

Red Tide

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Extract

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"The native son is missing."

"Missing how?"

"Packed his gear and drove off in the van."

For thirty seconds the only sound on the line was static.

"He was always the weak link."

"A weak link with a personal ax to grind."

"They all have an ax to grind. That's why they were chosen."

"We were hoping his local knowledge would be of use."

"It was. The house is perfect."

"He was always a loose cannon."

"We knew that going in."

"Yes, we did."

"Should we abort?"

He thought about it. *"No way he goes to the authorities."*

"The authorities are not what he has in mind."

Something in the tone served as an alert. *"Is there a problem?"*

"He took the rest of the accelerated material."

A longer silence ensued.

"Could have been worse, I suppose."

"Yeah, he could have taken the other."

"And we'd be booking flights to the Falklands."

A dry cough scratched the silence.

"Can you find him?"

"I put a transponder under the front seat."

"A judicious move."

"I'm an untrusting man."

"Find him then . . . and see to it he's not going to be a problem."

"The others say he was getting crazy. Wanted to start things going right now. Didn't want to wait anymore."

"Find him before he does something stupid."

2

The last moments of Carson Moody's life were silent. Surely, other conversations must have swirled about him in those final minutes. It was, after all, rush hour and the bus was full, but, as he so often did in public, Carson Moody had tuned it all out. His full lips moved as he listened to his inner voice run down the dessert column of the Alexis Hotel's room service menu. He'd already settled on the Veal Picatta entrée and was debating the wisdom of finishing with a nice crème brûlée when the gruff voice came rattling out of the overhead speaker. "Pioneer Square Station," the bus driver rasped.

Pulled from his gastronomic ruminations, Moody reached between his legs, slipped his fingers over the handle of his briefcase and lifted it into his lap. As the bus silently slid past the white tile walls, he turned his eyes toward the window. His distracted gaze ran over the string of bodies standing in knots along the bus tunnel's northbound concourse. He was still staring at this random assemblage of humanity when, as often happened in his pensive moments, he heard his mother's voice reciting one of the hundreds of homilies by which he primarily remembered her. "If you're going to Rome, you might as well see the Pope," he heard her say and smiled. It was settled then. Definitely the crème brûlée. He stifled an inner chuckle. Couldn't tell Wendy about it though. Oh, no. Since last May, when he'd been diagnosed with diabetes, she'd become the food police. Ever vigilant. No excuses. No . . . the crème brûlée was most certainly destined to remain his little secret.

Carson Moody got to his feet as the bus approached the center of the station. He used his free hand to smooth his overcoat. Satisfied with his appearance, he straightened his shoulders and turned his attention to the automatic doors directly across the aisle from his seat. Staring through the door's plastic ovals, his eyes were drawn to an elderly couple in bright black and yellow ski parkas. He watched as they hurried across the floor, toward the open mouth of the elevator. The old man raised a hand and mouthed a plea at the thirty-something guy standing inside.

Moody watched as the younger man reached out and pushed a button. Quite naturally, he assumed the young fellow was holding the doors open for the couple, a misconception which perhaps explained why he went slack-jawed when the sliding doors snapped shut and the green light began to rise.

As the bus slid along, Moody was forced to turn his head and watch the unfolding scene through the bus's dirty back window. Watch the old folks shuffle to a stop. Watch the woman bring her hands to her hips and say something to the man. And then watch the old guy shake his tousled head in disgusted disbelief.

He was still watching the pair when he caught sight of a puff of smoke. Not smoke exactly. Something thicker. More substantial. In the artificial light, it looked for a moment like his boyhood in Iowa, when the afternoon breeze rustled the late summer dandelions and filled the air with squadrons of tiny white parachutes.

Although Moody didn't personally hear a noise, it was plain to him that whatever had launched the smoke must have made a sound of some sort. Everyone on the platform stiffened for an instant and then turned toward the spiraling cloud of white. Hands rose to throats. People pointed. Forty yards down the platform, the old man seemed to wobble on his feet. "Some damn fool with a firecracker," Carson Moody thought to himself.

The bus hissed to a stop. Moody collected his thoughts, picked his way carefully down the trio of stairs and stepped out onto the platform. To his right, the crowd milled around, staring upward at the rapidly dissipating cloud. The elderly couple were screened from his view by an uneasy wall of humanity. Carson Moody surveyed the scene

for a full minute before striding off in the opposite direction, toward the long escalator at the south end of the station and the mezzanine above.

He hadn't walked more than thirty feet before he suddenly felt a dry patch at the back of his throat. Almost as if someone had affixed a postage stamp to his tonsils. He hawked twice and tried to swallow. When his efforts failed . . . when, in fact, his entire throat suddenly felt constricted and inflamed, he began to conjure more dire possibilities. Wondering first if he weren't perhaps coming down with a cold, or worse yet . . . the flu . . . or . . . even . . . God forbid . . . he wondered if perhaps he hadn't contracted this most recent strain of flu, which, if the media were to be believed, presently ravaged the country.

He gathered himself and managed another half a dozen steps toward the escalator before stopping again. The roots of his teeth had begun to throb, as if they had suddenly become loose and were about to fall from his gums. He brought a hand to his lips. Or at least that was the plan. Instead of reaching its intended destination, his hand bounced off his forehead and then flopped back to his side, like a fish dying on a riverbank.

His muscles felt rubbery and barely under control. Certain that his distress must be obvious to his fellow travelers, he turned back toward the station, only to find that no one was looking his way. That, in fact, everyone in view seemed to be suffering something quite similar to his present malady. He blinked his eyes several times, and then shook his head, but the scene remained the same.

Several people had fallen down and now writhed about on the white marble floor, legs scissoring, arms flapping as muscle contractions propelled them in smooth stone circles. Closest to him, a Hispanic woman, her face fire engine red, had dropped to one knee as she tended to her spasming daughter. Half a football field away, the black and yellow ski parkas lay silent and still. Closer, the driver of his bus sat . . . head thrown back . . . mouth agape . . . staring at the ceiling of his bus. A river of blood poured from the man's mouth, down over his chin and onto his crisp blue shirt.

Carson Moody coughed heavily. He felt something thick and warm

in his mouth . . . thought to reach for it and then changed his mind, instead turning and lurching toward the escalator, staggering toward the silver salvation and the light at the top of the stairs.

As he moved forward, he felt as if liquid were shifting in his innards, almost as if he had a bucket of water in his chest, slopping back and forth as he made his unsteady way, shuffling his feet in the last yards before grabbing the moving handrail, allowing the black plastic to jerk him forward onto the escalator, where he wobbled but kept his feet as the soundless machinery carried him upward, above the level of the platform, where his backward glance caught no movement at all, only stillness, dotted here and there with uneven patches of red. He turned away. Looked upward.

He was trying to feel the light on his face and wondering about the red patches when the shifting ocean in his chest dragged him to his knees. His trembling fingers lost their grip on the briefcase, which tumbled end-over-end down the moving stairs toward the mother and child, still and silent in the quavering red spotlight.

He forced his gaze upward again. Out over the expanse of the bus tunnel. Nothing moved but his eyes, which, for unknown reasons, proved incapable of coming to rest on any single scene, but instead rolled relentlessly from body to body, rolled along the walls and over the ceiling to the pair of buses standing idle on the tracks, rolling from one abhorrent picture to another as if, by constant movement, his brain could avoid processing the details of the carnage.

His arm gave way. He felt the ribbed metal of the stair against his cheek, felt the machinery in its guts as it carried him upward toward the bright light at the top of the stairs. He willed himself to reach out for the glow, but was unable to summon the strength. He felt a need to say something but his mouth was full of soup.

He lay with his body wedged across the electric treads at such an ungainly angle that the escalator was unable to push him off onto the floor when he reached the top. Instead, he found himself paralyzed, his unmoving form undulating above the steel steps as they sank in upon themselves and disappeared beneath his body, leaving only a series of bright clicks to drum his passing, as each succeeding stair clipped the underside of his jaw and clicked his teeth together . . .

over and over . . . click after click after click . . . like the rhythmic rolling of bones. He closed his eyes, took a final shuddering breath and, with a sound not unlike a child's rattle, died there on the moving metal stairway.

When the hand grasped her elbow, she twitched at the touch, caught her breath and aimed an icy stare down at her arm. She'd seen him many times before but could never recall his name. Always at some artsy-fartsy social function or other. Invariably, he came over to chat, like they were long-lost friends or something. Worse yet, he not only recalled her name but also remembered whatever it was they'd talked about the last time, almost like the previous season's inanities were part of an ongoing dialogue to which they alone were privy. A wave of musky fragrance arrived a moment later, as if his cologne had followed him across the room like a stray cat. He gave her elbow a second little squeeze and treated her to a baby grand worth of teeth. "It's fabu, darling. Absolutely fabu." He slid the hand up to her shoulder and began to gently knead her flesh.

"I told you so," he said knowingly. "Remember . . . I told you so."

She didn't remember and had no idea what he was talking about.

He was late forty-something and quite obviously had spent more time primping for the evening's events than she had. Perfect gray suit and hair. Custom-made shirt. Cufflinks no less. Probably had his tootsies pedicured inside the tasseled Bally loafers. Very slick. Very money. Very annoying.

Meg Dougherty mustered a tight smile. "Thanks," she said. For the umpteenth time in the past hour, a sigh escaped from her chest. She caught herself. Made a rueful face. "I guess I'm a little nervous," she offered.

He reproached her with a scoff. "Don't be silly. You're the star, my

dear." He wagged a reminding finger. "As I predicted," he intoned. Having made his point, he used the finger to point along the length of the nearest wall. "Look at all the red dots. Looks like the show's got measles or something." He flashed another toothy grimace and laughed at his own little joke.

He was referring to the little red stickers used by the Cecil Taylor Gallery to denote items which had been sold. Whatshisname was right. Fully two-thirds of her photographs were sporting little red dots in the lower right-hand corners. For some reason, the sight failed to cheer her.

She threw a glance over the man's shoulder. To the far side of the room where Corso stood alone . . . looking her way. He could sense her discomfort, and found it amusing . . . caught in the act, he swallowed a smile and looked down into his wineglass.

She heard her name being called. "Meg. Meg," the insistent voice repeated. She peered out over the sea of heads. There was no mistaking Cecil Taylor, resplendent in a gold brocade caftan, winding his way through the crowd with a flourish denied all but the most unrepentant drag queens. As he moved, his pear-shaped body seemed to take on a life of its own, rippling and rolling this way and that beneath the flowing folds of fabric, coming fully to rest a second or two after his feet slid to a stop at her side. He smelled of cognac and baby powder.

"I've got some patrons who are just dying to meet you," he announced.

Before she could respond, he took notice of the man with his hand on Dougherty's shoulder. "Ah . . . Michael. I'm so sorry to have to pull her away from you, but . . ."

Reluctantly, the hand left her shoulder. "No problem at all, Cecil," the guy said. "I understand. Business always comes first."

Cecil Taylor rearranged his agile features into an understanding face. "A regrettable factoid of the trade, I'm afraid."

Using her other arm for leverage, Taylor began to move Meg Dougherty toward the north side of the room, where the collection of art enthusiasts was a bit thinner and the roar of conversation a bit dimmer. They allowed the crowd to wash their footsteps and then stopped and watched the other man make his way to the wine bar by the window.

"You looked like you needed a rescue," Taylor said.

She nodded wearily. "Thanks."

"The least I could do," he said. "Michael can be quite a bore."

"I can *never* remember that man's name."

"Michael Marton."

"He a member of the Arts Commission or something? I see him at nearly every opening I go to."

"If you went to more events, you'd see him more often. Michael lets no opening go unattended." His lip began to curl. "Never buys a piece either." He waved a dismissive hand. "Just another little man with too much money and not enough to occupy his time." He anticipated her next question. "His granddaddy made a bundle in sand and gravel down in Portland and, as far as I've heard, nobody in the family has done much of anything useful since the interest began to accrue." He looked across the room toward Corso. "Quite the opposite of your famous friend Mr. Corso there."

Dougherty glanced at Corso, who now stood with his back to the room, staring out through the drizzle onto First Avenue.

"Amazing how he commands a room by ignoring it," Cecil Taylor observed. The sound of his own words caused him to flinch slightly. He looked down at his sandals. When he looked up Dougherty was regarding him in amusement. He chuckled. "It's those big strong silent types. The ones with all that hurt locked up inside. Always bring out the bitch in me."

Dougherty heaved another sigh. "I shouldn't have badgered him into coming," she said. "He hates this kind of thing."

As if on cue, Corso turned back to face the room. His eyes found Dougherty's. She shivered as a finger of electricity coursed down her spine. From fifty feet away, she could feel the icy, silent space at the center of him and again wondered at his ability to be alone in a roomful of people. His need to stay disconnected from his fellow creatures in the very way they strove so insistently to be connected to one another. She turned her eyes away and then shivered again.

Cecil Taylor cleared his throat and changed the subject. "Well, my dear . . . it's official. You're a hit. By the time the papers make the streets in the morning you'll be the darling of the Northwest art scene once again."

She cast him a skeptical glance.

"Pleeeeeease," he insisted. "Look around you. These people are in awe of you . . . of your talent. The show's going to be completely sold out by the end of the week." He patted her arm. "It doesn't get any better than this, my dear. I'd suggest you wallow in it while you have the chance." He gave her a wink. "As you, above all people, know so well . . . fame is fleeting."

Something back over her shoulder caught his eye. She turned that way. Cecil's partner Maury Caulkin waved a diffident hand. "Seems I'm needed," Cecil said with a smile. He excused himself and started for the back of the room. Glad-handing as he went along, he left no hand unshaken, no elbow unfondled, no smile unreturned.

Dougherty watched for a moment and then started across the room toward Corso. She watched as a woman in a red sweater said something to him. Saw Corso step aside, allowing her to retrieve a pair of coats from the antique rack behind the door. The man she was with hung his black raincoat from the crook of his arm and then helped her into her gray wool coat. "Great stuff," she heard the man say.

"Wonderful."

"She finds life in things . . . you know . . . you normally . . . wouldn't . . ."

She shrugged herself into her coat. "Some people just have the eye."

"I feel like I've seen her before somewhere." He waved his keys. "Maybe one of Todd's pool parties or something."

"In the papers, silly," his companion said.

The man suddenly noticed Dougherty's approach, closed his mouth and stood at attention. He cleared his throat once and then again . . . louder.

Busy with her purse and gloves, his companion failed to pick up on the distress signals. "Her boyfriend doped her up and tattooed her all over. Remember?"

The man didn't respond.

"Guy looked like Billy Idol," she went on.

"Uh-huh," he mumbled.

"They say she's got some really bizarre stuff tattooed on her. You know what I heard? I heard . . . she's got . . ."

Finally, she glanced up at his face and got the message. She looked around; the sight of Dougherty standing so close stopped the breath in her throat. "Oh," she began, "I didn't realize . . . I . . ." A pair of red spots appeared on her cheeks. "I mean . . ." she stammered. The air was suddenly thick.

The guy recovered first, gave a couple of uncomfortable nods, pulled open the door and ushered his stiff-legged companion outside. Meg watched as they hurried away, chattering between themselves and casting furtive glances over their shoulders as they hurried down the sidewalk. "Loose lips sink ships," Corso said.

Dougherty took the final three steps to his side, looped her arm through his and leaned her head on his shoulder.

"I probably should have tried to make them feel better," she said.

"Why would you want to do a thing like that?"

"Cause it's what people do when other people are embarrassed."

"Funny. I always figured they just gloated and thanked their lucky stars it wasn't them with the mouthful of foot."

"You always think the worst of people."

"And they never let me down."

She stepped back a pace and looked up into his cold blue eyes. "You can go," she said. "I know these things drive you crazy."

"And miss your moment of triumph? You gotta be crazy."

She made a rude noise with her lips.

His eyes got serious. "Don't be snatching defeat from the jaws of victory," he said. "You're knocking 'em dead here tonight. You've waited a long time for this. Worked real hard. Enjoy it while you can."

Another sigh escaped. "That's what Cecil said."

"Cecil was right."

She let go of his arm. Shrugged. "It just doesn't feel like I thought it would."

"Things never do."

Before Dougherty could respond, the tinkle of a bell drew Corso's attention toward the door. He put his hand around Dougherty's waist and pulled her aside as a pair of Seattle police officers pushed their way into the room. He sipped at his wine, watched one of the cops lean over and speak to a woman in a green sequined dress who stood just inside the door. She moved her wineglass to her left hand and waggled

a long manicured finger out over the crowd, toward Cecil Taylor, now entertaining the multitudes along the back wall. The woman said something, but, by then, the cops had begun to elbow their way through the crowd, showing considerably less finesse than was usually exhibited at gallery openings, thus leaving a trail of wrinkled brows and jostled drinks as they forced their way toward the rear of the room.

Something in the way they moved stiffened Corso's spine.

Dougherty felt the sudden tension in his arm. "What?" she said.

He inclined his head toward the back of the room where the taller of the two officers leaned over and whispered something into Cecil Taylor's ear. The roiling din of conversation prevented them from hearing what was said, but whatever it was most certainly pissed Taylor off. His diffuse features gathered themselves in the center of his round face before the cop was through talking. His jaw was set like a bass. He snapped a response. Then another, before chopping the air with the edge of his hand in a gesture of finality. The cop held up a hand of his own . . . fingers spread, as if to indicate five of something.

An older woman in a shiny black dress swooshed up to Dougherty.

"This is wonderful work, my dear."

"Thank you so much," Dougherty said.

"You should be so proud of yourself. I've never seen—"

Ding. Ding. Ding. Cecil Taylor was tapping the rim of a glass with a spoon. The woman scowled and sought the source of the noise.

"People . . . people," Cecil Taylor shouted. *Ding. Ding. Ding.*

Slowly . . . in stages . . . the crowd noise began to diminish. *Ding. Ding. Ding.* "People. Please."

The room fell silent. "Apparently there's been some sort of . . ."—he looked over at the cop—"some sort of toxic spill or something in the neighborhood. It seems we're going to have to evacuate the building immediately." His tone suggested it was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard. "These gentlemen . . ."—he threw a glare at the pair of cops—"insist that we be out of here in the next five minutes." He set the glass and spoon down and raised his upturned palms to shoulder height. At that point the whispering cop took over.

"When you leave the building, please move south. Down toward the

stadiums. The area between Cherry and King Streets has been cordoned off. Transportation is available at Safeco Field."

"My car—" someone in the crowd began. The cop waved him off. "If your car is parked between Cherry and King . . . from the waterfront to Fourth Avenue, you're going to have to find some other way home tonight."

A flurry of protests and questions filled the air. The cop shouted them down. "Move, people," he yelled. "Let's go. MOVE."

Slowly, one and two at a time, the crowd began to head for the door.

Cecil Taylor stood in the opening alternately offering agonized apologies and casting scowls at the cops, who continued shaking their heads at shouted questions and herding the disgruntled patrons like sheep.

As the final guest disappeared into the darkness, Taylor turned to the cops. "I know Chief Dobson personally," he was saying. "I'll be on the phone . . . first thing in the morning. This damn well better not be some goddamn training exercise . . . I'm telling you right now—"

The cop cut him off. "Let's go, sir," he insisted. "We'd appreciate it if you'd leave the lights on."

Before Taylor could muster a comeback, Maury Caulkin appeared carrying an armload of coats. He handed Corso two and kept a pair for himself. Cecil Taylor shouldered his way into his long black cashmere overcoat and then turned his attention to Dougherty. "I'm so sorry, my dear. I can only imagine how you must feel . . . on this of all nights . . . to have something like this—"

"Let's go, people," the short cop shouted. "Need you to move now."