta boca comes?* With that mouth you also eat?” Lorenzo stood up and picked up his drink. He kissed Joe’s puckered lips. “Now let me get over to that lonely booth before some undesirable grabs it.”

Wade had never mentioned commitment. They rarely talked about anything—just meet at a motel, strip as fast as they could and roll around on the sheets. Occasionally, a few weeks after Charlie came to work at the store, they used his home in Cathedral City’s cove. Then one afternoon, sweaty and spent, Wade had walked out of his life as if he had been a one-nighter, not three weeks of daily phone calls that sometimes caused him to leave his store in the middle of the day and meet Wade at a roadside motel. Wade had sat on the side of the bed pulling on his Levis. “It’s over,” he said, “I’ve known about it for some time.” He looked around the room finding boots and a shirt that had been scattered in their haste to fall on one another. “But we can be friends,” he said, looking at Lorenzo’s naked body. Lorenzo knew better: by then he knew Elwood McFarlan was the only person Wade ever came back to.

In the beginning, after a sweaty hour in Wade’s arms, guilt squeezed him every time he saw Wade’s lover at the Glad Hand. Elwood always welcomed him with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Surely, he must know of his lover’s extracurricular goings on, Lorenzo thought. At times he wished it had been Elwood who had made the advances. He knew, as did everyone who knew him, the only love Elwood ever shared had been with Wade. Wade told him he met Elwood on a houseboat on the Russian River before he turned twenty. The next week he’d moved into Elwood’s San Francisco Victorian home.

Wade hurried through the door thirty minutes late. He seemed in a hurry to get to the booth. “Something came up,” he said, sliding in. “I’m off to San Diego.”

“No time to sip a *copa*?” He knew Wade never apologized. “What happened to your hot *caliente* date?”

“*Caliente* cooled.”

“Perhaps,” Lorenzo said, sliding close pushing his knee against Wade’s leg, “Wade saw *caliente*’s face and chickened out.”

“This fucker’s playing games with me on the internet.”

“It’s all a game, my friend.” Lorenzo slid back in the booth away from Wade’s knee. “Wicked photos do tell all.”

Wade got up. “I’m outa here.”

Lorenzo watched Roper come toward his booth, slender and self-assured chic in a red blouse that ballooned at the wrists. Her black slacks covered all but the toes of her Amante shoes. She owned The Diner, which was a separate room but also part of the Glad Hand Saloon. At first glance she might have been part Indonesian mixed with Middle America. Slick black hair was sculpted to the sides of her head, a silver clip in back holding a bun slightly off center. She grinned, lips together, tipping her head back enough to let him know he was welcome at her diner. He’d heard the whispers about Roper and her Cafe Respect. The adobe with a brick front, now lonely and boarded up on a weedy corner. He wondered how she could always put on a smile now, be ready with a joke, laugh out loud. “It’s her way of dealing,” Joe Collins told Lorenzo, “learning new ways to cope as she forgets.”

Roper sat down across from him. “Hey, everything all right? Hot date?”

“Wade called me at the store and told me to meet him here at eight. Said he needed to talk.”

“I heard your ménage à trois ended.”

“Never a triangle, Roper. Apparently, he met someone on line that screwed his mind. After two minutes he took off for San Diego in one of his moods.”

“Wade needs a psychiatrist,” Roper said. “Why online dating when he can pick the cream of the crop right here? I want to hear a voice, see up close if the eyes are the right shade of brown. Not just about sex. And now I hear talk of a sex club called ‘The Bushes.’ Jesus Keerist. . . you guys always in heat?”

“Sometimes.”

It’s definitely all about sex, Lorenzo thought. He’d never thought of Wade as someone to love. Love was the precious moments with his wife.

But Lorenzo didn’t get home to his wife until three in the morning. He walked across the room to the Glad Hand bar and told Joe to fetch him a scotch and soda, the first of four.