



Long Time Dying

David Bruce Bozarth

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LONG TIME DYING

Tight-stretched canvas sang with a splish and spatter as light drizzle fell from leaden skies. Beyond the drab-colored crowd a bird sang, mourning a mate flown south to escape the November chill. At the rear of the tent pole and canvas sanctuary a woman sang, her voice timorous and uncertain because over-whelming sorrow affected her performance. Rafe looked at the gathering sadly and shook his white-haired head.

It comes now when I no longer have the strength to carry out the great plans of youth. All that's left are weakly smoldering desires—and these do not sustain me.

Raphael Michelangelo Picasso shivered beneath his over coat. With great effort he stilled the muscle spasms; though he knew the calmness would be only temporarily. The cold cut deeply into his bones, felt more strongly now than in his

youth. His feet ached from long hours of unaccustomed activity; greeting guests all morning and the long walk from the limousine to this dismal place.

"How much longer, Rafe?"

Raphael bent weary head to look into Iris' inquiring eyes. She clutched his arm for support and, beneath the ebon shimmer of her veil, Rafe witnessed the smokey tracks of moist grief marring the woman's time-ravaged beauty. He patted her frail hand with reassuring tenderness.

"A few moments, Iris, then we can go home."

Dear Iris—oldest of old friends. I'm so sorry it's come to this. I want to tell you how much I love you—still.

Cowardice seized Rafe's vocal chords as he helped Iris into the wobbly folding chair opposite the casket and upturned earth concealed beneath an artificial grass cover. Iris responded to his assistance with the brave, tight-lipped smile she presented to the world since Jackson's death, an upturning of lips lacking any warmth.

The minister approached the grave site and the throng of mourners made way for him. As the church man neared, quiet conversations ceased until only an occasional cough or sneeze broke the silence. Rafe scanned the crowd, nodding to old acquaintances or acknowledging the of youthful folk he did not know personally; though they shared a great deal in common: Jackson Archibald Kenner.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to..."

Bitter bile rose to clog Rafe's throat as the pleasant voice intoned the traditional elegy

become so familiar as Rafe out-lived the friends of his youth. He rarely disapproved of such services for death was a part of life, objecting only to the well-practiced aloofness by which they were delivered. This service was, after all, for Jackson; the Writer, the Poet, the Stealer of Hearts. Jackson Kenner, the Gentle Thief who invaded and destroyed Rafe's world, then begged Raphael Michelangelo Picasso to share the ruins with him. Jackson Archibald Kenner: the source of Rafe's great animosity—and loving respect.

Rafe shivered again as the wind increased. He turned his head slightly to ward off the wind's bitter chill and saw a young man and woman beyond the grave, holding tightly to each other. How long had it been since Iris clung to him that tightly? When had it not been so cold?

The young man, tall and broad shouldered, sun-browed and dark haired, sat beneath the stately oak in the company of a lovely girl most recently blossomed into womanhood. She wore a sparkling lace dress, all white and fluffy, contrasting vividly with red lips, brown eyes, and hair so black and glossy a raven's wing would pale in comparison. The woman's magnificent hair was loosely bound behind a graceful white throat with a silken ribbon of blue. Her brown eyes, flecked with gold, sparkled as she gazed upon the young man casually playing a guitar across the lap of his worn blue jeans. She often teased him about his appearance, worn and shabby clothes next to the impeccable luster of his exquisitely polished instrument.

An open picnic basket rested on the gay patch-work quilt, its contents ruthlessly plundered by two hearty appetites. Hunger content, the young couple joined happy voices together as the guitarist's nimble fingers expertly produced harmonies on the beautiful instrument.

"Rafe, you're marvelous!" Iris clapped her slim hands with pleased appreciation. She smiled easily, having known Raphael since first memory. "Yesterday you swore you didn't know that song!"

"I didn't," Rafe blushed shyly, still too recently a boy to easily manage manhood. "I learned it just for you." Then, displaying a quiet modesty that enhanced his natural charm, he added, "Let me have a few more days with it and it'll be much better."

"I like it just the way it is!" Iris declared, her nose crinkled sweetly above up-turned lips. "To think you would do this just because I asked...it's wonderful!"

"Your slightest wish is my command," Rafe replied, playing the gallant with sincerity.

Iris leaned forward and kissed the guitarist's sun-browned cheek. His blush deepened, to Iris' gentle amusement.

"What was that for?" Rafe fought the confused stammer her attention produced.

"For nothing, for being so considerate," Iris giggled, pleased to be the cause of Raphael's boyish discomfort.

Rafe tried to say the sweet kiss was more reward than expected. He would have settled for her pretty smile. He would—

A shadow fell between them before Rafe's courage solidified. The young couple looked up to discover a green-eyed, tow-headed stranger grinning an apology. He appeared no more than a year or so younger than Rafe; though there was a maturity about his eyes that seemed oddly out of character. He wore a tattered jacket, scuffed shoes and the travel-stained trousers sported different colored patches on each knee.

"Hello," his voice was pleasant, his eyes mischievous with emerald green luminosity. "Sorry to disturb you on such a beautiful day, but I am recently arrived in town and hope you might direct me to the nearest lodgings where my ruffian appearance and unfortunate sparsity of funds might see fit to accept me for a few days. But I see, however, that I am interrupting..."

The stranger, of course, instantly noted Rafe's narrowed eyes. Though he was young, the yellow-haired vagabond had the mature presence of mind to avoid unpleasant confrontations.

"Don't be silly!" Iris announced cheerfully. "You aren't intruding, is he, Rafe?" Iris continued speaking, providing no opportunity for the guitarist to correct her statement. "Are you planning to stay in our little town for long?"

"I hope to make it my home if I can find enough work to keep body and soul together." His white teeth flashed in smile so contagious Raphael unwillingly responded in kind. Heartened by this, the stranger extended his hand. "You sir, are a most excellent musician. My name is Jackson Archibald Kenner. I hope I have not

unduly disturbed your picnic with this charming lady."

Iris immediately answered without consulting Rafe. "Don't be silly!" Iris turned to the guitarist, pleading sweetly. "Rafe, be a gentleman and invite Mr. Kenner to join us. Have you had lunch yet, Mr. Kenner? We simply have oodles of Mother's fried chicken leftover. Would you have some?"

From such inauspicious beginnings worlds may crumble. The gracious, bright-eyed stranger joined them at lunch and a week later had a small room at Iris' mother's boarding house; employed as an unskilled, though conscientious, handy man who received little recompense beyond bed and board.

Raphael privately resented Iris' generous sponsorship of Jackson, personally resenting the young man's ability to see Iris more frequently than himself. To make it worse, Kenner was polished in manner; brilliant and well-educated. He commanded a wonderful vocabulary guided by an infectious wry humor. Jackson's unusual vision of the world delighted his new friends through outlandish observations of the human condition.

Rafe intensely despised the tremulous effect Kenner had on Iris; yet, he grudgingly admired the mysterious young man from nowhere. Yes—he admired the man who'd invaded the quiet little retreat the guitarist secretly planned for Iris and himself.

Jackson came out of Rafe's small apartment. He sat on the porch step next to the tall, broad-

shouldered, bare-chested youth, who idly strummed his guitar. "Too nice a day to sit around here," Jackson mentioned casually. "Want to go fishing, Rafe?"

Rafe chuckled as he put his instrument in its case. "Sure, why not? As usual I'll catch all the fish and you'll lie on the bank and daydream."

Kenner followed Picasso into the apartment they shared since the death of Iris' mother. "I'll get the beer!" Jackson shouted as he entered the tiny kitchen cluttered with dishes neither had washed.

"You do that," Rafe called out, carefully sliding the guitar case under his bed. He opened the closet and gathered rods and tackle box.

Rafe and Jackson spoke little on the way to Simpson's Bar to get ice to chill the beer. Once out of town, they cut across Groton's pasture toward the river; two young men, one tall and well-muscled, the other slight and a half head shorter; equipped with fishing rods, gripped the wire-hoop handle on the battered galvanized bucket. They crossed the Groton's meadow with easy strides, walking in companionable silence which remained unbroken until fishing lines floated on the river's smooth surface.

Jackson stared at the river, sipping beer as the afternoon sun danced on the dark water. Almost hesitantly he spoke. "You still have not offered a comment on my announcement this morning, Rafe."

"I wasn't aware you sought my blessing, Jackson. I heard you say you and Iris are getting married as soon as she gets back from the East. I

wish you all the happiness," he lied. "You're a lucky man," the truth.

Jackson glanced at Rafe. Noticing the bottle beside his black-haired friend was empty, Kenner finished the rest of his beer and pulled two more from the ice. He skillfully banged the caps off on the lip of the bucket.

"The luckiest," Jackson agreed in quiet reflection, handing the bottle to Raphael. "I mean, if not for you and Iris— Damn it, man, I'm not blind! I feel like a thief. I've stolen her from you and—"

"Knock it off, old man." Rafe kept his attention focused on his line. "Iris loves you, not me." Rafe changed the subject before Jackson could protest the statement. "You got a letter from her yesterday. Any news?"

"The lawyers urge her to sell the house. You know her mother was seriously in debt. Iris is justifiably upset." A trace of frustrated anger crept into Jackson's voice. "I would spare her the heartbreak if I could, but how can I? I barely make enough money to support myself, such as it is, much less a wife! Maybe we shouldn't get married—"

Rafe set his beer on the ground and glared at Jackson. His eyes narrowed and the guitarist growled: "Like hell you will! You can't do that to her. I won't let you."

"How can I keep a roof over our heads, you thick-headed imbecile? What do I know about making a living? I wish I had your talent for farming or music! At least I'd earn a decent wage!

How many incompetent janitors do you know?
One. Me!"

"Hey! It'll work if you let it! No one is making enough money now. Until things get better you and Iris can stay with me."

Rafe made the offer without thinking, but once stated, it was what he wanted. "We'll be crowded, but we can split expenses and you and I won't have to fight over who does the dishes."

Jackson stared at Raphael for a long moment. He heard the sincerity in Rafe's offer and was deeply touched. For once, the young man was at a loss for words. When he did find his voice Jackson chuckled, "Right! You and I won't fight because Iris will tell us which one of us has to do them..."

Rafe grinned.

Jackson watched the river for a while, then spoke softly as a hot breeze rustled leaves along the riverbank. "You are a good friend, Rafe. I hope our friendship is a long time dying."

"You say the damndest things, Jackson!" Rafe chuckled and tossed a pebble in Jackson's direction then returned to his fishing.

Jackson slowly reeled his line in, checked the bait and cast. The result was a backlash which turned his reel into a disaster. Rafe grinned at the softly swearing man.

"Give me that!" Rafe held out his hand. "You'll never be a fisherman, Jackson!" Embarrassed, Kenner passed the tangled line to the guitarist. "I'll have you straightened out in no time," Rafe grinned.

"That's what I like about you, Rafe. You're so damn practical and sensible. The archetypical example of the strong silent-type."

"You're just as strong," Rafe countered, head bent over the rats' nest of fishing line. "Differently, but just as strong."

Conversation mutually failed as Jackson stared at the colorful flotsam drifting with the slow current. Rafe's sure fingers worried the snarl until the secret was unraveled. With a cry of triumph, he wound the line back onto the spool.

Jackson's thoughtful voice caused Rafe to look towards Kenner. "Wish you had brought your guitar, Rafe."

"Give me a break," the musician snorted with patient exasperation. "Ever since you moved in all you want is to hear me play!"

"That's because you are a virtuoso, my friend. Or," Kenner added with a mischievous grin, "I have a tin ear and I'm a budding masochist."

Rafe reached out and punched the reclining writer's shoulder. "If I don't play you make me listen to all those fancy words you put down on defenseless paper!"

Jackson grinned and sat up. He pulled two fresh bottles of beer from the pail. They smiled at each other, no further words needed.

Rafe expertly cast Jackson's line into the river and exchanged it for the offered bottle of beer. "Try not to screw it up again, Jackson." The warmth of his voice belied the potential slander. "I'm ready to do some serious fishing."

"And I," Jackson replied, leaning back on the river bank, "am ready to do some serious day-

dreaming." He looked towards Picasso and laughed. Rafe was quietly amused as Jackson added, with up-raised bottle in salute and lopsided smile: "Let's get down to business, Rafe. We have six beers remaining and an entire afternoon to waste..."

"I'm glad I'm wasting it with you, Jackson." Rafe replied with an honesty that surprised him.

Waste? Rafe thought, a grim, pinched-lip smile touching his lips. *The only waste was four terrible months at Deckerman's Quarry.*

There were angry mutters amongst the men waiting in line since before dawn. In the bitter chill of the September morning, Rafe and Jackson stamped ice-covered boots to restore impaired circulation. A cloud of condensed breath hung over the crowd shivering outside the quarry gates, shadow-eyed men hoping to find work in hard times.

Rafe felt a jerk on his arm. Turning his gaze from the locked chain-mesh gate, he looked down at Jackson. Continuing their argument the writer's green eyes challenged the musician with narrow-eyed defiance.

"You must promise, Rafe! If we get the job, you do anything except hold the star drill! Iris will die if something happens to your hands."

"I'll do whatever I have to, Jackson. We need the money." There was a touch of peevish anger in Rafe's declaration, generated by frustration at being near to begging. The over protective

attitude of Iris' husband only made their desperate situation worse.

Jackson clamped down on his disgust and thrust both hands under his armpits to warm them. "We've been all through this before! You are the one with the musical gift! I do not require all ten fingers to write! A few broken bones will never finish my career before it has a chance to begin."

"I'll do what I have to do," Rafe quietly insisted.

"How gallant for you to say, Rafe. Think about this: Iris will be heart broken if you were crippled. Do you know who she would blame? Me! I could never face her contempt, so I shall take the chances. I am quite serious about this, Rafe."

"We're all in this together, Jackson. I—"

The blond writer verbally exploded. "Horse manure! I want your word, Raphael!"

Picasso swallowed his hot retort. He thought of Iris, knowing how she would feel, but mostly he thought of Jackson's stubborn determination to accept the potential danger himself. The harsh anger evaporated; he nodded. "Okay."

The gate rattled as the work boss kicked it open. He held a list in his work-calloused hands and began calling names been submitted more than three weeks in advance. "I'll take six today," he called out and read the first name.

Rafe and Jackson became anxious as the count reached five and then: "Picasso— Hey, is that your real name?"

Rafe shouldered his way through the crowd, which parted before his tall well-muscled figure. "Raphael Michelangelo Picasso. Any more comments?"

The work boss took one look at Rafe's imposing size and shook his head. "You've got the job." The gang boss jerked his thumb towards the quarry's entrance. "Inside."

Rafe stood his ground, laying a hand on Jackson's shoulder. "Not without him. We're together."

The work boss frowned at Kenner's slight build and shook his head. "We need strong—"

"He comes with me, or I turn and leave."

Jackson nudged Rafe in the ribs. "At least one of us will be working!"

Rafe bent his head to whisper to the writer. "We work together, or we find something else." Rafe straightened up, facing the foreman; his eyebrow arched in query. "Well?"

"I suppose we could find something for him to do." Deckerman's foreman found himself staring at Rafe and Jackson's backs as they eagerly pushed past and entered the quarry.

For three weeks the young men sweated in thirty to forty degree weather, suffering countless abrasions from dust and fragments created by the blasting. Their eyes became red-rimmed and raw, throats wretched with dust. Rafe worked with a crew of thirty, who hauled massive marble blocks from the vast pit carved into the mountain side. Jackson teamed with a burly Negro, who swung his sixteen pound sledge as precisely as a virtuoso pianist. He never missed, and that knowledge

made it possible for Rafe to worry less, though he never stopped worrying about Jackson's danger. Men holding the star drills met with accidents—and learned to count in multiples less than ten.

At night, weary beyond belief, they staggered toward the poor shelter their combined income could afford. Iris awaited them, bedraggled and unlovely from hours of doing wash for pennies. She anxiously tended blisters and abrasions and massaged cramped muscles after dinner. For her, life was a misery of dirty linen and the fear of hearing the quarry's emergency whistle. Three times the whistle blew since they came to this cold and distant area in search of paying work. Each time the shrill scream echoed in the mountains, a man had died and others were injured.

The hard life showed worst on Iris, who lost weight as well as sleep. Her once vibrant laugh came less frequently and Rafe and Jackson, tired as they were from brutal twelve to fourteen hour days, attempted to bring some joy into their lives for her sake. Jackson recited random ideas or thoughts contemplated while the burly Negro stung his hands with mighty blows to the star drill. Rafe, after soaking swollen hands in hot water, might play a song on the handsome guitar, his sole remaining possession besides the clothes he wore; everything else gradually sold as the nation's economic structure worsened.

Iris occasionally broke down in tears, begging the men to find other work. "I'm sick with fear

when that horrible whistle sounds! One of these times it will be one of you!"

"There isn't any other work, Iris," Jackson told her with weary patience. "Do you want us to become thieves?"

"I want you safe and whole!" Iris demanded.

"Nothing is going to happen to us," Rafe reassured the bitter woman. "It won't be long before things get better. The president says this is only temporary."

"Sure!" Iris ran from the room in tears. "Sure they will, after you or Jackson is dead!" She slammed the bedroom door behind her.

Rafe and Jackson stared at each other across the beat-up table, both miserable, yet unable to ease Iris' distress. After a time they went to bed, Rafe in the front room on a rude pallet, Jackson and Iris in the rear, sharing an equally uncomfortable bed.

Three months, one week and two days after they started at the quarry, Rafe fought bitter recriminations as he firmly held Jackson's hand to the operating table in Doc Clarke's tiny, quarry-dusted office. The surgeon was as gentle as possible with his scalpel. He regretted the inability to spare his small supply of anesthesia on such a minor amputation. Jackson, half-drunk from Doc Clarke's medically prescribed whiskey, almost giggled as the tired-eyed physician cut the shattered bone and crushed flesh of his index finger from his hand.

Jackson was far enough removed from the pain he found it possible to make conversation as five appendages became four. "Too bad they

fired the Negro, Rafe. At least he never missed." Jackson chuckled. "Such is life..."

Rafe was bitter and didn't care who knew. "The dumb bastard should have kept his mouth shut instead of looking for trouble!"

Jackson sighed, suddenly very fatigued. He watched Doc Clarke working on his damaged hand. To Rafe, he said, "I do not believe any man can avoid trouble when it comes chasing him. Our obnoxious white-sheet brethren are to blame, if blame must be attached, for this little accident. Forget the name calling, Rafe. It is beneath our dignity to—" Jackson gasped and twisted his eyes shut when Clarke's probing scalpel scrapped a nerve.

The old doctor skillfully sewed the ragged edges of the amputation together. He sighed unhappily as he finished the bandaging then looked down at Jackson. "Lie there for a while, son. I want to talk to Rafe." Clarke took Picasso by the arm and led him to the outer office.

"You get that boy home. Make him stay in bed a few days—he's run-down and on the verge of pneumonia. And do both of us a favor, Rafe, quit working at the quarry. Those greedy owners don't care how many men they maim or kill. I brought you into this world Raphael Michelangelo Picasso. You were whole and well-formed. I'd like to see you leave life with what you started with."

"I'll think about it, Doc. Thanks for taking care of Jackson. What do I owe you?"

"Nothing—if you do like I tell you. Quit that job."

"I'll think real hard, Doc. Real hard. Can I take him home now?"

"Sure," the old man frowned then reached into his vest pocket. Clarke pulled out a silver dollar, forcing it into Rafe's hand. When the musician started to protest, the doctor shushed him. "Stop by Simpson's on the way. Medical treatment."

"I can't—"

"Don't argue with me, Rafe." Doc Clarke pushed the bitter young man toward the operating room. "Get Jackson and get out of here."

It was raining when they left the doctor's office. It was as cold, wet and bitter as it had been all winter. Jackson staggered against Rafe's body and the musician kept the slim-built man steady on his feet by holding Jackson erect with both hands gripping the blond man's shoulders. He asked, "Can you make it to the house?"

"I have to, don't I?" The slightly drunk youth, aged beyond his years, attempted a weak smile. "What would you do? Carry me?" The jaunty words were delivered with false bravado as Jackson struggled against the pain.

"If I have to," Rafe simply replied.

Jackson raised his eyes and gazed at Rafe as if he saw the big man for the first time. The soft-spoken offer touched him. "I believe you would."

Raphael's calm strength seeped into Jackson. Taking a deep breath, Kenner gripped Rafe's thick arm with his undamaged hand. "I'll be fine. Just woozy—hurts like hell!"

Rafe managed a wry grin and showed Jackson the silver dollar. "Doc gave me a prescription

for you. Suggested we stop by Simpson's on the way home."

"Ah!" Jackson chuckled. "General Anesthesia? My pleasure, sir, I am Major Disaster..." The man tensed his grip and nodded. "I could go for a beer. How about you?"

Old man Simpson set up the first round for free. Doc's silver dollar bought them two rounds each and Rafe dipped into his cache to produce two more rounds. By that time Jackson seemed to have regained his biting humor, and often savage, sarcasm. He waved his bandaged hand under Rafe's nose.

"See? I told you better me than you..."

"You crazy son of a bitch!" Rafe growled, although he shuddered to think he might have been the one maimed. He quickly finished his beer and stepped away from the bar. "Come on, Jackson. Iris will be out of her mind because we're so late." Rafe thanked Simpson and efficiently adjusted Jackson's jacket about his friend's thin body.

Rafe put his arm around Jackson's shoulder and steered him to the door. "I'll stay with the Davis family tonight. I'm sure you and Iris will want to be alone."

"Like hell you will, my gallant friend," Jackson announced with sudden heat after they reached the sidewalk. "I'll not have you put out of our home because of something as trivial as a lost finger. Besides," he added in a more sober tone, "Iris will need you after she finds out about this." Jackson glanced down at the red-tinged bandage.

"What are you going to tell her, Jackson?"

"The truth, my *compadre*. I have saved the career of the best damn guitarist I know."

Rafe thought the joking response a bit bizarre in context with the situation but after all, that was Jackson. He clamped a hand on Jackson's shoulder. "I think you and Iris should be alone," Rafe repeated as they walked towards the crude and ill-heated shack they called home.

Jackson swiftly denied Rafe's suggestion. "We've been living together for over a year, Rafe. We need each other. Iris needs you, too. Are you going to back out on us now?"

Rafe looked down into the searching eyes and could not deny them. "No—the day I back out will be the day I'm dead and buried."

"Well, my fine and respected friend, I hope you're a long time dying."

The men were three hours late but Iris was relieved to have them home and reasonably safe, regardless of their drunken condition. She said nothing as she fed them then put the inebriated Jackson to bed with quiet efficiency. She deliberately avoided questions through dinner, but as soon as Jackson was settled, she silently left their bedroom and came to Rafe. She knelt on the hard wood floor, her thin face silhouetted by silvery moonlight straining through the dust-opaque window.

"Rafe?" she whispered, clutching the thin cotton robe about her.

"Yes?"

"Can we talk? Please?" Iris reached for the edge of his blanket.

Rafe hesitated. He thought of Jackson passed out in the other room then looked into Iris' moisture-filled eyes. Her quiet despair touched his heart and, with a trembling hand, Rafe lifted the covers and Iris crawled beneath. For years afterwards Raphael Michelangelo Picasso remembered the sensation of her tears on his shoulder, wetting the fabric of his nightshirt.

Raphael felt dampness on his shoulder, a steady rain blown under the canvas canopy by a capricious wind. The minister's voice droned on in the background but the withered old man failed to comprehend the words.

Words.

Words were Jackson's milieu.

"You know," Jackson laughed as he prepared to board the train to San Francisco, "In all these years I never asked—Why Raphael Michelangelo Picasso?"

Rafe shrugged his shoulders and set Jackson's bag on the steps of the pullman. "My mother wanted a painter in the family. So far, all the Picassos of my family have been everything but painters. She thought that saddling me with Raphael and Michelangelo could bring her dream to life. So—" Rafe chuckled "—she got a musician!"

Jackson grinned as faced his glowing wife. "I'll be back as soon as I can," he promised Iris. "Mind the doctor and Rafe, and take care of yourself, darling."

Iris patted Jackson's cheek with affection. "It's just a baby, darling. Nothing more, but I promise to do just as my jailers decree without hesitation or need for the direct application of coercion."

Jackson's hearty laugh rang out over the crowd waiting to board the train. He winked mischievously as he clapped a firm hand to Rafe's broad back. "I can see that I shall have to find someone else to proofread my miserable scribbling—Iris' vocabulary is becoming inordinately obnoxious!"

Rafe grinned, attempting to remain neutral in the conversation. "Only you are to blame for that, Jackson," he told the author. "Be that as it may, old friend, if you don't get on that train, you'll be late for your own award ceremony. Good luck, I'm so proud of you!"

He offered his hand, warmly gripping the one Jackson extended, the one minus an index finger. They never forgot those grim years of struggle, but they had endured the worst and emerged into a better life.

Jackson tenderly embraced Iris. "Remember what Doctor Burroughs said, you are to rest as much as possible."

"Stop worrying, Jackson! You're worse than an old hen. Rafe will take care of me." She indicated Rafe's instant nod of willingness. "I'd almost swear Rafe is more excited about this baby than you, Jackson."

"Doubtful, my dear," Kenner replied. He looked to Raphael's smiling face hovering inches above his. "I have merely taken strong silent-type

lessons from a master, achieving, I think, a fair degree of accomplishment."

"Fair degree?" Rafe cheerfully sneered with a wink. "You've cornered the market! Good luck in Frisco, Jackson. It's a fine city. You'll enjoy yourself."

"I believe I will. Since they so warmly welcomed you and your *Concerto for Piano and Guitar* I'm sure we'll get along famously." Jackson paused, his voice filled with a mysteriously sober tone. "Thank you for staying behind to take care of Iris."

Iris stepped close and kissed Jackson's thin mustached mouth. "Don't get emotional now, darling. Rafe and I are supposed to do that. We're so proud of you!"

Jackson boarded the train, shouting as the locomotive jerked the coach forward. He pointed at Rafe. "He's the one to be proud of, Iris! *Concerto for Piano and Guitar* is the national rage!"

Jackson stood in the pullman's doorway, leaning out to look back until the rails curved to the southwest, cutting off his view of Iris and Rafe waving goodbye.

The memory of their happiness for him sustained Kenner through the long trip and hours of preparation for the ceremony presenting him with an award for his first major novel. Yet, in the years to follow, he remembered that first triumph with bitterness.

Iris miscarried December 27th, the day before Jackson returned from California. She lost the child Jackson desperately desired—and complications dashed any hope for other children. Iris

recovered slowly, hampered by the harsh realization she was barren for life.

Raphael blamed himself for the late-term miscarriage, though he had faithfully discharged his promise to Jackson regarding Iris. The guilt Raphael felt compelled the musician to accept an extended concert tour to escape the pain and heartbreak.

Jackson, denied Rafe's freedom to flee the unbearable, hovered over Iris, watching the woman's despair slowly evolve into partial acceptance, then, eventually, a determined effort to pick up the lost threads of her life. His devotion was such that the only time he left Iris was when she slept. In those hours of mid-night torment, in a desperate attempt to examine his own feelings, Jackson Archibald Kenner wrote what many consider his finest work: *Dark December*. The book won the author international recognition, but more importantly, it helped purge the terrible melancholy that consumed him.

Raphael Michelangelo Picasso looked down at Iris and felt the pressure of tears building for the hundredth time since Jackson Kenner passed away. He had cried for the departed, but he also cried for himself. When Iris lost the baby, it devastated him as deeply as Iris or Jackson.

The old man's hand lightly touched the warmly bundled shoulder at his side. Iris pressed her hand over his, looking up with sympathy. Rafe swallowed hard, remembering other times Iris looked at him with the same questioning appeal.

Times were happy those years before *Dark December*. Raphael began to receive recognition of his musical compositions, and was well paid for his concert performances. His tours often took him away from the great house he, Iris and Jackson jointly purchased after the Depression. It was a great two story estate with a detached cottage out back where Rafe lived.

At the time Jackson held a position on the local newspaper, an uninspired rag that paid the bills. To combat boredom and maintain his sanity, Jackson clandestinely authored a number of lurid novels for the weekly pulp magazines. He loudly declared he received no great satisfaction in writing such impossible trash, though it pleased him immensely to hear people talking about the latest Mick Casso stories, such as 'Congo Girl of Africa', 'Gat Happy', or 'Red Trails West'.

It was always a point of amusement between the three of them regarding Jackson's choice of pseudonym.

"If," the author stated, "Mick Casso's fans learn the writer lives in this city, it's better they come looking for a 'Michelangelo Picasso' instead of a respected newspaper editor named 'Kenner'."

The times were better, yet they were a prelude to change. The metamorphosis of Jackson Archibald Kenner into the acclaimed author given his first literary award in San Francisco was not instantaneous or easy.

There were days of raging frustrations as Jackson struggled to learn the disciplines of formal writing instead of episodic adventures spiced with off-the-wall observations. Kenner became

obsessed with perfection and his search involved all about him, especially Iris and Raphael, after the guitarist returned home to rest after his first successful series of tours.

Dark December was not yet a haunted dream when Iris turned to Rafe for companionship of a more intimate nature. She had desperately tried to understand her husband's moodiness and self-anger, his all-consuming desires; desires which no longer included the physical closeness that marked their previous years.

Iris needed the gentle comfort Rafe once gave her in a squalid quarry town shack. She made no demands on the musician, nor did he of her and they enjoyed themselves, lovemaking the crowning consummation of years of wonderful friendship. Iris, still deeply in love with her husband, never thought of their tender meetings in any other fashion; friendly affairs of mutual physical gratification, intensely more pleasurable and safer than the embrace of a stranger. Rafe, however, yearned for more; yet, was wise enough to accept what Iris offered than chance losing her completely.

Iris would whisper her hopes and fears, all based on Jackson's unhappiness, as they gasped for breath after the joyous combat of the flesh. She thought nothing of telling Rafe that Jackson once ravaged her as thoughtfully and as thoroughly, until a year earlier, at which time his love making suddenly assumed the tones of desperate duty. Then—almost as suddenly—the interest waned until it barely existed. Iris never compared the men, loving them both, saying her concern

was that her husband seemed disturbed by something—something she felt had to do with their love-life.

Rafe, feeling his love for Iris with a greater intensity than ever before, comforted her, his actions motivated by that same unselfish love. Oddly, the jealousy he expected to feel did not materialize. He, too, had noted a marked change in Jackson Kenner. Like Iris, he thought his friend's anger and self-imposed celibacy was caused by Kenner's difficulty with writing a "serious work."

Jackson Archibald Kenner took his anger on the road, following the major news stories of that year, winning accolades for insightful reporting, honesty, and brutal truthfulness. Each time he left the home on a new assignment, he departed with hope and expectation, but when he returned, he was filled with rage; a deep despair that had no cause as far as those nearest to him could determine. In time Jackson submerged his anger in the powerful *Hunter's Horn*, the San Francisco book. After *Hunter's Horn* was published, receiving the rave reviews it deserved, Jackson once again found joy in Iris' liquid embrace. He became more like his old self, to the relief of his wife and closest friend.

Jackson seemed secretly amused when Iris became pregnant, though he never revealed the reason for that amusement to determined questioning. After her miscarriage the amusement past never became a topic of discussion.

consumption n. 1. act of using up; use. 2. amount used up. 3. destruction. 4. a wasting disease of the lungs or of some other part of the body...

Jackson's sage, gray head lay propped on cooling pillows. His eyes were rheumy and his breath harsh and ragged. The cloying smell of antiseptics failed to hide the malodorous stench of cancerous decay.

"Are you still there, Rafe?"

The weak voice brought Raphael forward in his chair at the man's bedside. "I'm here, Jackson."

The old man, bed-ridden for months, tried to focus his eyes on the voice and gave up when it proved impossible. "Remember when we were at Yellowstone? You wrote your most enchanting music while you, Iris and I sat around the campfire. In my uneducated opinion, it was the best you ever wrote."

"I remember it well, old friend," Rafe fondly recalled. "The tent was pitched on the slope above the most magical little lake in the world. Iris wove garlands of wild flowers while you cooked the zestiest trout, cottage fries and corn on the cob."

"And as usual," Jackson tried to chuckle, "you caught all the fish!" The effort at laughter became a hideous fit of coughing. Hellish pain contorted Jackson's withered features.

Oddly, that facial gesture reminded Rafe of Simpson's, thirty-nine years in the past. This was one time when he and Jackson could not go to

the familiar bar and drink the pain away. He felt helpless in the face of Jackson's illness, his suffering. Then, he was startled when the incredible green eyes focused on his with coherent intensity.

"Thank you for taking Iris to the Christmas Ball."

"You already said that, Jackson," Rafe gently reminded. "Thirty-five years ago. Right before you went to San Francisco."

The light faded in the green eyes. "I hope it's a boy. I've always wanted a son. We'll name him Rafe, Iris, in honor of my best and only true friend. If it's a girl?" He answered the voice that only he could hear. "Michelle in honor of that self same friend." For a moment the lined face relaxed in happy anticipation. Jackson could not see the tears shed by the white-haired man sitting beside him.

"Jackson!" Rafe tenderly gripped the dreamer's hand. Jackson did not respond. After a time the invalid's eyes closed and Kenner slept fitfully.

Rafe stifled the sudden urge to go out and get drunk. He'd done that when Iris had lost the baby. He'd stayed drunk for three days while he drowned his sorrow for Iris, Jackson and, strangely, himself. Raphael did not give into that impulse. He leaned back into the chair instead, spreading the newspaper across his lap. He shivered, the orange blaze from the fire unable to relieve the chill in his old bones.

He did not remember falling asleep, but Jackson's voice woke him from a light doze. "Have Iris and I told you how much we enjoy your music?"

"About as many times as I've told you I've never understood a word you've written since the demise of the late, lamented Mick Casso." Rafe's voice filled with happy emotion. For an instant this was the Jackson he remembered and loved, voicing playful banter, always hoping to get a rise from his adversary. "But," he added, "you may tell me again."

Rafe bent to rescue the fallen newspaper, which Jackson's editorial acumen had raised to a level of excellence larger publishing concerns envied. Folding the copy, he turned to Jackson with expectation, only to discover his old friend sleeping fitfully. With a bitter frown, Raphael rose and stirred the ash-covered logs in the fireplace.

It was cold in the room, yet, unlike the usual winter days, the sun was bright and shining; the sky free of overcast or threatening rain. *Illumination without warmth*, Rafe silently quoted. "Your most famous line from *Dark December*, my friend," he whispered.

The rays of the distant solar orb glowed through the stained glass window Jackson and Rafe made for Iris' fifty-fifth birthday. A guitar for the Musician, a quill and ink bottle for the Writer, a bright sunflower for the Lady. Rafe gazed at the window for long moments before he resumed his unhappy vigil at the side of his old friend. He was still looking at the colored glass when a palsied hand touched his.

"How's Iris?" Jackson asked.

Rafe took the thin hand in his and pressed it tenderly. "She's fine," he lied. "Iris is having tea with Mrs. Harkness."

"Good," Jackson collapsed into a fit of coughing. Rafe patiently held the emesis basin to catch the blood-tinged phlegm drooling from slack lips.

"Perhaps I should call Mrs. Harkness?" he asked.

"No!"

When the fit subsided, Jackson's eyes seemed completely clear for the first time in weeks. "I'm fine, Rafe. Why disturb them with this foolishness about dying? How long have you been here?"

"Forty years," Rafe replied.

Jackson's smile was weak, but it animated the parchment skin hanging loosely on his always too thin face. "I'm serious, Rafe. Hope I haven't been too long in dying—you have your own life to lead."

"I've only been here a few hours."

"Liar! You have been here a week, if I know you—" then, softly—"I just can't seem to remember." Jackson released a painful breath, which made the fluids in his lungs bubble horribly. "I never wanted it to end this way, old son. Fortunately, this will soon be over and you shall finally have Iris as completely as you've always wanted her..."

Rafe jerked his hand away and rose to his feet. "You bastard! What are you saying?" Years of angry frustration rushed out in those few words. For a brief instant Rafe yearned to strangle the man on the bed.

Kenner's lips tried to curve upwards. "I see I haven't lost my ability to incite emotions. I—" Jackson closed his eyes. "—I am sorry, Rafe. I did not mean for it to sound that way. You and I have

tried to fool each other for years and never succeeded. Please, let us not continue that now."

Jackson paused for a breath, his jaw muscles jerking as he fought the pain. He conquered it with his need to speak. "There is one thing which has perplexed me from the beginning, Rafe. You never fought me for Iris. Why? You had as much chance as I..."

Rafe's temper cooled. He answered with the truth. "Because she wanted you, not me." Rafe closed his eyes, voicing words never spoken aloud, but never far from his thoughts. "Iris loved you from the first. She loves you now."

"Yes," Jackson closed his eyes though he continued to speak in a whisper nearly lost in the crackling of the fire. "To my eternal amazement, Iris loves me. I confess to you, Rafe, I have never understood why. So many times I behaved abominably toward her."

"I know, Jackson. I shall never forgive you."

Jackson sighed, a world weary whisper. "It matters little, Rafe, the many unforgivable things I have done, including those you are totally unaware of, yet the most bewildering aspect of it all is why you stayed around—" Jackson bit off his words with startled insight. "There never has been a rivalry between us, has there?"

Rafe grudgingly nodded. "Not in the traditional sense." Rafe walked to the stained glass window and tapped the image of the guitar with his finger. "Myself," the hand moved to the other edge of the frame and touched the quill and pen, "you, and in the center," he laid his palm against

the sunflower with a trembling touch, "Iris. All that ever mattered was her happiness."

"My friend," Jackson breathed hoarsely, "you're a liar."

"Damn you, Jackson, must you always argue?"

"I am speaking the truth. Come, sit down. I grow tired and I need to talk with you."

Rafe could not deny the plea. He took the chair, reaching for Jackson's withered hand.

"There's nothing we have to say to each other. We've been together for so long there's nothing left to tell."

"And that is the very reason I must speak, Rafe!" A spasmodic pain caused Jackson to grip the aged musician's hand. When it passed, there was a sense of urgency in the cracked voice. "I am not strong, so do not argue with me. Hear me out before you speak. Do I have your word?"

"Always, Jackson."

"The child was yours, not mine. I—"

"What?" Rafe felt his ears flame red, his chest constricted about his heart. "Shut up!"

"You promised!" the green eyes accused. "You must listen to me!" Jackson's demand was accompanied by more coughing, worse than before. Rafe, tears streaming from his eyes, held the weak head erect so Jackson could spit out the foul mess the spasms wrenched from his tortured lungs. Throughout his friend's weakness, Rafe was consumed by the shame he had concealed for years.

Jackson feebly pushed the basin away. "Hear me out, Rafe, you must."

"I'll listen, but I don't have to like what I hear." Rafe set the basin on the bedside stand and held the Jackson's trembling hand.

Kenner's green eyes caught fire, though it was possibly a trick of sunlight through the windows. "Iris and I should have made you leave. You might have enjoyed your recognition earlier—perhaps you might have done something more wonderful with your life, though you certainly have done quite well. But the truth is Iris and I were so childish and naive when we married we could not have survived without your calm strength and friendship, your generous help. If God granted another lifetime to thank you for what you gave us it would be woefully inadequate."

"I didn't stay out of desire for your gratitude, Jackson."

"I know. You did it for love, your love for Iris. That's why you bailed me out of a dozen stupid liaisons with women whose faces I cannot now remember. You thought I was unfaithful because I still wanted children and Iris couldn't conceive. You could never have been further from the truth. My desperation was not due to Iris being barren, but because I was sterile. I learned about it before I wrote *Hunter's Horn*. Remember all those trips I took for the paper? I always covered the stories I went after, but in every city I went to different doctors hoping they could do something.

"When Iris got pregnant, I was elated. I thought the doctors were wrong—that I had fathered the child. But there was something in Iris'

eyes—and yours—that told me otherwise. I was never really sure until I came back from the war. That's when Iris told me about you and her."

"She told you?" Rafe was stunned.

"Yes," the writer was faintly amused by the guitarist's slack jaw and shocked disbelief. "She's smarter than the two of us put together, Raphael Michelangelo Picasso. When I came back, feeling angry about things you said in London, I asked Iris point blank. She told me. I expected to be insanely jealous, but I then I remembered Annette Goodsen and how you grieved for her. I imagined my life without Iris and I realized nothing could change how I felt for Iris. When I asked why she waited, had never even mentioned it, she said that when I cared enough to ask she was ready to share that happiness she had with you. It took time, but I did come to understand. Yet there is one thing Iris does not know, Rafe. She was never certain who fathered the child, though she prefers to believe it was me. I hope this confession will not change that for her. I shall leave it up to you, old friend, for I never told Iris. I am sterile. After her hysterectomy there seemed no point in telling her."

"That was a long time ago, Jackson. There are things in life which are best experienced only once."

"That's a wonderful line, Rafe. Too bad I shan't be able to steal it for one of my books." Jackson sighed, his eyes bright with moisture. "Dear Rafe, Iris and I used you terribly. I should have cut our ties ages ago."

"I'm glad you didn't, then I would have been forced to steal Iris. I stayed for other reasons, Jackson. Whenever you were riding high and I was low, I had to better you. Then you'd come back and raise the ante. We needed each other as well as Iris. This place we share is, and always has been, my home."

Jackson raised his head from the pillow. "Thank you, Rafe."

"For what?"

"For loving Iris and for being yourself. In my own way," he paused as his claw-like hand rose to muss the guitarist's white-hair, mimicking the annoying gesture of years past, "I have loved you, too."

The drone came from the south. The minister raised his eyes to the overcast as the airplane passed overhead. Others in the gathering looked up, though most held their eyes downcast, filled with sadness in their hearts. The rain stopped momentarily; the stone markers of nearby graves glistened, a ghostly sheen born of polished marble filmed with icy moisture. The sound of the jet engines gradually faded in the distance, reminding the bent-shouldered musician of other aircraft—and England, 1944.

Rafe's damp raincoat took the jubilant pounding as gracelessly as its wearer. In the interest of self-preservation, Raphael placed the guitar case on the ground and embraced Jackson with an intensity that left the other groaning.

Jackson, still laughing, worked free of the guitarist's enormous grip. "I'll take your bag, Rafe. Let's get the hell out of here."

The tall man draped his arm over the war correspondent's slight shoulders. They briskly moved away from the air transport which had brought Rafe across the Atlantic. "Not that I'm unhappy to see you, Jackson, but just what in hell are you doing here?"

"Iris wrote." Jackson kept the pace fast as they crossed the flight line of the military air field near London. He spoke staccato-style, emulating the trademark which made his war reporting starkly immediate. "Told me you were doing USO Tours. You always were the impetuous and stupid bastard. Should have stayed home where it's safe! What made you do such a silly thing?"

"The same as you, Mr. War Correspondent. Doing my bit to keep Hitler's goons at bay."

Jackson's smile broadened. He was about to say something when a jeep passed them. "Hey, taxi!" Kenner shouted.

"Jackson," Rafe whispered as the vehicle suddenly stopped then backed towards them. "That's an MP jeep!"

"I don't care what it is as long as it gets us to the main gate. Bastards made me leave my car there." Jackson threw Rafe's bag in back and jumped in with it. Rafe looked at the driver, who grinned and raised a finger to his helmet and executed several large circles then jerked his free thumb at Jackson.

"Climb in," the sergeant chuckled. "I'll be happy to see the last of this guy. What are you?"

An aide to the President? Is that some kind of secret weapon?" he grinned, nodding at the guitar case.

Jackson leaned forward and patted the rain spattered case. "Certainly is, soldier. Only guaranteed heart stealer in existence. Too bad it only works for him. Move it, general, I have London to show off and damn little time to do it."

"Hold yer water, motor-mouth." The driver extended his hand and Rafe shook with him. "Guitar player, huh? Sax man myself."

"Pleasure, Sergeant." Rafe got settled. "I suppose we better go, my friend is getting a bit apoplectic."

"Apo-*what*?"

"Burst a blood vessel—piss his pants."

"Right," Jackson interjected. "One of those 'writer words'."

"Okay," the sergeant trod the clutch and grabbed the gear shift. He grinned at Jackson, "As long as you keep quiet. I want to find out what's going on at home."

The MP asked question after question until they reached the main gate and even there, the men at the guard post were starved for news from the States. Rafe didn't mind talking to them, that being part of the reason for coming; entertain the troops, to make the soldier's grim life more bearable.

"Yeah," Rafe said with a wink to the small group gathered round. "That's right, Yoblonski, all the girls still have legs from the ass to the ground. There's a cute blonde waiting at home for you."

"Which one?" the man laughed. "My wife or—"

Jackson grabbed Rafe by the arm and headed out the gate. "Both, you old so and so! Why split hairs? They're all waiting for this damn party to be over."

"You said that right," another man agreed. "Thanks for keepin' things straight in the newspapers, Mr. Kenner. The damn Limmies blasted our raid over Dusseldorf last week. You told it like was, how they need to do something besides talk a good war."

Jackson grinned. "I appreciate it, fellows. Say," he stopped dragging Rafe toward the gate and looked back to the men. "Do me a favor?"

"Sure! Just name it."

"If you see this poor dope wandering around like he's lost, take him someplace safe then put him on the next ship or plane back home. He's supposed to be taking care of my wife instead of putting his butt on the line."

"I will. What's his name?"

Jackson groaned. "I've forgotten what few manners I ever had. You, sir, are in the presence of a musical great of our time. Allow me to introduce Raphael Michelangelo Picasso. And no funny jokes or I'll belt you a good one!"

"No need," a master sergeant replied. "I've heard of him. One of my buddies has a record of yours, Mr. Picasso. Plays it all the time. I like *Geysers and Bears*. I'd like to shake your hand again, sir."

"Thank you," Rafe accepted the outstretched hand with a trace of embarrassment.

"Are you shipping out with the Cole Porter tour?" Yoblonski asked.

"Supposed to, but I missed my connection back in Nova Scotia. I'm not sure I can catch up with them in time. But I'll be here in England for a while. I'd be honored if you'll come see me play."

"Bet your ass, sir. I'll be there—and the whole barracks with me!"

Jackson urged Rafe onto the asphalt road toward a black sedan parked under the trees on the opposite side. "Thanks, fellahs! Keep those Nazi bastards on the run! Come on, Rafe."

Jackson hurried the musician and Rafe got a surprise when he neared the vehicle. It was occupied by a pair of British girls. Jackson quickly introduced them when they stepped out. The blonde clung to Jackson as he put Rafe's bag and guitar in the trunk. She was perhaps twenty and quite attractive. The other girl, a quiet brunette in her mid-twenties, politely smiled at Rafe.

Rafe returned the gesture, only after Jackson's elbow caught him in the ribs. "Surprised, huh? I mean to tell you she knocked my socks off the first time I saw her. Annette Goodsen, Rafe Picasso, my best friend."

"Pleased to meet you," Rafe managed, still stunned by the resemblance Annette Goodsen bore to Iris Kenner. Jackson shoved Cynthia into the front and impatiently waited for the musician and the woman wearing a white lace dress, brown eyes, and blue hair ribbon to climb in back. Rafe felt he was talking to a strangely reserved, quietly thoughtful Iris. The illusion suf-

ferred constantly since their conversation was about the war, and the States, England, and Germany.

Rafe studiously avoided watching the giggling blonde up front with Jackson. The writer drove with one hand on the wheel, the other about the willing nymph and somehow managed to find yet another hand to keep lifting a silver pocket flask to his lips. Rafe vacillated between anger and pity. He had believed Jackson's penchant for womanizing was thoroughly burned out of the man's system years ago.

Rafe listened to Jackson's chatter about London night clubs, restaurants and theater with half an ear; his thoughts focused on an earlier time when Jackson drank hard, worked hard, and stayed hard—with other women. It was a difficult time for the two men because Rafe felt Iris knew about Jackson's indiscretions, which hurt the guitarist, and Jackson appeared unconcerned, which angered Rafe. He frowned moodily as memories of several sticky affairs, which could have ruined Jackson, not only as a husband but as a writer, came to mind. Ultimately there had been one too many and Rafe virtually kidnaped Jackson, taking the brawling writer to Mexico where they remained until Jackson's drinking and explosive libido were once more under control.

Sitting next to Annette Goodsen, Rafe didn't rock the proverbial boat with indignant anger until after checking into the hotel. In the lobby the two women went to the ladies room while Rafe and Jackson climbed switch-back stairs to the guitarist's room. As soon as the door shut

behind them, Rafe grabbed Jackson's shirt and shook him.

"You're screwing around on Iris again!"

"Take your god damn hands off me, you pious son of a bitch!" Jackson's speech was slightly slurred from the drink, but the grip of his hand was strong enough to tear Rafe's loose. Jackson narrowed his eyes and said, "You've been here three hours—I've been here three years! Damn it, Rafe, you don't know what it's like. Don't preach to me. I love you dearly, but if you start preachin', I'll belt you."

"Why?" Rafe put a tight rein on his anger. He wanted to understand.

"I think I know what my chances are, buddy. I don't sit in London and write stories about something I haven't seen first hand. I'm out there with those Joes. I duck the same bullets, eat the same food, speak their language. I'll die just like any one of them if my ticket to the farm gets punched."

"But what about Iris? Doesn't she matter?"

"Of course she matters!" Jackson roared. He pulled the flask out and took a hard swig. "Listen to me. Let's not confuse the present with a past I barely remember. This is now, Rafe. This is how I am, this is the best I can be until, God willing, this insanity is over. Do us both a favor, no more about Iris."

"That's it? That's all? Just forget about her because you're scared shitless? If you feel that way, you should take the next ride home!"

"Shut up. Rafe. Find out what's going on first, then talk to me in a few months." Kenner delib-

erately controlled his anger. Speaking more reasonably he said: "Come on, old son! Have a drink and let's forget we had this argument." Jackson took another drink, his harsh anger dismissed with an ease that startled Rafe. Jackson leaned closer and winked. "Save the piss and vinegar for the Germans, Rafe. How about that Annette? Cute as they come."

"She looks like Iris."

"I know that. Why do think I got such a kick out of your surprise? By the way, she's all yours—" Jackson chuckled—"for the duration!"

Rafe's face crimsoned, the anger tightening his chest. "That good, huh? Tried her out already?" Rafe's sneer abruptly vanished when Jackson's fist rocked the musician's head. Rafe staggered back, falling to his knees. His hand investigated the pain across his jaw and it came away with fresh blood. Jackson didn't look any bigger or stronger than usual, but his vicious uppercut, and the anger which powered it, was an amazing revelation how war affected human beings.

Kenner controlled his voice, rubbing his bruised knuckles, but just barely. "Keep your filthy mouth shut, Picasso! I thought you'd like her, but I see I was wrong!" Jackson stormed out of the room, leaving Rafe to nurse a reddened jaw. Ice from room service didn't help much, nor did the stiff shot of Scotch he downed from the bottle inside his guitar case.

Rafe was sorting through anger and disappointment when a polite knock sounded on his

door. A woman's voice said, "Mr. Picasso? May I come in?"

Rafe got off the bed and flung the ice-packed towel across the room. He jerked the door open and glared at Annette Goodsen. He stepped back to let the woman enter, then closed the door, leaning against it, eyes hard, voice rough. "How much did Jackson say you'd get?" Rafe reached into his pocket and pulled out his money.

The girl's eyes went wide, her face paled. "Yanks!" she made that a curse. She attempted to leave, but the disheveled man blocked the exit. "Please let me out!"

"Tell me," Rafe grabbed the brunette's arm, twisting savagely until she gasped. "Tell me how much you were promised so I have a damn good reason to paste Kenner's chicken-shit ass all over Trafalgar Square!"

"If you don't let me out of here immediately I'll scream!"

"Raise your voice," Rafe warned, "and I'll paste you..." Picasso's blood roared in his ears. Yet a part of him also wondered how he could say these things—be so cruel to a woman he'd just met, especially one who looked so much like Iris.

"All right, Yank. I'll tell you, but first let me go. You're *hurting* me." Annette Goodsen jerked against his grip.

Rafe released the fiery-eyed woman though he stayed close. Annette compressed her lips with anger and returned the big man's stare without flinching.

"Cynthia called me this morning. She invited me to go with her and Mr. Kenner to pick up some famous American musician, an old friend of his from the States. Cynthia, poor dear, doesn't have a brain in her head for chuckling around with a married man, but she is my friend and I agreed to come."

"I'll bet!" Rafe growled. "I'll bet you come, time and time again."

"Don't be so repugnant, sir! You are the most uncouth man ever my displeasure to meet!"

"And you always wear white lace dresses," Rafe poured himself two ounces of scotch and downed it in one gulp. He reached out and fingered the sleeve of the woman's dress; white and lace. "I suppose the blue ribbon in your hair is reserved for first dates. Tell me another fairy tale, honey."

Annette was bewildered by the man's words, his inexplicable actions. "You know, Mr. Picasso, he said almost the same thing when Cynthia introduced us. Mr. Kenner seemed quite shaken. I almost changed my mind about coming—accompanying them to the airfield."

"Sure, sweet heart, and I'm Franklin Delano Roosevelt." Rafe snorted with disgust. "I'm sure my old friend found a way to persuade you..."

"I've answered your question, Yank. I see no reason to prolong this deplorable conversation." She moved towards the door, feeling relief when the irate American made no move to stop her. With her hand on the door knob, Annette Goodsen turned and looked at the tall American with furrowed brow. "I have the uncanny feeling

that I have offended you somehow, or—" she added with confusion, "—frightened you."

Rafe sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing the back of his neck. "You really don't know what this is all about? You mean Jackson didn't set you up in that dress and ribbon? God forgive me, Annette, I'm such an ass!"

Rafe poured another scotch, though the glass remained untouched as he swirled the smoky liquid with a trembling hand. His head drooped between his shoulders, his thoughts elsewhere. The tense silence in the hotel room was broken only by the exterior sound of traffic calmly negotiating rubble-strewn streets despite daily devastation by the Nazis.

Annette Goodsen's eyes were drawn to the small window by the loud voices of a street cleaning crew. When she looked back, the Yank was bent forward, eyes closed, his broad shoulders shaking. She was astonished to see the big hard-muscled man weeping. He sat on the bed, silent tears rolling down his cheeks. Where she had earlier been prepared to bolt and run, she was now curious. What was it about her that disturbed this man? Why had Kenner grabbed Cynthia and gone to the bar to set a record for becoming drunk? Where had the bruise on Rafe Picasso's jaw come from? There was something going on and she could not leave without learning why the Yank was so sure she was a common whore hired to entertain him. Annette crossed the room. She hesitantly captured his attention by touching the thick black hair beginning to show patches of gray.

"Mr. Picasso?"

Rafe looked up, surprised to see the English girl. "I thought you'd left. I hope you can forgive my rudeness—I thought my friend had played a tasteless joke on me."

"A joke? How could I be a tasteless joke? We've never met."

"Not you, Annette, but someone who looks like you. It really isn't a joke either. She is, was, someone I loved very deeply a long time ago."

"I see—" Annette said, not sure that she did, but somehow knowing the man wanted to explain. "I reminded you of her? I suppose Mr. Kenner knew her, too. She must have been very special, I sense you miss her profoundly."

"He knows her quite well. He married her."

Rafe looked into the woman's concerned eyes. She was pretty, like Iris, but now that the shock of seeing her was past he saw the differences, and discovered they were greater than the similarities seemed at first meeting. He sighed, smiling ruefully as he admitted his embarrassment. "Do all you English use Jackson Kenner words in your everyday speech?"

"I don't understand, Mr. Picasso."

"Call me 'Rafe'. I was talking about 'profound', 'uncanny', 'deplorable' and 'uncouth'. Oh," he smiled sheepishly, "let's not forget 'repugnant!'" Rafe glanced at the glass in his hand then offered it to the woman. "I'll get you a clean glass if you'd rather. It's good Scotch. A peace offering. And yes—I miss her."

"A peace offering—" Annette glanced down to her hands then up again, the worried look re-

placed with a timid, beautifully shy smile. "I'd be pleased to drink with you, Mr. Pi—Rafe. Shall we start over?"

"I'd like that very much, Annette."

"Bravo, Yank! as long as you don't mind me having to run at four o'clock. Mother is having a tea and promised to chuck my son in the garden if I'm not home on time."

"I don't mind if you can put up with a wacky Yank until then." Rafe got that other glass and poured. "A son. How about that. How old is he?"

"Going on four. His father and I married in 1940," Annette sipped her scotch then said wistfully, "Bradford was killed at Dunkirk."

"I wasn't going to ask," Rafe set the Scotch down. He lowered his eyes. "Bad stuff, that. Sorry. Look, let's get this straight. I'm not like all the other guys you've met. *Christ!*" he slapped his forehead apologetically. "Where do I get off talking like that? I don't know anything about you or who you know! What I mean to say is you're safe with me."

Annette quickly drained the Scotch and held the glass out for a refill. She smiled, with warmth this time, eyes twinkling as sunshine peeked through winter clouds and the parted black out curtains. She laughed, a sweet melodic sound that warmed Rafe more effectively than the potent liquor. "I wish I were as sure of myself as you seem to be, Rafe."

Annette Goodsen not only 'put up with a wacky Yank', she fell in love with him. There rarely passed a day that Raphael had leave in London that they were not together. They

laughed, they loved, and made glorious plans for the future until a V-2 blast ripped through the woman's flat three months later. Rafe narrowly missed being caught with Annette, her child, and her mother in the horrible explosion because of a last minute performance for the 460th Infantry due for transfer to the front. Rafe bitterly regretted he had not been with Annette at the end.

Jackson, who felt genuine affection for the spunky woman who captured Raphael Picasso's heart, came to Annette's funeral. It was he who observed that no man should have to endure two dark Decembers in one lifetime.

Jackson's fading croak caused Rafe to lean close. "It's been years since we talked this way, Rafe. After the war words never seemed necessary between us, yet I must tell I have long envied you. You had two great loves in your life, three if you count your music. I have only had one and that is more than I ever deserved." Jackson's eyelids sagged, translucent folds of flesh over piercing eyes, still green, still bright. "I should have asked about using you and Annette in—" more coughing.

Rafe held the fevered head to his breast. "In *The Sad War*. Yes, my little Annette lives forever in your words. For me, Jackson, that one book made up for all the bad times; the women, the booze..." The pain of that long ago loss was as fresh for Rafe as the tragic day he stared into the blackened ruins of a small flat on London's lower East Side. Annette had been what Iris might have been for Raphael if things had went differently

that summer's day in another time and place. Rafe forced the memories away. There would be time to remember after Jackson was gone.

"You better take it easy now, Jackson. Conserve your strength. Do you want me to call Edith?"

"Rafe—Edith Harkness can't undo the damage to my body. She cannot take this cancer from me and make me whole. Iris needs her more than I. In truth, sir, I relish the pain. It tells me I still live. What I want," Jackson Kenner concluded, "is a favor from you."

"Name it."

"Play *Geysers and Bears* for me."

"Later, after you've rested."

"We must not delude each other, Rafe. We were never very good at that anyway." There was a sparkle of amusement in the old man's eyes.

Rafe agreed with a bitter-sweet laugh. "I'll go downstairs and get my guitar."

"No need!" Jackson grabbed the musician's sleeve with almost frantic desperation. Jackson was suddenly, and acutely, embarrassed by the childish outburst. "I mean, I do not want to be left alone." He gestured across the room with a palsied tremor. "Your 'other' guitar is in the closet. Play for me, and then take it with you afterwards. It's yours. It always has been."

Rafe knew the instrument well. He and Jackson discovered it in an old instrument maker's shop in St. Louis the year he and Iris accompanied Jackson on the writer's first professional speaking tour. It was a fine holiday for all and, when they were several days in a city, the three

of them would, alone or together, explore the sights. One day when it was the two of them Jackson, remarked on the graceful sway of a Missouri lass walking down the street. He was the first to see the music shop.

"Let us see what he has, Rafe," Kenner had said, taking the tall man's arm.

The proprietor, a white-haired man of the old world school, greeted them cheerfully, displaying his guitars one at a time. There was, however, only one instrument which matched the caliber of the musician who tried it. Rafe was consumed with instant delight the moment his fingers caressed melodies from the ebony fingerboard. Then, reluctantly, he returned the instrument to the display rack. It was far too expensive for his meager funds. On the day they departed St. Louis, Jackson nearly missed the train. When he arrived, breathless and grinning, it was with guitar case in hand.

Rafe, too proud to accept the overwhelming generosity of the gift, refused to accept it. "If you will not return it, then keep it for yourself, Jackson," Rafe had told him. "You'll always be sure an instrument is on hand when I come visiting."

In later years, when Rafe began his series of professional tours, he often used Kenner's guitar, but he always returned it.

Rafe gazed at the dried up form swallowed by the bed, "If I take it now, what will we have to fight about, Jackson?"

"We won't be fighting much longer, Rafe; or drinking beer, or ogling pretty girls in the park. I

shall miss debating your caustic comments on my writing, and you will finally hear the last of my snide remarks about your horrendous playing technique."

Jackson's withered lips turned upwards. He patted Rafe's hand. "I think you know how highly I valued your opinions. You were a great help in giving shape and meaning to my words."

Kenner's eyes closed, his breathing so shallow that for a moment Rafe thought him gone. He leaned close, and was startled by Jackson's abrupt laugh.

"Play for me, Rafe. Just like the first time we met under a tree in the park with a bucket of cold chicken and a pretty girl. Play *Geysers and Bears*—I want to go back to Yellowstone. I want to be young and happy. I want our first successes when the world was ours for the taking. I want to remember the warmth of our campfire. I want what we had before *Dark December*. Am I asking too much, beloved antagonist?"

"I've never really hated you, Jackson."

"I know, Rafe. We have, at times, endured stormy disagreements, but we never hated one another." Kenner began coughing again. It was far worse than any previous attack. Rafe gently lay the wispy-haired head on the pillows.

"I'll get Mrs. Harkness," Rafe said, his voice tight with worry.

"No!" Jackson pleaded. "Not now!" Jackson's lips shaped 'Iris' and he closed his eyes against the pain.

Rafe stroked the sunken cheek with a shaking hand before he removed the guitar from the

closet. As he tuned the immaculate instrument Jackson sighed with relief. "Please take it with you, Rafe..."

"I will," Rafe grimly replied with an aching sob.

The guitarist played with much the same youthful enthusiasm as he'd shown thirty-five years earlier on that wonderful vacation. Rafe also longed for the serenity of the magic lake. His music soothed Jackson as well as eased the ache within his own heart.

The vibrant green eyes closed for the final time. Rafe silently wept as he finished the composition, even though he knew Jackson never heard the ending. The hardest part of all was packing the guitar into the case and going down stairs to face Iris.

The younger folk were first to turn away from the canopy covered grave. They were mourners who might grieve for a time then speak glowing platitudes when discussing the intricate philosophies contained in the vast body of works authored by Jackson Archibald Kenner. They knew Jackson through his literature and, in the years to come, would forget the man because they never knew him. Others in the damp, dismal crowd, were long time personal friends with the Kenners. They were reluctant to say goodbye to the man whose editorial policy echoed his personal beliefs, "*If you're going to work on my paper the first thing you have to learn is that Mary Ellen's petunias rate the same respect as heart transplants, satellite launches, and presidential campaigns!*"

For Raphael Michelangelo Picasso a life time of memories created an immense inertia. He gazed at the casket, seeing a green-eyed tow-head with patched britches dappled by sunshine through the leaves of an ancient oak. He saw a thin face, gray with pain; a blood-stained bandage; a drunken fool; a grieving father; a bitter soldier; the thoughtful editor; the stealer of hearts who managed, somehow, to bring happiness to a special woman and touch the hearts of all those who knew him. Rafe sobbed once, swiftly controlled, and said farewell. He knew it would be a long time dying, this terrific grief he silently endured.

Raphael offered his hand to Iris Kenner. She gratefully took strength from his arm and rose from the creaking wooden chair. She looked long and lovingly at the polished wood casket that held the mortal remains of the one who, in their hearts, could never die. Rafe let her look until Iris turned away of her own accord.

Old friends stopped to offer condolences as they slowly walked to the limousine. When it was possible to disengage without rudeness, Rafe guided Iris down the well-kept sidewalk to the waiting car. The chauffeur, a young man with bright blonde hair worn below his collar, opened the car door for Iris. The driver was professionally sympathetic as he helped Iris enter. He stood at the door, the shoulders of his black suit damp from rain, waiting for Rafe to step inside the vehicle. The young man quickly closed the door and entered the front seat. Rafe felt he understood the man's eagerness to be gone, choosing to believe an important football game was on

television, or the warm embrace of a sultry girl anxiously awaited his arrival. Rafe liked the second thought best.

The driver started the engine then looked over his shoulder. "Back to your house, sir?"

"Yes. Thank you."

The limousine smoothly pulled away from the curb. They began the long drive back to the big, empty house. Rafe frowned. Was it empty? Wasn't Jackson there in all the books and awards, a part of each room and in their hearts? Jackson said it two score years ago: his hope their friendship would be a long time dying.

"How long before we get home, Rafe?" Iris asked.

Without thinking, Raphael replied, "About forty years—"

"What did you say, Rafe?"

"Nothing—" Rafe shook his head clear of morbid thoughts. He smiled thinly; there was still a future to be lived to the fullest.