



Michael D. Smith

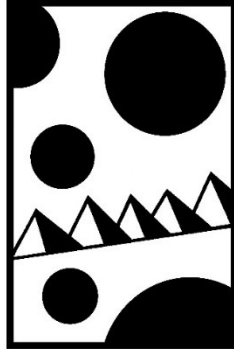
**The Soul
Institute**

THE SOUL INSTITUTE

by Michael D. Smith

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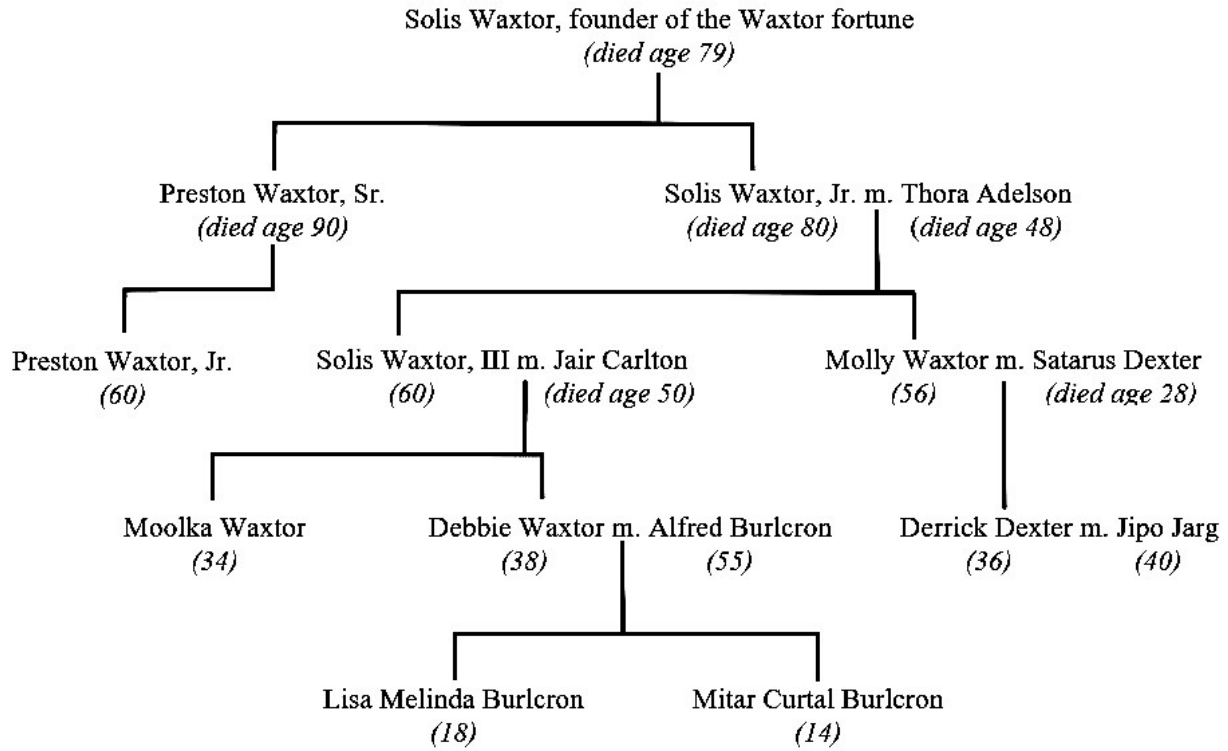
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cover design by Michael D. Smith

For my wife Nancy
who has given infinite support to my art
from the beginning

The Waxtor Family



CHAPTER ONE

Goodbye Moolka

Friday, November 2

Derrick sipped his clear wine among the crowd beneath the banner. GOODBYE MOOLKA. It was good so many had turned out on her last day.

"I still can't believe she's actually going back," Debbie said.

"I know," Derrick muttered. "It just doesn't make sense."

Late afternoon light glowed through two sets of glass doors. Sixty people were jammed in the English Department lobby. Everyone already had enough wine to be laughing and forgetting that Moolka was really leaving the Soul Institute.

Moolka came up for a sideways hug. "There you are," Derrick said, squeezing her. "We're just discussing how awful it is for the millionth time."

Moolka was short, with brown eyes, a round face, and long wild dark hair. She wore a loose-fitting top over big melon breasts.

"We can't believe you're really leaving," Debbie said.

"I'll always be here," Moolka said, pointing first to her sister's heart, then Derrick's. "You know I'm really just going *home*."

"But it's turned into such a cesspool," Derrick said.

Moolka shrugged. "No, really, Derrick. When I interviewed in September, the grounds were as beautiful as ever. It's still the way it was, deep down."

"Really? Really?"

"But of course it's just like some cheap amusement park now," Alfred Burlcron put in. Tall and sallow, the director of the Soul Institute extended his arm to Moolka for yet another sideways hug.

"Well, we can't put a damper on Moolka's plans," Debbie said. "She's doing good for herself to go." Debbie Burlcron was even more gorgeous than her sister. There was a definite facial resemblance, and Debbie's green eyes were as intoxicating as Moolka's, her blond hair thick and long like her sister's. But Debbie was taller, her face sharper, her voice deeper, her body excellently proportioned. Men drooled at the perfection of the director's wife. Yet there was something irritatingly vacant about her.

"But she'll really be running the place," Derrick put in. "It can't help but improve."

Burlcron looked down on Derrick with Moolka under his arm. "Well, I suppose one can hope."

"You'll all have to come visit when I get it back on its feet!" Moolka laughed, punching Burlcron's arm.

Nobody else would dare touch him like that, Derrick knew. How could the happiest, most carefree person here be leaving them?

"Oh! There's Greg! Greg! Where've you *been*?" Moolka cried, embracing baby-faced Milton expert Greg McKinnon.

"How's my Moolka?" Greg said. "Have you had any of Janey's cookies over here?" Derrick watched Moolka's trim little ass swaying as the two moved off.

"Man, I haven't been back there since God knows when," Derrick said.

"Well, when I was back a few years ago," Debbie mused. "It's really still beautiful. Well, except for those rides by the lake."

“Yes, I’m sure Preston’s little theme park is quite lovely,” Burlcron snorted. “God, what a waste.” He emptied his red wine and searched for more. “Well, possibly our little Moolka will work miracles there. Who knows? Excuse me, please.” And he was off for the wine table.

Derrick let out some air. “Well--I bet she will.”

“I guess we’ll all have to start budgeting for monthly airplane tickets,” Debbie said. “We’ll have to visit all the time. We can’t just let her be all alone up there.”

Derrick winced. “It’s just that I haven’t been back there in so long.”

“And of course, Daddy being back in Chicago complicates things.”

“Really? Are you kidding?”

“He’s been back since late last year, that’s what Moolka said.”

“Are you kidding? He *can*’t be there!”

“Shhh! No, Preston seems okay with it. I guess he feels sorry for him or something. Somehow Daddy has money again.”

“No!”

Debbie considered her husband far away by the cookies. “Look, I don’t know how or why. Anyway, Daddy sent Moolka a letter in January asking how things were. So, a few emails back and forth ...”

“I can’t believe this! Moolka’s *writing* him?”

“Of course. How do you think she landed the job?”

“God, I thought Solis legally couldn’t have anything to *do* with it.”

“Well, I don’t know all the ins and outs. I guess Moolka’s going to find out. It was all so edgy when she was up there. She never did see Daddy. Just Preston.”

“Huh. Why does that sound so typical? Well, maybe it was for the best.”

“I know. I’m not sure I could deal with him in person myself anyway.”

What was up with Debbie today? She never opened up like this. Was it because everyone was pretending to be so happy? Or maybe the wine? Hell, maybe she wanted him. Could that be it? God, she was sexy. Probably every man here wanted a piece of her.

Debbie looked across the room. “Well, cheer up, you’re actually gaining *another* cousin, not losing one. I’m sure you’ll have Lisa in one of your classes this year.”

“Huh? Oh--right.” Derrick followed her gaze to where a young woman in a long gray dress was spilling crimson wine onto a tablecloth. As she pulled back with a hand over her mouth she knocked a plate of sandwiches to the floor. Burlcron and Debbie’s daughter had been so moody and withdrawn her last couple years of high school that Derrick was startled by how much she’d grown up. She was an elegant if somewhat uncoordinated eighteen-year-old beauty.

Maybe it was the fuzzy gray turtleneck dress outlining that long slim body. Such a solemn oval face, such sculptured lips, with long brown hair falling well past her small breasts. Endless slender legs. Huge brown eyes. How would Aunt Jair have defined the new Soul Institute freshman? A first cousin, once removed? Now he had *three* beautiful cousins.

Wouldn’t old Alfred be pissed if Derrick began nosing around his daughter? Damn, her ass was nice in that clingy thing. Was she a poet? Was she an artist aflame with buried passion? He knew she studied music; surely she played haunting airs on the flute. She’d be shy in bed but Derrick would teach her fantastic things--

“Are you even listening to me, Derrick?” Debbie demanded.

“Well, sure. Something about this manuscript TSI Press got?”

She shook her head. “Derrick, I swear, your listening skills ...”

“This weird book Alfred wants you to publish?”

“I mean, the thing is, Felicia won’t even let me *read* the thing, but she lets out all these hints about how insane it is, how it’ll destroy TSI Press.”

Derrick tuned her out. Across the room was Felicia McKinnon, Greg’s wife. His dearest friend on earth. The woman he’d never stop loving as long as he lived. He smiled at her outrageous attire: the faded overalls over the bright red shirt, the boots. The woman was a walking work of art. She lounged against a table, tall and lean, brick-red hair done up high, exposing that lovely neck Derrick used to kiss, out of his mind.

She had the spark. *She* had the life force. She looked ready to leap onto a horse and spur it to full gallop. She was such an exuberant female, so mystical, yet so down to earth. That wary look in her sharp blue eyes always stunned him. She defined Woman. Her breasts under those overalls were the most perfect he could imagine.

What did she see in that jerk husband of hers?

But when she’d broken it off with Derrick in February she’d said: “It’s all for Greg now.”

They’d never even been naked with each other, except the time he’d gotten her blouse off for a couple minutes before she’d ordered him to stop. Only much later did he realize he could’ve had her anyway if he’d just pushed it. Dammit, he’d blown his one chance to bed Felicia McKinnon. Well, maybe ending it had been for the best. But he still loved her, always would.

The chatter was deafening. Six-foot-four Tuttle Borgenfoen, chair of the Languages Department, rode high above the noise, cackling through some off-color joke in his erudite German accent. Everyone at TSI was crammed in here, it seemed, all twenty faculty, dozens of students and staff. They all loved their Moolka.

But in the last hour Derrick’s entire life had been ripped apart.

Had one hour changed his feelings for Felicia? It couldn’t be. He didn’t want to drown in passion again. Felicia was good for maintaining a balance. He knew he loved her, but all that passion stuff was in the background now, and didn’t it help him as a writer to be able to stand back and just watch the cosmic sexual forces of life at play? If he got lost in passion again it’d wreck his growth as a writer, wouldn’t it?

A playful punch hit his shoulder. “Repeat back what I just said.”

Derrick was caught in Debbie’s challenging emerald eyes.

“What did I just say? Play back your tape recorder again, Derrick.”

“Well, you were saying Alfred’s already a little worried about how crazy this manuscript is, and that he hadn’t read it when he offered this new guy the job.”

“Amazing. I don’t know how you do it.”

*

There was a commotion at the door.

“Sorry I’m late. Had to finish my run!” Jipo Jarg still wore her running togs after pounding her daily fifteen miles through the streets of Linstar. She looked to weigh sixty pounds. Her teeny breasts jutted from her tight black shirt like the armored ridges of some deep-sea crustacean. Her arms and legs were strained, yellow, and wet, like something Derrick might find in his basket beside the coleslaw at Clampers Chicken. He’d nearly run her down at a stoplight last week when, obsessed with her runner’s high, she’d ceased noticing traffic. Derrick had screeched to a horn-honking halt to avoid the idiot, then recognized who it was. But she never turned to acknowledge him and in disgust he hadn’t bothered to call a hello.

“Where’s the OrganoWater?” Jipo cried, moving towards the wine table, the bright red key cord around her neck slapping her bony chest.

“I believe Debbie did get some,” replied pseudo-artist Fannin Richardson, directing her to the clear plastic bottles.

Derrick snorted. The only time he’d ever had a couple drinks with Richardson was last March, when the guy had been promoted to chair of the Art Department, and Derrick, as chair of English, had been embarrassed that nobody else was about to mark this transition with any ceremony. But once Richardson was potted all he could do was whine about how he needed raw cunt in the worst way.

So why didn’t he have a girlfriend? He’d been such a monk all this time that the rumor had it that he was gay. But there he was, slaving over the fantastic pussy here. Well, if he didn’t mind an ugly bitch, wouldn’t Jipo be the perfect match? What a hoot it’d be to see that bastard plowing his way between that runt’s twiggy legs.

Jipo had collared Burlcron by the double set of glass doors to the fields. They were dark silhouettes against bright yellow-green, Jipo jabbing emphatically, Burlcron shrugging in unconcern. Derrick grimaced.

Where was Moolka? She had to get packed up. She had a fifteen-hundred-mile drive tomorrow. He had to let her know that somehow he’d follow her soon.

God, how he hated this place. It was killing him.

Moolka stood by the secretary’s computer, chatting with Lisa Melinda Burlcron and Dorrington Caldwell, the sophomore psychedelic freak. Derrick picked two full plastic wine cups off the wine table and moved to Moolka.

“Saw you needed a fresh glass there.” Moolka met his eyes with a dazzling smile that knocked the air out of him. His fingers slipped and the proffered cup plunged to the carpet.

“*Oh!*” she laughed.

“That’s the fifth cup down so far!” the shaggy Dorrington put in.

Moolka bent to pick it up, but as she leaned over in that loose top her bra came away from her magnificent breast. And there was her nipple. Derrick poured his own cup onto the carpet.

Moolka slobbered at the stains with a cocktail napkin. “So what are *you* looking at, cousin?” she grinned.

“I--I--”

Derrick squatted to get a full view of Moolka’s treasures. She met his eyes with a potent smile. His heart split open. Again. He was barely conscious of Dorrington handing him paper towels. He soaked up wine as best he could, unable to pull his eyes from that wondrous cleavage.

Fortunately Dorrington and Lisa Melinda couldn’t see what Moolka was so happily displaying. Derrick groaned. What happened an hour ago flooded back.

Hadn’t he been so damn sure he could handle it?

CHAPTER TWO

The Dim Warning

Pushing into the lobby, glancing at his watch: 2:30 PM. Felicia and others setting up for the party. He still had half an hour before it started. Time enough to write that letter to the Rumson boy's parents. The idiot had once again violated the drug code.

Why on earth had he volunteered for student advisor this year? Answer: because he thought Burlcron might consider him for the open dean of students slot. How had he turned into such a brownnoser? There wouldn't be time to work on his play this semester.

Felicia looked fantastic in those old overalls. What a faultless tush. After all these dismal months apart, he still loved her. He moved to her but Debbie interrupted. "Hey, there, cousin. We could use some help."

He found himself calling over his shoulder: "Sorry, but I can't. I'll be out for the party in a bit. Need to get that damn Rumson letter out." And then he was in his office.

A dim, delightful space twenty-five feet wide, once a conference room. He was lucky to have it, although the rumor was that Burlcron was looking to carve existing office space into smaller units. The entire far wall was solid window covered by closed miniblinds. There was a suggestion of November afternoon light and the fields of the Soul Institute.

He stopped in shock. "God! What are *you* doing here?"

"Hey there!" Moolka Waxtor said, leaning back in his big leather chair.

"How did *you* get in here?"

"I just came in, silly." Moolka took a deep breath and stretched her arms over her head for a yawn, thrusting out those luscious round breasts.

"I mean, how'd you get in here if--if the party's being set up out *there*?" Wasn't there some sort of protocol--brides before weddings, actors before a play--that you didn't appear at your farewell party until it was set up?

"Debbie and Felicia told me to come on in here and wait. I wanted to talk with you."

"With ... me?" Derrick set his briefcase down.

"To say goodbye."

"*Oh ...*" Goodbye forever. No more bubbly Moolka. He'd tried not to think about this moment since she'd announced two weeks ago that she was going to Waxtor Carnationist College. That the Enemy had hired her away. Everyone was stunned, but they all loved Moolka and not only had they forgiven her, they'd never really blamed her. They knew how much she loved her childhood home. Of course, nobody understood that Derrick loved it just as much. But wouldn't he be called a traitor if he uttered that?

"We'll ... stay in touch," Derrick said. "We'll email or something."

"No, call. Call me when you can. I can't write."

"But you're the writer in residence!" Derrick tried to joke. "Or were, I guess. I mean ..."

"No, it'll be better to call me. I'll need to hear your voice."

"*Oh ... okay.*" He sat on the edge of the desk, his shin an inch from her knee. Moolka was such an affectionate woman that she often rubbed up against him, touched knees under the table, and flirted with saucy smiles and pleasant deep laughs over double-entendre chitchat. But always in the company of other people. This business of being only an inch apart, given that they were alone, was disturbing.

Today she wore tight gray jeans that excruciatingly outlined the shape of her thighs. He'd always had trouble believing that any woman could have such excellent legs. He was fascinated

by the contrast of the gray jeans with the loose gray-and-white-striped top. Everything was so gray in here. He realized he should've turned the lights on, but he preferred this grainy darkness. "Well, I'm glad you came by. You know we'll always be friends."

"Yes ... forever." Moolka stood, arms wide. "Give me a hug, Derrick."

He did so, surprised and delighted. Only once before had they hugged, after a drunken party when he was escorting her to her car. Yes, she'd flirted with him ever since they'd been at TSI, ten long years of it even as she was engaged for most of that time to that Don twit who'd fled TSI a few years back. But he'd always had the impression that Moolka enjoyed using her position as cousin to merciless feminine advantage, with rubbing and joking sex talk to confuse him, knowing full well he could never make a serious move on her. Had she really forgotten their childhood friendship?

One Friday night at Emerson's, with seven or eight TSI people, including Felicia and Greg and Moolka's date Carl, a silent mustached turd she'd later dumped, Derrick and Moolka had jammed their calves against each other and undulated for an hour as drunken laughter went on all around them. Yet they'd never looked into each other's eyes the whole time.

He'd spent that whole weekend obsessing about running away with her. Of expressing everything directly to her, soul to soul, no secrets kept back, everything male-female that could possibly be. Then on Monday he'd woken up sane and realized it would never work. Moolka was just being herself, she was just his cousin, she had Carl. She was just spinning out her zany sexual power games.

Now Derrick had his delightful friend in his arms, and he felt her magnificent breasts pressed to him, he felt her arms come tightly around him in the realization that they'd never lay eyes on each other again, and he wondered why on earth he was letting her go.

"We'll ... write some emails ... or something," he babbled, his face in her fluffy brown hair. She smelled so good. Childhood friend, colleague, cousin, primordial woman, muse ...

"What ... whatever you want ..." Moolka whispered back.

He kissed her on the cheek. A final little goodbye token. But he found he couldn't stop with one. His lips roamed her face. She held him fiercely. How could she be so strong? "We'll write long emails ... very long emails that explain everything, things we take our time with."

"Anything ... everything ..." she whispered. Those brown eyes, shining with tears. Everything so dim in here. And Derrick kissed her on the lips. Then pulled back. She was smiling at him. Holding him so tightly. She was so warm.

"Moolka ... you know I'll always love you--"

Derrick was about to add "as a friend," but she silenced him with:

"I know. I love you, too."

God, yes. Now it was clear. It was Moolka he'd always loved. All the flirting, all the games, had been there for a reason.

Kissing her. Deeply. Her entire body came to him. He rocked her back and forth. "God ... God ... *Moolka* ..."

"Oh yes, oh yes ..." Her tongue came into his mouth.

"I mean, is this right? I mean, should we be ...?"

"Oh yes, we *love* each other."

"Yes ... we do ..."

He'd never looked into anyone's eyes like this before. Not even Felicia's. Moolka's eyes were twin pools of brown love that went back to the beginning of the universe. She and Derrick were eternal. Their love was eternal.

“God, that it has to come down to this.” Derrick struggled for air, holding her face in his hands. “That--you’re *leaving*.”

She nodded. “I know ... I know. Just hold me.”

More kissing. Her hands came down to his ass and squeezed. He couldn’t believe she could be so direct.

“I guess it’s ironic ... we’ve always wanted each other ...”

“And couldn’t do anything about it ... until now.”

“I know ... but maybe it’s all for the best.”

Moolka pulled back. “I leave tomorrow.”

“I ... I know ...”

She looked deeply into his eyes. “Then this is our time, Derrick.”

“I ... I ...” he gasped, abruptly aware of himself surging against the flimsy confines of his thin pants, pressing into her thigh. He grabbed her soft ass and found himself thrusting against her.

“Yes ... I want ...” she moaned. “I want *you*, Derrick.”

His hands found her huge breasts. God, they felt good. Before he knew what he was doing he’d pulled her top over her head.

“Moolka! God!” Her boobs were wondrous, spilling out of her bra. With a smile she reached behind and helped him unclasp it. “God, you’re *beautiful*.”

She pulled his belt apart and slipped the catch of his pants free. “I want *this*,” she whispered, pulling his zipper down, unpeeling his underwear. He was in the open, in the air, and she was grasping it. “Oh, *Derrick* ...”

“*Oh my God yes* ...” Derrick shivered, all too aware of the unlocked door to his office and Debbie and Felicia setting up the party twenty feet away. “We ... we need to get into the closet.”

“The ... closet?”

“Over there,” Derrick said, waddling towards the closet in his fallen pants. “We can be naked with each other in there--”

“*Naked* ...” Moolka whispered, taking his hand. “I’d like that.”

Jamming themselves into the closet, nudging aside a dead laptop, scattering a shelf of student papers, they quickly shed the rest of their clothes. Everything was revealed. Endless exploring, discovering, kissing. It didn’t matter that anyone out in the lobby had to be hearing this. There was nothing but fondling her firm cunt beneath the big bush of fluffy dark hair. There was nothing but the bliss on her face. “God, you’re good, Derrick,” she moaned.

“*You’re good*,” Derrick said, taking her breasts in his hands. “These feel *so good*.” Rubbing against her, squatting, maneuvering for an entrance. “Maybe this isn’t the best position ...”

“Maybe ... Derrick ... *oh* ... just *put it in*.”

She opened up. He peered deeply into those brown eyes--inexpressible intimacy--as his phallus slid home. Her strong hands pulled him deep inside her.

“*I love you*, Moolka! God I love you!” he moaned, animal force driving from the depths, ramming up through her.

“I love you, Derrick!”

CHAPTER THREE

Paradise and Depression, or, The Sneer

He and Moolka stabbed the floor with paper towels even as they poured themselves into each other's eyes. Derrick fought to catch his breath. Dorrington and Lisa Melinda behind them, tipsy and giggling, still didn't get it. They moved off for more wine. Moolka and Derrick were alone.

"I thought you'd run off on me," Moolka winked.

"I ... I thought it would look best if I mingled through the party. And if you did too ..."

"Don't run off on me, Derrick."

"No, of course not ... I'll fly up there every chance I get."

"That's what I was hoping. And I'll fly down here ..."

"Your breasts are so *beautiful*." Derrick was tempted to reach through the generously open neckline for them.

"I'm glad you like them. They're all yours."

"Well, I see our outgoing little traitor is now destroying college property," Alfred Moid Burlcron said from six and a half feet above them.

Moolka quickly straightened, with a hand to her chest to close off the view. "Well, I'm sorry, Alfred, but we couldn't afford red dye for this carpet, so we're using *wine*."

"I think we got the worst of it up," Derrick said. "Of course, we've needed new carpet in here for years."

"We'll have new carpet once we remodel all these offices next spring," Burlcron shot back.

Damn the bastard. Well, so what if Derrick lost the stupid office? His goddamn life was over. The whole bullshit at TSI was over.

He tossed the bloody paper towels into a wastebasket as if they were TSI themselves.

The paper towels ... he'd come naked out of the closet, hoping Debbie or Felicia hadn't entered the office in the meantime. Snatching a roll of towels from a shelf, he'd been appalled to hear people laughing on the other side of the unlocked door. Back in the harsh closet light, still panting from the exertion of the standing fucking, they'd cleaned themselves with the rough paper and redressed. Derrick was horrified at the smell of sex all through his office. Moolka telling him everything was all right had no effect on his escalating panic.

"Did you guys have a nice chat?" Debbie had said as they'd emerged. Derrick couldn't recall what he and Moolka mumbled in reply. Surely everyone out there *knew*.

And now Moolka continued to banter with Alfred as he crapped on about office remodeling and budgets. Well, flirting was her nature, it was the way she related to men. Derrick supposed he had to love her for it.

God, what had they done? What had he done with his cousin? Didn't they just give way to *urges*? Wasn't it insane to fuck in the closet while Debbie and Felicia were setting up fifteen feet away?

Yes, even as he'd been proud to watch Moolka's lithe, big-breasted body hugging every man at the party as he stood there knowing he'd *had* her just an hour ago, he hadn't been able to say one real thing to her. Of course she'd sensed this. It was all crazy. They hadn't discussed birth control or STDs or anything. They'd just gone ahead and done it.

But even as all the hormones, sperm, penis, balls and everything else connected with sex had evaporated to nothing, even as the rational mind wrote off *the closet* as a flat-out mistake, even as Derrick assumed he'd never again feel horny for Moolka Waxtor, her naked breasts blew the

rational mind off its foundations. He knew he wouldn't be flying to Chicago to visit his dear childhood friend; he'd be barging up there every weekend to bang her good and hard and then forget her for another week.

Something had begun that no force on the planet could stop. His mild wish for a controlled, low-wattage observer lust, his fantasy of cuckolding Burlcron with cousin Debbie, his wistful memories of Felicia, had all just been games designed to distract him from the final insane force of *Moolka*.

That protection was now removed.

*

"Attention, attention!" Burlcron intoned, Moolka at his side. "I have some wonderful news for you all. As sad as we all are to have our writer in residence leaving us, I must say we've got some great news, and I might as well announce it here. As many of you already know, and now I can make it official, we've hired a new writer in residence who's due to arrive tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Derrick whispered.

Moolka bit her lip. Derrick could feel the shock waves through the room. It was just like Burlcron to screw up a heartfelt party with some tactless political crap. Moolka took a deep breath, suppressing tears as Burlcron rattled off the newcomer's name and accomplishments, none of which Derrick caught.

God, she was lovely. He had to have her right now. Couldn't he lead her back to the office, make everyone think he was taking her away from the obvious dismay of hearing how easily she could be replaced? No, that was impossible. She had to stand here and take it. Was there any way he could fly up to Waxtor himself and just never come back? Get a job there himself? Turn traitor to Burlcron and the Soul Institute? Meanwhile the anorexic Jipo led a round of applause for the next writer in residence, declaring how much he'd have their support, how Burlcron had such a "flash of genius in hiring this new jewel." God, she was such an *asshole*.

Moolka's face was close to collapse as Burlcron continued to enumerate the stellar qualities of her replacement. Chatter resumed. Derrick basked in the radiation sleet of sexual satisfaction, fantasy, longing, dread and nostalgia, for everything from his childhood at Waxtor to the Urges in the Closet.

"This Steina guy is an absolute fruitcake," Felicia said, leaning in. Derrick gaped at the one-time love of his life.

"Who?"

"This Steina guy. Did Debbie tell you about his insane manuscript? It's totally *pornographic*, it's fifteen hundred pages, and he says he's constantly revising the whole thing. You wouldn't believe the gall of the cover letter he sent. Burlcron happened to be in the office and I showed him the letter as a joke. But he says it's inspired. Next thing I know he's offered the writer in residence job to this idiot."

"Damn, Burlcron's more senile than we thought."

"It's gonna be weird. This guy is *nuts*."

But Derrick didn't care about Moolka's replacement. He was transfixed by her overwrought round face. For so long she'd cultivated this image of herself as mindlessly simple, absorbed in her sunny creativity. No, she was complex and unhappy. Derrick went to her, daring another sideways hug, appropriate for their public personae. "We'll send email, or something ..." was all he could think so say, hoping to recall to her the power of *the closet*. But to his dismay her mouth

and eyes crumbled into uncontrollable sobbing, and she was fully in his arms.

“She’s ... just a little upset,” Derrick said. “She’ll be all right.”

“We’ll really miss you, Moolka,” Greg McKinnon put in.

“She’s so sad,” someone said.

“But ...” Moolka said from Derrick’s arms, turning to the crowd. “I’m so confused, but ... I have an announcement of my own to make.”

Derrick drew back, sure she was about to describe *the closet* in life-shattering detail. But he gasped in relief as she went on:

“I just wanted to tell you all how much I’ve appreciated your party, and your love for me, which I can never forget. It’s just that I don’t want to, like, piss anyone off, but ...” She paused for a long time, crying.

“You couldn’t piss off anyone for any reason!” her sister Debbie laughed. “Go ahead, Moolka!”

“It’s just that this party ... well, we should have it for another reason, maybe not my going away.”

“But we want to give you this special party, child,” Burlcron said in his most charming, officious manner. “After all, you were practically one of the founders of TSI.”

“No ... because I’ve made up my mind ... not to take the WCC job.”

Silence.

“You ...” Burlcron began.

“I’ve made up my mind. Maybe it’s not right to try to go back to paradise. Maybe I have paradise right here ... among all these people who love me.” Crying. Not meeting Derrick’s eyes.

“*Wow ...*” Fannin Richardson blurted on behalf of everyone.

“Did you ... decide this ... when?” Debbie blurted.

“Right now! I decided right now!”

“Well, my dear, sometimes it’s wise not to let opportunities like Waxtor Carnationist slip by,” Burlcron said. “Maybe when you sleep on it ...”

“I’m not going! Oh, I know you hired this Steina person! He can be the writer! I’ll just be a janitor, or work in the garden, or--or--if you’ll have me, that is! If you love me as I love you!”

“Well, well ... of course we’ll have you,” Burlcron said, blinking in the glare of sixty people’s eyes. “Of course we love you.”

“I love you all. I *can’t* leave,” she said, barely audible, sobbing.

Derrick surveyed the crimson refuse in the wastebasket. Paper towels in here soaked with wine, paper towels in there soaked with *sex*.

He looked up to meet his wife Jipo’s eyes expecting him to share her sneer.

CHAPTER FOUR

We Seem to Be Facing an Oceanic Meadow

Saturday, November 3

Himal Steina had rarely abused amphetamines, but there had been occasions when he'd known the full soul death following the intoxicating power of the speed, every nerve in his body charred and misfiring, rest or sleep impossible, all the memories of a lifetime squandered like life savings at the gambling table. But as he chugged the old Porsche into the East Parking Lot of the Soul Institute in a foggy gray dawn amid pungent dripping trees, he didn't feel the burnout. He needed to sleep for three days straight, his brain was fried, but it didn't matter. He was *home*.

He was a refugee. He'd dared brain damage to come to the promised land. He switched off the engine and listened to the calling of birds in the dawn. The plant smells, the heat and humidity, the purple shadows, a single parking lot light high above buzzing with ochre light, all told Himal that a new life had begun.

The unlatching Porsche door echoed through the mist. His was the only car in the parking lot. This was all a dream. As he stepped out the smells and the bird calls increased. It was a swamp out here. Foggy outlines of palm trees ringed the parking lot. Ahead the black shape of a building floated in the mist.

Burlcron had said he was to stay at the director's house for a week to give him time to secure housing. Himal had a map of the campus but knew he'd just wander until he found the place. Irrationally he decided to take his two suitcases. After all, one had his laptop and the other his manuscripts, all carefully swathed in underwear and socks. He was shipping everything else he owned, but that wasn't much, as he'd sold his furniture and turfed a thousand knickknacks that had piled up over forty years.

Himal set the two big suitcases on the wet asphalt and locked the car. Billions of tiny droplets covered the windows. The blue Porsche began to become part of the fog itself. Well, it would get a good rest here in Linstar. No more hassled commuting. He'd buy a bicycle for most of his errands. The suitcases seemed heavier than he remembered. Maybe too heavy for this new life.

The sun came up behind him. The green-gray morning expanded. The building on the right loomed out of the fog, rising in three giant steps, wet concrete glowing faint orange in the fresh light. "DORMITORY," read a metal sign. Arched doors and windows suggested caves where scholars recharged themselves for the study of Soul to which they'd dedicated their lives.

Himal felt like a freshman just beginning his education here at the Soul Institute, as if his parents had sent him here to learn the secrets of Soul, to become part of an up-and-coming elite nurtured to take over what was most important on this planet: the development of the human psyche. His parents knew that, his teachers knew that, the mystic rulers of the planet knew that.

Did he really come here to *teach*? What if he fucked the whole thing up?

In front of the dormitory, an empty field sloped fifty yards down to an oceanic meadow of tall grass. Yellow mist hung over the ocean in the brightening sun. Himal's shoes oozed into the marshland.

To his left another building glowed in the sunrise. Its architecture was similar to the dormitory, with wide black arches on three stories, but it wasn't as impressively mystical as the dorm. Himal could now make out a sign on the building: "GLOUAIR LIBRARY." To its right was a two-story building, again with dark arches, pleasing to the eye but again nothing like the

dormitory.

A figure moved through the tall grass.

“Hey there! You must be Himal Steina!” a woman’s voice called, juicy and deep, full of the misty dawn. Himal blinked as a heartbreakingly beautiful woman came across the field, huge breasts bobbing in a loose green blouse. She was small, round-faced, with tousled dark hair down to her shoulders.

“Well, yes ...” Himal gasped. “How did you know?”

The woman smoothed her disheveled hair. “I heard your car pull up. You got here so early. We didn’t know exactly when to expect you, but Alfred said you were only leaving Chicago yesterday morning, and you were going to try doing it all in one sitting.” She caught her breath. “And even though we all thought, now *that’s* weird, we were keeping an ear cocked this morning. So I got up and ran over.”

Himal was locked onto her brown eyes. The light perspiration on her face was intoxicating. He’d never seen such an enchanting female. Had she just tumbled out of bed, thrown these clothes on, and run madly to get here?

“I’m Moolka Waxtor,” she said. “I see you brought your suitcases.”

“Well, yes, I did ...” God, he couldn’t think. This woman’s eyes alone had *gotten* to him. And if her eyes weren’t enough, that voice--the way she stood--everything about her--

What was this? Had he just fallen in love? To find this woman, at this new home, he instant he set foot here?

“Well, let’s get them over to the Admin Building,” Moolka said, reaching for a suitcase.

“I can get--” Himal said, but shut up fast. Because, as Moolka leaned over to pick up his manuscript suitcase, that loose green blouse hung way out and Himal’s eyes locked onto both breasts. It seemed half of them were spilling out of her bra. He kept staring, hoping for more than fifty percent. He didn’t get it. But what did it matter? *He was in love.*

“Well,” he said, hoisting the other suitcase, “you know it’s so much easier to balance when you’re carrying two at a time.”

“Okay, then, I’ll take both of them!” she laughed, reaching for his suitcase.

That laugh! That voice! “Uh, no ...” he croaked, grabbing it back, his hand brushing hers. *Electricity.* “I mean ...”

“Okay, have it your way. I know it’s only seven now, but Alfred said he was going to be in his office just in case you got here this early, can you believe that?” She moved down the beach.

“Wow, really?” Himal squeaked. “I thought I was supposed to report to the director’s house.”

“Oh, we’ll get you there soon enough.” Moolka bumped his suitcase against her thigh. “It’s about half a mile through the woods over there. We’ll have someone get your suitcases over there later.”

“This is nice, getting someone to meet me,” Himal said, bumping his own suitcase along.

“Well, actually ...” Moolka came to a stop. “Can we talk for a second?”

“Well, sure.”

“I guess I wanted to be the first to see you and tell you that things are going to be all right. I didn’t want anyone telling you any rumors or distorting things.”

Himal winced at the first hint of office politics contaminating paradise. “Well ...”

“See, there’s been this very weird thing, and I think a lot of people are still mad at me.”

Himal stared, puzzled, at those wonderful breasts.

“See, I’ve been the writer in residence here, and ... at my going away party yesterday--”

God, no, he was *replacing* this woman. She was already *gone*. How could life be so cruel?

“And then I decided that I wasn’t really going to quit after all.”

Himal took a long time to process this. “You ...”

“See, I really have to stay. I mean, I really love this place.”

“Wow ...” So she would stay, and it was *Himal* who was gone. Paradise was gone. He had to pack up his Porsche and leave.

“But we can both stay, both be writers in residence. I think that’s what Alfred wants. I mean, he said to me last night, I went to talk to him, to try to explain, and he thought awhile and said that writing was really important to TSI, and that maybe two writers in residence would mean we could, like, *expand* and all.”

“He still ... wants me here?”

“That’s right. I mean, I was so relieved. I thought I’d messed everything up. Stupid Moolka messing everything up again!” Himal knew she didn’t consider herself stupid at all. The way she’d pronounced her own name showed that. Her name was humid and green, it was sunrise burning off the fog.

Moolka. He stood in front of the most beautiful, soulful woman he’d ever met, and he was aroused just to hear her say her own name. She was everything he’d ever wanted.

“Well, I guess we’ll be comrades then,” Himal said, thrusting out his hand. She took it, puzzled, but gave him a firm shake. “I mean, we have something in common. We’re writers, after all.”

“Huh. Well, I guess so!” Moolka swept her bedroom hair out of her eyes. “Look, I think all this has to work out. I think Alfred’s right. We could really turn out some of the best student writers in the country.”

“Well, maybe we can. What sort of stuff do you write?”

“Oh ... stories, I guess. Weird stuff. Some of my friends think it’s science fiction, but I don’t think of it like that. TSI’s published a couple books of my stories, but I just can’t stay focused on anything long like a novel. So I stick with stories.”

They picked up the suitcases and walked to the tall grass of the oceanic meadow. The sun was rapidly burning off the mists.

“I had a novel published once,” Himal blurted.

“Really? What’s it called?”

“*The Emily Epistle*.” Himal’s suitcase was getting heavier, and he knew he had the lighter of the two. “But I’ve outgrown it. It sank beneath the waves pretty fast anyway. I’ve kind of given up on fiction for now.”

“Oh, right. Felicia was telling me about your new book.”

Himal went blank. Abruptly he was ashamed of the stupid thing. What the hell did he think he knew about women anyway? How did he have the gall to write fifteen hundred pages about sex? Especially when this woman here had thoroughly changed his entire outlook on the matter?

He was burned and he knew it. The damn amphetamines. He wasn’t thinking right. He was scrambled by the drive, by this woman, by this paradise.

It seemed as if he’d been driving down here for millions of years, not--what was it? Nineteen hours? Millions of years of Illinois, Tennessee, and Arkansas. Daylight then, but still all a dream. Then dark Texas, getting lost in Nacogdoches, then Houston, deep black early morning, missed the damn exit, went all the way to Freeport, had to turn around, but who cared? It was all one big dream summing up his whole desperate life.

Could all the pain possibly be coming to an end? Now, with this Moolka?

“Well, to tell you the truth,” Himal said, “I’m not sure exactly if it’s the right approach. I may have to rewrite it entirely. I don’t know.”

“Yeah, it’s always interesting when you kind of look at something you’ve done in a completely new light.”

“I mean, just coming here, just setting foot in this place. I mean, to *be* here! To be the *writer in residence*. Not in a million years would I have believed this possible.”

He felt rather than saw Moolka wince. “I mean,” he went on, “you know, to be part of this *team* of writers in residence. I mean, I had no idea this job was even here.”

“So it’s really true that you were just submitting your book to Felicia and then--” She grinned. “That’s our Alfred, all right. He makes these split-second decisions.”

Himal still couldn’t believe the response to his query. Felicia McKinnon, senior editor of TSI Press, wrote back six days later to inform him that the director of the Soul Institute had taken an interest in his cover letter’s “wry sense of humor” and would be contacting Himal shortly.

Himal hadn’t known what to make of this, but a day later had come a letter from Alfred Burlcron stating that “as if in divine coincidence, a writer in residence position has just opened up here at the Soul Institute, and I wonder if you would be interested in taking the position effective immediately? Your delightful humor and the quality of dedication shown in your manuscript seem to meet our qualifications exactly.”

“It was unbelievable. I’m still not sure how it happened. I mean, to drop everything and come! I mean, what an incredible opportunity! I called him within five minutes to accept. I can hardly even remember what we talked about.”

“Yes, Alfred definitely has that effect on people.”

It was only after he’d hung up that Himal realized he’d just been talking to the most important American novelist of the last fifty years. Alfred Moid Burlcron. He’d even checked the name on the web to confirm that yes, for the last ten years Burlcron had been director of the Soul Institute in Linstar, Texas. Himal hadn’t been able to find out why Burlcron hadn’t published anything after that first novel.

Felicia had emailed him a couple days later with further good fortune: in addition to offering him the job of a lifetime, the Soul Institute would actually publish his book. “Now that you’ll be here, it’ll be easier to coordinate strategies for editorial work on your book, for which I and Alfred have several suggestions. I’ll reserve these suggestions until you arrive.”

Himal didn’t want to think about any changes to his book. But hadn’t he defined it as an evolving work? He supposed he had to consider any alterations that might bring out even more passionate sexuality. And, God, if the author of *Grappler’s* had any comments to make, why then ...

Himal noticed Moolka had no further comment about his book. Why did he have the sickening sensation that she and Felicia had read parts of it aloud and laughed themselves sick?

On the other hand, Moolka probably knew precisely the effect she was having on him. Wasn’t leaving the book’s frank subject completely unsaid affirming their coming sexual fusion? Surely the other writer in residence, after reading Himal’s passionate words, must have understood how lonely he was, surely she knew she was destined to be the sea change in Himal Steina’s life.

A four-story structure with high gray arches came into view. The other buildings were squat and massive, close to the earth, but this one was rising and thin, nestled among tall trees. A sign read “THE SOUL INSTITUTE. ADMINISTRATION. CAFETERIA.” Moolka pushed open a tall glass door and they came inside the lobby.

“Wow!” Himal laughed. “Damn, this is cold!”

“You really start trusting air conditioning down here,” Moolka said, brushing wet hair off her forehead.

“I believe it. My Porsche’s AC has never worked right, but that wasn’t really a problem until I got to Texas.”

“Listen, let’s just put your suitcases into one of these lockers here, then we’ll see if Alfred’s in his office up on Level Three.”

Himal was only now registering that it was Saturday morning at seven AM. Could the director of the Soul Institute be in his office at this hour? What on earth could that mean? Himal hoped to God he hadn’t stumbled across a workaholic boss. But that couldn’t possibly happen in paradise, could it?

They stowed Himal’s lifetime literary output in a student bicycle locker and walked onto a mezzanine extending around all the walls, with a vast hole in the center looking down upon a lower floor filled with tables and chairs. Stairs led to what appeared to be a third level of offices. Skylights high above glowed with the morning.

“We might as well get some coffee first,” Moolka said, leading Himal down to the lower space and a cafeteria line. Three sleepy Saturday morning students fidgeted with cola machines.

“Wow, what are all these statues?” Life-sized sculptures of figures in rough white plaster stood on the mezzanine, walked up and down the stairs, entered the cafeteria from a back hall, and sat on benches and at cafeteria tables.

“Oh, those were a student art project a few years ago.” Moolka leaned over the counter, tightening her gray jeans around a flawless ass. “Two large coffees, please,” she told a young man wearing a teal uniform, then turned back to Himal. “It’s called the Family of Woman.”

Indeed, every sculpture was female. Sculptures of young girls in baggy sweatshirts lugged notebooks, executive women strode in power miniskirts, secretaries sauntered with large purses, peasant women held sheaves of wheat, girls and women conversed, played guitar, painted at easels, and hit racquetballs.

It was astonishing how much space they took up. The hall leading into the cafeteria from the back of the building was choked with these talking, striding statues. Himal saw a group of boys twisting to avoid colliding with them. The sculptures took some of the best benches by the potted plants adjoining the cafeteria line, and a fifth of the available chairs at the cafeteria tables were occupied by sculptures eating white plaster food from white plaster cafeteria trays. To his shock, one was a voluptuous nude holding up a peeled plaster banana in her left hand as she hoisted a plaster coffee cup with her right. He stared at the wild white hair, the massive white breasts and erect nipples as the creature seemed to debate whether to suck down the male symbol entwined in her left fingers or slurp the female one in her right.

He gasped. Couldn’t that statue look just like Moolka? The hair was so like hers. That body had to be close. Could this be what she looked like naked?

Moolka frowned as she noted his gaze. “Actually, it was pretty controversial, because it was made by one of our male students. Half the female student body seems to have posed for him, while the other half said no man could possibly understand the Family of Woman. They wanted him banned from TSI.” She shrugged. “But the statues have just hung on.”

“Wow ...” Himal muttered. He’d forgotten all about political correctness. Whoever had created them, these statues were no doubt being kept to reeducate your average uncouth teenage boy. Himal realized he might get reeducated himself if he didn’t keep his mouth shut. “You know, this coffee is probably the last thing I need,” he said. “I’ve been up for hours and hours

getting here.”

“We all wondered why you said you’d only take a day to drive down here,” Moolka said, sipping her coffee, toying with her cup, looking away from him.

Had she really read some of his book? Did she think his writing sucked? But maybe *she* was the one assigned to reeducate him.

“I’m really glad you’ve escorted me here.”

“I’m sure you’ll be very happy here. And I’m sure we’ll be able to work together as the two writers in residence.”

Himal probed for her eyes. “You think so?”

“Well ...” She looked away. Himal settled on probing for her boobs.

“It must mean something that you’re the first person I’ve met here. So maybe we should have dinner tonight?”

“I ... well ... I don’t think so ... I actually have other plans.” But she met his eyes and shared the shock of what he’d said.

“I mean, you could show me around campus and all.”

“Well, actually, I think Alfred was going to show you around.”

“Well, then, maybe another time.”

Moolka managed a barely perceptible nod. “Oh, there’s Alfred now!” she sighed in relief.

Himal turned. Pushing through the glass entrance doors was the tall gaunt man in a three-piece suit who’d summoned him to paradise.