

GARTER SNAKES

Four blocks from his office, on a street more upscale than his own, Nolly came to the Tollman Building. Built in the 1930s, it had an Art Deco flair. The public areas featured travertine floors, and a WPA-ers mural extolling the machine age brightened a lobby wall. Seraphim's child had been alive as long as Naomi had been dead, almost fifteen months. In fifteen months, Junior should have located the little bastard and eliminated him. With a nervous twitch of his avian head and a wary frown, the watcher broke eye contact and slipped into the chattering crowd, lost as quickly as a slender sandpiper skittering among a herd of plump seagulls. ". . . then how come you couldn't walk where your eyes were healthy and leave the tumors there," she remembered. Nevertheless, Junior was thrilled to hear the name Bartholomew, and to know that the boy of whom Celestina spoke was the Bartholomew of Bartholomews, the menacing presence in his unremembered dream, the threat to his fortune and future that must be eliminated. "A friend's daughter. They say she died in a traffic accident down in San Francisco. She was even younger than Naomi." The kiss was lovely, long and easy, full of restrained passion that boded well for nights to come in the marriage bed. In reaction to a terrible sense of weightlessness, Agnes's two-fisted grip on the steering wheel grew so tight her hands ached. She held on with all her strength, as if at real risk of floating out of the car and up toward the source of the raveling skeins of rain. "Thursday it is," he said, clearly delighted to be receiving only a third of the fair-market rental from his apartment. "I'm saying, for all I know." She took her hand off his thigh. "What's all this about Celestina, anyway?" The fire department. The firemen could come without sirens, quietly with their ladders, so as not to break Barty's concentration. The fact that Barty saw twisty spots with either eye closed had prepared Agnes for this bleak news. Yet in spite of the defense that foreknowledge provided her, the teeth of sorrow bit deep. He could recall clearly when he had known that he would marry her: during his first year of college, when he'd returned home for the Christmas break. Away at school, he had missed her every day, and the moment that he saw her again, an abiding tension left him, and he felt at peace for the first time in months. In January '65, while Vanadium had been in the first month of what proved to be an eight-month coma, Enoch Cain had sought Nolly's assistance in a search for Seraphim's newborn child. When Vanadium had learned about this from Magusson long after the event, he assumed that Cain had heard Max Bellini's message on his answering machine, made the connection with Seraphim's death in an "accident" in San Francisco, and set out to find the child because it was his. Fatherhood was the only imaginable reason for his interest in the baby. He had the capacity to be exceptional at anything to which he applied himself. Bob Chicane had been right about that: Junior was far more intense than other men, possessed of greater gifts and the energy to use them. For a spirit, the maniac lawman appeared disturbingly solid. He wore a tweed sports jacket and slacks that, as far as Junior could tell, were the same clothes he'd worn on the night he died. Apparently, even the ghosts of Sklent's atheistic spiritual world were stuck for eternity in the clothes in which they had perished. Dr. Daines spoke with Celestina in the corridor, outside the door to 724. Some of the passing nurses were nuns in wimples and full-length habits, drifting like spirits along the hallway. With everyone in the diner now aware of Junior, with every head turned toward him and with every wary eye tracking him, he dropped the bun cap and the mustard dispenser on the floor. Barging through the swinging gate at the end of the lunch counter, he entered the narrow work area behind it. Jacob had been born with the requisite dexterity and more than sufficient memory function. His personality disorder—which made him unemployable and guaranteed that his social life would never involve endless rounds of parties—ensured that he would have the free time needed to practice the most difficult techniques of card manipulation until he mastered them. Junior considered slipping quietly around the house, peering in windows, to be sure she was alone, before approaching directly. If she saw him, however, his wonderful surprise would be spoiled. Standing at graveside, Junior was in a foul mood. He was weary of pretending to be deep in grief. Thickened with the odors of antiseptics and blood, until breathing required an effort. With her brothers, she adjourned to the waiting room, where the three of them sat drinking vending-machine coffee, black, from paper cups. Tom opened his empty hands and then filled one of them with his water glass. The rattling ice belied his calm face. Raising his revolver, Tom squeezed off two shots, but the gun didn't discharge. Taking her mother's advice to heart, Celestina sighed. "All right. Let's just pray they catch him. But if they don't . . . two weeks, and then the rest of the plan, the way you said, Tom. Except that I can't tolerate two weeks—in a hotel, cooped up, afraid to go into the streets, no sun, no fresh air." Junior said nothing. He was still upset with Naomi for hiding the pregnancy from him, but he was delighted that the baby would have been his. Now Vanadium couldn't claim that Naomi's infidelity and the resultant bastard had been the motive for murder. Only one member of the distant funeral party did not disperse toward the line of cars on the service road. A man in a dark suit headed downhill, between the headstones and the monuments, directly toward Naomi's grave. As he'd been instructed, Vanadium felt along the return edge of the carved limestone casing to the right of the window until he located a quarter-inch-diameter steel pin that protruded an inch. The pin was grooved to facilitate a grip. An insistent, steady pull was required, but as promised, the thumb-turn latch on the inside disengaged. The cop had unzipped the top of her jogging suit and pulled up the roomy T-shirt. Junior had heard of this invention, but until now he'd never seen one. He supposed that an obsessive like Vanadium might go to any lengths, including this exotic technology, to avoid missing an important call. He considered himself to be a thoroughly useless man, taking up space in a world to which he contributed nothing, but he did have a talent for baking. He could take any recipe, even one from a world-class pastry chef, and improve upon it. On the back of the watch case, however, were the incriminating words of a commemorative engraving: To Eenie/Love/Tammy Bean. She asked him how many fingers she was holding up, and he said four, and four it was. Then two fingers. Then seven. Her hands so pale, the palms both bruised. Chicane wasn't alone.

Sparky Vox, the building superintendent, approached behind him and hovered. Seventy-two yet as spry as a monkey, Sparky didn't walk so much as scamper like a capuchin..He nervously fingered the fabric of his slacks, outlining the quarter in his pocket. Still there..He swept the immediate area with the flashlight, and shadows spun with shadows, waltzing spirits in the ballroom of the night..Urgency gripped the paramedics. The rescuers' equipment and the pieces of the car door were dragged out of the way to make a path for a gurney, its wheels clattering across pavement littered with debris..When Max answered, Vanadium let out his breath in a whoosh of relief and began talking on the inhalation: "It's me, Tom, and maybe I've just got a bad case of the heebie-jeebies, but there's something I think you better do, and you better do it right now."..She held his face in both hands and kissed each of his beautiful jewel eyes. "You ready?"..folded over his too-tight shirt collar, and with a second chin more prominent than..Like all women past puberty and this side of the grave, she was attracted to him. She never told him as much, not in words, but he detected this attraction in the way she looked at him, in the tone that she used when she spoke his name. Throughout three weeks of therapy, Seraphim revealed countless small but significant proofs of her desire..A pang of regret pierced her, that her boy's precocity should deny him this fine fantasy, as her morose father had denied it to her. "He's real," she asserted..If Cain had been attracted to one woman by her looks, surely he would be attracted to the other. And perhaps the sisters shared a quality other than beauty that drew Cain with even greater power. Innocence, perhaps, or goodness: both foods for a demon..Fear of the unknown is a weakness, for it presumes dimensions to life beyond human control. Zedd teaches that nothing is beyond our control, that nature is just a mindlessly grinding machine with no more mysteries in it than we will find in applesauce..Maria gathered up the four jacks and tore them in thirds. She put the twelve pieces in the breast pocket of her blouse. "I buy to you new cards, but no more ever can you to be having these."..But Havnor is also the Great Isle, a broad, rich land; and in the villages inland from the port, the farmlands of the slopes of Mount Onn, nothing ever changes much. There a song worth singing is likely to be sung again. There old men at the tavern talk of Morred as if they had known him when they too were young and heroes. There girls walking out to fetch the cows home tell stories of the women of the Hand, who are forgotten everywhere else in the world, even on Roke, but remembered among those silent, sunlit roads and fields and in the kitchens by the hearths where housewives work and talk.. "By law, adoption records are sealed and so closely guarded that you'd have an easier time acquiring a complete roster of the CIA's deep cover agents worldwide than finding this one baby."..As if he sensed her reluctance to return to Dr. Chan, Barty had kept her occupied with talk of the red planet as they approached the office building, had talked her off the street, along the driveway, and into a parking space, where finally she relinquished the fantasy of an endless road trip. At 5:45, long past the end of office hours, Dr. Chan's suite was quiet..With Naomi, sex had been glorious, because they were bonded on multiple levels, all deeper than the mere physical. They had been so close, so emotionally and intellectually entwined, that in making love to her, he'd been making love to himself; and he would never experience a greater intimacy than that..Having booked the suite for three nights, Tom expected that he would spend far fewer late hours in his bed than sitting watch in the shared living room..replace her. I'd never be able to spend a penny of it. Not a penny. I'd have to give it away. What would be the point?"..NOT IN A MOOD to garden, but wearing the proper gloves, Junior clicked on the foyer light, the hall light, the kitchen light, and stepped around the clubbed-smothered-shot nurse, to the range, where he switched on the right oven, in which an unfinished pot roast was cooling, and the left oven, in which the dinner plates waited to be warmed. He cranked up a flame again under the pot of water that had been boiling earlier-and glanced hungrily at the uncooked pasta that Victoria had weighed and set aside..He told her that he loved her, and she slipped away upon his words. As she went, the haggard look of the terminal leukemic patient passed from her, and before the gray mask of death replaced it, he saw the beauty he had preserved in memory when he was three, before they took his eyes, saw it so briefly, as if something transforming welled out of her, a perfect light, her essence.. "Just that she's aware of all the ways things are," Maria added. "Like you and Barty."..She expected him to be gone, snatched by an accomplice who had come in the back way while Deed had distracted her at the front door.. "And how about this," he continued. "Every point in the universe is directly connected to every other point, regardless of distance, so any point on Mars is, in some mysterious way, as close to me as is any of you. Which means it's possible for information-and objects, even people-to move instantly between here and London without wires or microwave transmission. In fact, between here and a distant star, instantly. We just haven't figured out how to make it happen. Indeed, on a deep structural level, every point in the universe is the same point. This interconnectedness is so complete that a great flock of birds taking flight in Tokyo, disturbing the air with their wings, contributes to weather changes in Chicago."..Grace knew it, too, because she went limp with misery in his arms, ceased struggling against him..ROCKING AS IF AFLOAT on troubled waters, abused by an unearthly and tormented sound, Junior Cain imagined a gondola on a black river, a carved dragon rising high at the bow as he had seen on a..In the front wall of the living room, where once had been a fine bay window, the parsonage lay open to the sunny day. Tom shrubbery, carried in from outside, marked the path of destruction. In the very middle of the room, plowed against a toppled sofa and a thick drift of broken furniture, a battered red Pontiac sagged to the left on broken springs and blown tires. A portion of the crazed windshield quivered and collapsed inward, while plumes of steam hissed from under the buckled hood..She damaged more of Joey's things than her own solely because he was such a big, dear giant, which made it easier to believe that he was constantly bursting out of his clothes..Now, the hateful music unnerved him. He became convinced that if he went home alone, the phantom chanteuse-whether Victoria Bressler's vengeful ghost or something else-would croon to him once more. He wanted company and distraction, after all.. "Last I noticed, his car was out. Let me check." Sparky put down his phone and went to look in the garage. When he returned, he said, "Nope. Still out. When he parties, he usually parties late."..With remarkably little splash, the sedan eased into the water.

Briefly it floated, bobbling near shore, tipped forward by the weight of the engine. As the lake flooded in through the floor vents, the vehicle settled steadily-then sank rapidly when water reached the two partially open windows..He stepped into the house, quietly closed the front door, and examined the bottle. The glass was thick, especially at the base, where a large punt--a deep indentation-encouraged sediment to gather along the rim rather than across the entire bottom of the bottle. This design feature secondarily contributed to the strength of the container. Evidently he had hit her with the bottom third of the bottle, which could most easily withstand the blow..The front door was unlocked. This was no longer one house; it had been converted to an apartment building..Already, the girl had taken Barty's hand. The two kids descended from the porch into the rain. They didn't circle the oak, but stopped at the foot of the steps and turned to face the house..Eventually, he settled on a mental image of a bowling pin as his "seed." This was a smooth, elegantly shaped object that invited languorous contemplation, but it did not tease his libido..He didn't allow himself to ponder why Vanadium had come here or what relationship might have existed between the cop and Victoria. All that was for later consideration, after he had dealt with this unholy mess..He got behind the wheel of the Studebaker, started the engine, did a hard 180-degree turn, using more lawn than driveway, and cried out in terror when Vanadium moved noisily in the backseat..To celebrate, Junior went to a gallery and purchased the second piece of art in his collection. Not sculpture this time: a painting..A trickster, this detective. Full of taunts and feints and sly stratagems. Psychological-warfare artist..Sometimes Celestina marveled at how intimately and inextricably the tendrils of tragedy and joy were intertwined in the vine of life. Sorrow was often the root of future joy, and joy could be the seed of sorrow yet to come. The layered patterns in the vine were so complex, so enrapturing in their lush detail and so fearsome in their wild inevitability, that she could fill uncountable canvases, through many lifetimes as an artist, striving to capture the enigmatic nature of existence, in all its beauty dark and bright, and in the end merely suggest the palest shadow of its mystery..In the cab, pulling into traffic, the driver said, "The mister tells me you're the star of the show tonight."..Junior considered leaving before Vanadium-still seventy-five yards away-arrived. He was afraid he would appear to be fleeing.."Who hired him to hex the ship, fool?"..Nolly said, "We've never really had a song of our own, in spite of all the dancing we do. I think this is a good one. But so far, you've only sung it to another man.".."But I've never seen a case like this. Usually, boils appear on the back of the neck. And in moist areas like the armpits and the groin. Not so often on the face. And never in a quantity like this. Really, I've never seen anything like it."..Holding up his misshapen hands, knobby knuckles toward Agnes, Obadiah said, "How do you think they became like this?"..He needed to keep moving, conduct the search, find the watch, and get the hell out of here, but he couldn't stop staring at the musician. Something about the cadaver made him nervous-aside from the fact that it was dead and disgusting and, if he was caught with it, a one-way ticket to the gas chamber..Celestina indicated to Tom that he should sit at the head of the table, facing Agnes at the foot. As Wally lowered himself into the empty chair to Tom's left, Celestina picked up two items from the sideboard and put them in front of Tom, before sitting to his right..Swift and yellow, Angel flew to her mother, grabbing at one of the bunched drapes as if she might hide behind it..She curled up in the armchair, watching Barty. She was greedy for the sight of him. She thought she would not doze off, but would spend the night watching over him, yet exhaustion defeated her..Each page comprised four columns of names and numbers, most with addresses. Approximately one hundred names filled each column, four hundred to a page..She remained fixated on the card that she had just dealt, and for a while she didn't speak, as though the eyes of the paper knave held her in thrall. Finally she said, "Monster. Human monster."..SHORTLY BEFORE one o'clock, the Hackachaks descended in a fury, eyes full of bloody intent, teeth bared, voices shrill..Celestina had a delayed reaction to Barty's name. An odd look came over her. "Barty? Short for ... Bartholomew?"..For a while he thought the fear would end only when he perished from it, but eventually it faded, and in its place poured forth self-pity from a bottomless well. Self-pity, of course, is the ideal fuel for anger; which was why, pursuing the Buick through fog, climbing now toward Pacific Heights, Junior was in a murderous rage. By the time he reached Cain's bedroom, Tom Vanadium recognized that the austere decor of the apartment had probably been inspired by the minimalism that the wife killer had noted in the detective's own house in Spruce Hills. This was an uncanny discovery, troubling for reasons that Vanadium couldn't entirely define, but he remained convinced that his perception was correct..The nurse raised her eyes from Agnes to this other person. "Yes a chip of ice would be all right."..faiths and inhibiting rules that confused humanity, when he was sufficiently enlightened to believe only in himself, he would be able to trust his instincts, for they would be free of society's toxic views, and he would be assured of success and happiness if always he followed these gut feelings..A cause now apparent, the fear explained, Agnes held her baby more tightly. So new to the world, he seemed already to be slipping away from her, captured by the whirlpool of a demanding destiny..To Edom, humanity was obviously not the greater of these two destructive forces. Men and women were part of nature, not above it, and their evil was, therefore, just one more example of nature's malignant intent. They had stopped debating this issue years ago, however, neither man conceding any credibility to the other's dogma..His eyes were strangely radiant, as she had never seen them before, as if the shining angel who would guide him elsewhere had already entered his body and was with him to begin the journey..Barty's mathematical genius proved to have a valuable practical application. Even in his blindness, he perceived patterns where those with sight did not. Working with Tom Vanadium, he devised strikingly successful investment strategies based on subtleties of the stock market's historical performance. By the 1980s, the foundation's annual return on its endowment averaged twenty-six percent: excellent in light of the fact that the runaway inflation of the 1970s had been curbed.."Well, with so much on His shoulders, He can't always watch us directly, you know, with His fullest attention every minute, but He's always at least watching from the corner of His eye. You'll be all right. I know you will."..Chicane packed the ice against Junior's thighs. "Severe spasm causes inflammation. Twenty minutes of ice alternating with twenty minutes of

massage, until the worst passes." Crouching beside the boy as he rubbed a brighter shine onto the granite, Agnes said, "Barty, honey, why are you ...As she struggled to cope with her loss, the last thing Agnes needed was the reminder posed by that empty chair. Maria's intentions were good, however, and Agnes didn't want to hurt her feelings..AGNES ALWAYS ENJOYED Christmas Eve dinner with Edom and Jacob, because even they tempered their pessimism on this night of nights. Whether the season touched their hearts or they wanted even more than usual to please their sister, she didn't know. If gentle Edom spoke of killer tornadoes or if dear Jacob was reminded of massive explosions, each dwelt not on horrible death, as usual, but on feats of courage in the midst of dire catastrophe, recounting astonishing rescues and miraculous escapes..By ones and twos, the festive crowd eventually deconstructed, but for Celestina, an excitement lingered in the usual gallery hush that rebuilt in their wake..In the passenger's seat, Barty was cushioned in his mother's arms. At times, the boy cooed or gurgled, or made a wet chording sound..Junior forgot all about seduction. "And she--what?--She adopted her sister's baby?".Although Junior felt honor-bound to give Victoria first shot at him, he certainly didn't owe her monogamy. Eventually, when he had shaken off suspicion as finally as he had shaken off Naomi, he would be in the mood for a dessert buffet, romantically speaking, and one éclair would not satisfy..Beveled, crackled, distorted, divided into petals and leaves, Deed's face beyond the lead-ad glass, as he leaned closer to try to peer inside, was the countenance of a dream demon swimming up out of a nightmare lake.

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