

# Petey Prickles Vs. Funeral Steve: An ALL-NEW Petey Prickles Caper!

*by* Laura Ellen Scott

A really good-looking man is a Blind Angel. Blind Angels scan the horizon, failing to recognize rocks, trees, high tension lines, the highway. What they do see is childhood, ancient settlement, and the energy that binds all matter. You get it, right? Blah, blah, blah, I took one look at you and I just knew . . .

Still, she liked that kind of guy. Officer Dumasha glimpsed a Blind Angel at the edge of the crowd where pajama-clad citizens gawked at a scene of carnage; two bodies had been discovered at dawn in the magic-free zone of the DC suburbs.

A man can either look for objects or he can look for meaning, and you can tell which is which by how his eyes swim or harden in the morning sun. The Angel's eyes were milky. Dumasha watched him shuffle away, bare footed, toward the cul-de-sac. His blonde hair shimmered, and his naked chest was rosy from sleep. A red coffee cup tilted in his weak grasp, but she could see that it bore an image of a cartoon favorite--the unrepentant Petey Prickles. The Blind Angel kissed his lips to the rim but didn't drink. An insouciant bagginess in the crotch of his flannel pants seemed so promising. Dumasha shivered once, sub-vocalizing an *mmm* of appreciation. Then she forgot him.

Joss was morally unstable, ever promoting his own interests ahead of others, but he wasn't evil. And when he experienced a revelation or had a deeper understanding of some crucial event, he often failed to consider the general usefulness of his perspective, opting instead for a quiet and handsome self protection.

He saw what he saw, he read the message. He thought he'd best keep it to himself.

His lover's body had been found next to that of a 14 year old boy, and both were face down in the stinking pine mulch under the swing set at the tot lot. The boy's arms and legs were thrown out like an X. But Ivy's arms were bent at the elbows, one fist up, one down, and her torso was twisted as if she'd died dancing. Her knees squared the angles, positioned far apart.

She looked like a human swastika, but that wasn't the message.

Joss's memory of the previous evening was foggy, but he knew he had made love to her only six hours ago. She was still protected by that worn out t-shirt with the 7-up logo across the back. The shirt must have been at least ten years old, and she'd refused to take it off during sex. She sent him home right after. Ivy never let Joss stay, never let him fall asleep in her bed. And he doubted that she ever drank 7-up in her life.

She was a swastika, the boy was an X, but fringe politics was not the message.

The technicians rolled the boy, and Joss glimpsed the mutilation just before the cops shouted the crowd back to the parking lot.

The killer had carved lines across the boy's eyes, digging two vertical gouges from brow to cheek, intersecting and crossing the natural seam where the lower and upper lids met. Detectives hovered, like betrayed actors from a canceled TV series, to cast shadows over the bodies and share intuition with one another.

But you didn't need intuition. The information was there. Joss understood the message.

He knew a field biologist who couldn't enjoy movies if the flora was wrong: "God damn it, that's a monkey-nut tree," he'd say, outraged all by himself. Talk about someone who couldn't see the forest for the fucking inaccurate trees. Similarly, Joss was possessed of his own eccentric expertise and had no interest in the big picture. All he saw, all he needed to see, were the details: crosses over the eyes, absolute symmetry, and ludicrous arms akimbo . . .

Only in cartoons did Death look like this.

It was a joke. But this time the coyote wasn't going to peel his own flattened carcass up off the highway, snap himself back into shape, and begin the hunt anew.

Joss nibbled at the edge of his empty cup, wishing for more than coffee. Cartoons were a means of telling children about untethered, unmediated rage. Cartoons depended on a reliable set of symbols that everyone understood as shorthand for horror and destruction.

Ivy's ridiculous pose was more extravagant than any he'd seen her perform in life. She was conservative, even cold with him. That she'd been murdered was not an impossible thought, but that her body could be shaped this way was damned hard to conceive.

Joss walked away. No one knew who he was or what his relationship to the deceased might have been, so his retreat went unnoticed. He wondered how long it would take before he was discovered, questioned, suspected. He knew a lot about Ivy's death. Too much, as they say.

And hell, he might well have shot her; he could have. He didn't really remember not doing so.

But the notion of offering his insight or possible confession to the authorities only dimly lit the periphery of his concern. He assigned priority to shaping and arranging his grief. As he entered his home, the living room was jolly with morning sun zooming through half empty bottles and smudged tumblers. The mounded ashtrays reeked. It looked like he'd had a party in here. He decided to go back to bed and dream.

Before Joss was born, his older brother died from aniline poisoning. Little Henry, at two years old, had drunk a bottle of ink from his father's office, and more ironically than anyone had the stomach for, turned greenish red, stopped breathing, and died. Joss knew Little Henry from a single photograph from the top of Mother's piano, and in dreams the flat image jittered and screeched just like Daddy's inky creations: *See you in the funny papers, see you at the movies, chump.*

The police would figure it out eventually. The victims were cartoons and only cartoons can kill their own kind. *Pop! Bam! Crash!* Joss drank against the sadness.

In the days that followed, Joss waited for the police. He was, after all, Ivy's lover and the last person to see her alive. But they never came. Joss stayed in his house for two days before he ventured out again. He spent his time smoking and looking over images of violence and death in Daddy's sketches; "Splatt!" with a double "t" was a trademark expression of impact in Hanky Bells' cartoon world.

On Wednesday he lunched at Mable's Downtown with his brother Declan, a prison guard. Dec paid, of course. They discussed an upcoming gallery event, a retrospective of their father's career in comics and cartoons. They also talked about tuxedos and invitations, but they didn't talk about Ivy. They didn't discuss the murders at all, despite the revelations that were burning in Joss's throat. He passed the herbed butter, he passed the salt, and he made sure that the waiter gave Declan an extra wedge of lemon for his tea. Dec had asked twice for himself, but his manner was habitually too small to be effective. Joss's careless beauty burned through the ruddy layers of a tequila hangover; he merely needed to raise his finger and service was rendered.

But he failed to introduce the subject of Ivy's death. Oh, and that boy as well. Who the hell was he anyway? Joss found it hard to concentrate on the boy at all, or to remember that it was the child's body that carried so much information. Joss's body missed Ivy's, and that fact managed to assert a kind of selfish priority to which he was already predisposed.

More ice water please. And a Stoli. Fish, potatoes, slippery zucchini pieces speared on forks, and one of the brothers was a cartoon killer. Joss visualized Declan in the act of killing Ivy, and he was jolted by how easily the scene came to him. He then bolted to the men's room to be sick.

*I'm pretty torn up about this.* He wiped his brow and studied his face in the long mirror over the basins. Slight lines around his eyes were a warning that he may have just passed his youth by no more

than an hour or so. He practiced saying, "It has been so difficult," and "She was a unique person."

Ivy's breasts. Perfect spheres of accusation. She should have taken off that damned t-shirt. Especially since it was going to be their last time together. Joss didn't know it, but he was one of those handsome guys ensnared by a plain, militant woman. It happens sometimes, an unappealing woman gets hold of a wolf, and she keeps him by virtue of her cruelty, her humorlessness, and her inability to be charmed. The poor guy walks around addled, as if he'd been thunked by a sledgehammer. Thunk! Another good cartoon word.

Declan followed Joss into the rest room. Essentially, Dec was a younger copy of Joss, but for some reason he was invisible and spiritless, without the gorgeous light that informed his older brother's features. Someone once joked that Declan was born when Hanky Bells used Silly Putty to create a warped duplication of Joss.

Family responsibilities divided predictably. Dec managed the estate, and Joss looked pretty. It was a blessing that neither of them had ambitions, anymore. In art school Joss had tried his hand at cartooning, but the only finished project he'd produced was a sophomoric porno parody of "Petey Prickles." The short film played in college theaters for one summer in 1987 before the family embarrassment became overwhelming.

"Maybe you shouldn't have vodka for two meals in a row."

Side by side in the mirror, the brothers looked like the alter personalities for a discontinued comic book hero. In black cotton silk and calfskin, Joss was unavoidably glamorous. He'd combed his golden hair with a little bit of gel--not enough to shine, but just enough to create honeyed undertones. A subtle stud in his ear lobe was only perceptible when the light was perfect. But Declan's only vanity was his high school ring, which he still wore with pride. His guard uniform looked okay on him, but civilian garments fit like threats. The mustard cord jacket was too tight against his chest, and a knobby brown tie shaped a fist at his throat.

Could Dec have killed Ivy?

Joss felt strange inspiration. "I've got to go to Ivy's funeral tomorrow. The viewing is tonight. You wanna come with me?"

"God no."

They arrived an hour early because Joss drove, and because Declan refused to kill time in the bar across the street from Smithley and Sons. He had a point; if the press were waiting, they'd wait there. Moderate celebrity necessitated moderate caution.

Annoyed, Joss lurched into a parking spot at the funeral home. "Fuck it. Aren't you going to ask me about Ivy?"

"We're too early Joss." Dec gnawed at his knuckle.

Outsiders always assumed that Hanky Bells had modeled the mischievous "Petey Prickles" after one of his own children. And at different stages of their lives, both Joss and Declan had been nicknamed "Petey." In high school, Joss bore the moniker with fragile grace, knowing that as he became an adult he would make it impossible for others find pleasure comparing him to a cartoon. Dec, on the other hand, grew into the teasing, having escaped it as a child. It wasn't until he started at the prison that his secret past was unlocked, and murderers, rapists, and fellow guards started to call him "Mr. Prickles," or "Officer Petey." Given the dangerous environment, given his dangerous life, Dec couldn't afford much of a sense of humor.

Nor could he afford patience for his brother's sense of drama.

"She was important to me," Joss continued. "It was mainly sexual on the surface, but there was more than that. She fascinated me."

"Jesus. I hope you aren't doing the eulogy."

Perhaps the only good thing about being identified with Petey Prickles was that it was an experience the brothers shared. Beyond that they were bound by a strong, mindless sense of family, though neither had sought to create his own. They never discussed their permanent bachelorhood. Joss's secret lover, now dead, had a fat orange cat and maybe in life the three had comprised a kind of crippled, dry family unit, but surely that was straining the concept. Only by rare accident had Ivy, Joss, and Gubar ever been present all at once in the same room.

"You're jealous."

Dec would never rise to the bait.

"Ivy put a spell on me. She wasn't good looking, she was mostly mean. She never let me hang around."

"You sound like a woman, Joss."

"Sometimes it seemed like she hated me. Hell, let's go in."

"No one's here yet."

But Joss bolted from the car and trotted up the ramped entrance. Dec followed at a more conservative pace. The brothers were greeted in the foyer by an enormous man whose smile seemed as permanent and natural as a birthmark.

"Welcome, gentlemen." Jim Smithley offered Dec the warmest, softest handshake he'd ever felt. "We're awaiting Mr. Oppel, but in the mean time please allow me to show you to the Memory Lounge. Coffee?"

Sweet, familiar music floated overhead.

"We want to go in there," Joss said, pointing to the main gallery.

"I'm sorry sir—"

Joss paid no heed. He rushed the viewing room with inappropriate energy. As Dec entered he saw a wall of mismatched flower arrangements sent by Ivy's relatives and co-workers. White vases offered yellow roses snuggled into nests of baby's breath and lacy ferns. Cheaper bouquets of tinted carnations filled the gaps. But there were also several bizarre, tropical arrangements of spiky greens and lurid, wide flowers that seemed poisonous.

Some people knew Ivy Oppel, some people didn't.

Declan heard his brother shout.

"Holy Shit!"

"Joss?" As Dec turned he saw Joss at the end of the gallery, arms splayed as if he'd just lost something precious.

Ivy Oppel's open casket rested on a carnation covered dais, and overhead, rose-threaded bunting scalloped an imaginary entryway to the afterlife. The music was a little louder here, and diffuse golden light from recessed panels in the ceiling struggled to give the body a lifelike, warm appearance.

"Whoa," Dec whispered.

The casket was pink.

Not just pink, but pearl pink, lipstick pink, the kind of pink one only sees on pony-festooned notebooks belonging to nine year old schoolgirls.

Ivy Oppel lay in state in a candy dish.

Dec pressed his knuckle against his lips in an effort to keep his cruder impulses at bay.

Lightly, Joss stepped forward, as if he feared he might wake his lover' corpse.

"They put make-up on her."

"They usually do, Joss." Some cross between alarm and humor had taken hold of Dec's diaphragm. His scalp percolated with wild nerves.

"No, I mean eye make-up. Lip liner. She didn't even own that stuff. Mennen Speed Stick was the fanciest she ever got." Joss touched the golden scroll on the front panel in disbelief.

"Who would do this to her?"

Jim Smithley coughed before he interrupted them. "Excuse me. It is customary for the family to receive mourners, but the family hasn't arrived yet. Might I ask you to wait in the lounge, please? I know it's difficult—"

"Who did this to her?" Joss demanded.

Smithley blinked, and Dec sensed false innocence in the funeral director's demeanor.

"My sister does the make-up."

"You know what I mean."

"It is a dramatic presentation. I worked with the loved one's uncle, I believe. He said that this was her favorite color."

"Maybe when she was four," Dec said. "This is crazy. Why do they even make pink ones in this size?"

"Container style is tremendously varied these days. This model was custom ordered."

"You must be joking. Her family paid extra for this?"



"Er, not really. This unit had been ordered by another customer, but it was never used. We were able to offer it at a discount to Ms. Oppel's family, which, along with the fact that it was her favorite color, made it very attractive."

Joss closed his eyes in denial. "It wasn't her favorite color. I don't even think she liked colors."

"Perhaps," Smithley said, "But now is not the time to make an issue of it, sir. I implore you to respect the family's wishes."

Dec placed his hand on his brother's shoulder. "It isn't like you have a choice, anyway."

Joss sagged a little.

Declan looked into the "container." Ivy Oppel lay buoyed on mounds of pale gold satin, her head cushioned by a tiny fringed puff pillow. This was Dec's first close-up look at Ivy Oppel, and his last. Defiantly plain, the woman's face belied the efforts of the make-up technician who had clearly struggled to feminize thin lips and piggy eyes. Dec hoped Joss could see that, could see the real Ivy through all the gunk. Ivy's stiff hair was teased over her brow in a kind of 50s pomp. Then Dec remembered that Ivy had been shot in the head. A wig had to be styled to cover what putty and make-up couldn't.

Joss pouted. Dec hoped he wouldn't do something extroverted and embarrassing like kiss a dead woman on the lips.

"It isn't fair." Joss's voice wavered with more emotion than he'd shown at his own father's funeral.

"She's gone. She doesn't feel this. Besides, you owe her the courtesy to be cool, even if her family are a bunch of cheap bastards."

"Quite so," added Smithley, with perhaps more candor than was prudent. "As I mentioned before, it is customary to wait to be received by the family--"

"It's seven now. Where the hell are they?"

"Running late, I suppose. It happens." Smithley's assurance sounded like an embarrassed lie.

"Bet it doesn't," said Dec.

Joss was suddenly alert, and the anger was replaced by another light in his eyes. "Where's your stock room, Jim?"

"Excuse me?"

"Where do you keep the vampires, buddy? Surely this isn't the only coffin in town?"

"Joss, no."

"Sir, the arrangements are final. There is no way--"

"Anything will do, Jim. Cost is no problem. Where're your showroom models? Back here?" Joss didn't wait for the funeral director's protests. In the hallway he started trying doors.

"For Christ's sake, Joss."

Joss entered a brightly lit kitchenette and crossed through it, powered by a faulty instinct. Another door opened into a brick-lined workshop. Far behind but in pursuit, Jim Smithley breathed hard, both to keep up and keep his dignity. "Please don't," he called.

The workshop was lined with counters, chemical containers, and instruments that resembled giant, steel mantises. A sharp green smell permeated the air, and at the center of the room were two steel tables, piled with shop rags and electrical cords. Refrigerated cabinets hummed against the wall.

"Body shop," Joss muttered to Dec. Impatiently he called out, "The caskets, man. Where are they?"

Smithley had lost interest in the struggle. "One more," he said, indicating a door across the work-shop. "Though it isn't the customer entrance."

The casket showroom adjoined the viewing gallery on the opposite side, and they had navigated an unnecessary horseshoe tour through the building to get there. The pastel walls of the showroom were decorated with silk flower baskets and peaceful paintings of woodland streams. It was an ideal room for the consumption of dry cookies and mint tea, except that there were so many caskets in the way. Eight sample boxes with wood and metal finishes waited on felt covered platforms. One model was snow white laminate with gold hardware.

On a desk near the exit was a binder labeled "Themes"; it was open to a glossy picture of a casket covered with a photo realistic NASCAR mural. Against a sky blue field, numbered cars bearing commercial logos zoomed around the perimeter of the box, and the faint image of Dale Earnhardt Jr. in sunglasses smiled through the clouds on the lid. Declan chose not to distract Joss with an "it could be worse" scenario.

The models on display all looked the same to Joss. Not pink. "We'll take this one." He selected a simple maple box nearest the viewing room door.

Smithley said, "This isn't a furniture store, sir."

"The fuck it isn't. How much for the box? Seven, eight grand?"

"You don't understand. You cannot return the current container. It has already been paid for by the family."

"No problem," said Joss. "I'll reimburse them for the pink princess, and I'll buy this one. That's two coffins for one body—that's a good day in a slowing economy, bud."

Smithley's expression was neutral. "Your credit card, sir. I'll need to confirm with the bank."

Joss handed over his platinum card and Declan winced. Smithley cleared the mellow timbre from his voice, replacing it with icy clarity: "The transfer is up to you sir. Those units are on wheels, and that's the door to the gallery. Let us hope that none of the family has arrived yet. And sir?"

"Yeah?" Joss stared at the maple box as if he were searching for the *on* switch.

"No take-backs this time."

"I understand."

"I don't think you do," said Dec.

Twenty after seven and still no mourners had arrived. Declan opened the accordion door that camouflaged access between the viewing gallery and the showroom. Joss pulled the draped cart and casket over the carpet. His progress was awkward, conflicted as he was by care and urgency. As he passed Declan, he tried to endear him with a comical expression.

Dec wasn't having any of it. "Just get this over with." A noise came from the foyer. "Shit."

Joss aligned the maple box next to the pink one.

More noise from the outer hall. "Someone's here," said Dec. "How are you going to--"

"Just go deal with it." Joss raised the lower half of the pink coffin lid and gazed down at Ivy's body. They'd dressed her in a long ivory nightgown. Matching ballet slippers encased her feet.

He thrust his arms into Ivy's coffin.

"Oh!" he said with surprise, but Declan was already gone.

A middle-aged couple and their two sons had arrived, and Dec watched Smithley greet them. Through the glass paned doors the milky shapes of more mourners became more definite as they neared the entrance.

Smithley glanced at Dec with confident serenity that communicated volumes. Joss's credit--under Dec's sponsorship--was excellent, and the promise of a tasteful hereafter for Ivy Oppel was assured.

Dec retreated as Smithley's honeyed murmur stalled the mourners with useless information about evening's schedule and where the coffee could be found. Declan slipped back into the gallery to see the amazing image of Joss standing with his arms full of satin bunting gathered around Ivy Oppel's doll-like, dead body.

Like a reverent child, he declared: "It all comes out."

He struggled to lower Ivy and her wrapping into the maple box, and she slopped around like a sack of birdseed.

Declan felt a sudden rush of awe for his big brother.

"Hurry. They're coming."

Joss poked the satin back in place and readjusted the pillow.

"Her wig! Joss, it shifted."

Joss straightened the ugly wig, then yanked the pink coffin away from the arc of flowers and draped backdrop. Some carnations fell loose and one side of the fabric sagged, but he managed to jam the maple coffin correctly into place.

Dec seized the pink box like a careless stock boy with a shopping cart, leaving Joss to rearrange the display. Dec wrenched the accordion door closed just as Smithley lead Ivy's cousins into the viewing room.

It didn't look too bad. Except for Joss wheeling around like a cornered bandit.

Joss extended his hand to the middle-aged gentleman he assumed was Ivy's uncle. There was no immediate family resemblance, except that the older man's face was breathtakingly grim, a canvas of old skin gathered around young eyes that glowed unhappily. Joss recalled the same trace of holocaust in Ivy's eyes.

The uncle took in the room, assessing, calculating. His black liquid gaze registered every detail. Nothing escaped his notice. Finally he settled his accountancy on Joss.

Joss withdrew his unaccepted hand. "We arrived early. I apologize for not waiting."

"Bells," said the uncle, weighing yet another bit of information. Behind him his wife stiffened. She stared at the wall of flowers, but it was clear that her attention was dedicated to her husband's responses. Their teen-aged sons moved towards the casket, and she shifted sideways, prepared to body block them if she had to.

"I'm surprised to see you here," said Ivy's uncle.

Joss gestured for Declan to come forward. "I was very close to Ivy."

The uncle barely nodded. "Fine, fine. But you have to go now."

"Steven," his wife said.

"He probably killed her, Omi." Oppel's voice was dry, but definite.

Joss shook his head and whispered, "No sir, no."

A half dozen mourners meandered near the rear wall of the gallery; the exchange between Oppel and Bells had drawn an invisible curtain across the room.

"Leave, or I will make you leave." It was a statement of fact, without emotion. Steven Oppel had successfully reserved his feelings for the ceremony to come, and he wasn't about to spend any resources--material or spiritual--beyond the budget he'd planned.

"Smithley, exactly what is this? Look at her coffin; I'm not paying for this."

"Steven, shh!"

Smithley moved toward Joss and said, "There is a very comfortable lounge downstairs."

"He shouldn't be here. This isn't a sideshow." A slight tremor in the tight line of Oppel's face signaled an excess of feeling; he had gone further than he needed to, and his eyes burned against his sallow temple.

"I loved her," Joss said.

Oppel's neck pulsed.

Dec sensed a level of danger beyond what was obvious. He could smell it, like ozone. He gripped his brother's bicep and urged him back. "It's time for us to go." He tugged Joss through the gathering crowd. By now even more people had assembled, and though most of them were clearly family members and friends of Ivy Oppel, a few stood out as oddly detached.

Of these, two men and a woman stared as the brothers left the gallery. Dec wondered, are they cops or reporters? Especially the woman, she seemed too alert. Too ready for this.

Steven Oppel's fading complaints followed the brothers outside.

Then Steven Oppel followed them out. He couldn't help himself.

Declan didn't wait to be accosted. He merely said, "Back off," and the man halted in his tracks.

Oppel stood in the gravel and glowered as the Bells brothers make their way towards their car. His navy suit was perfect, with perfect buttons, a perfect tie. His horrible face, pocked as it was by haunted confidence, confirmed a vocation bestowed by nature: to offer or accept condolence. No one could bear pall with more grace, more sincerity of burden, than he.

Dec put Joss inside the car, and Oppel made another approach, placing his hand on the passenger door.

"I said back off, crypt-keeper." Dec crossed to the driver's side.

Joss was unresponsive. Oppel paused to gauge the level of threat Declan posed, and then swooped down to whisper into Joss's ear.

Dec heard an explosion of gravel, and suddenly Joss was gone. He didn't see Oppel, either. Dec ran around the front of the car to find them both on the ground, struggling against each other in the dusty lot.

As far as skirmishes go, this one was subdued. The men gripped each other's lapels and rolled against each other, kicking up clouds of pebble dust. Occasional grunts were uttered, as if they'd agreed that a wrestling match in the parking lot of a funeral home should be a fairly silent, gentlemanly contest.

For a while Oppel had the advantage, rolling Joss over and over until his black clothing was utterly coated in gray dust. But then Joss had managed to fix his knee against Oppel's groin and was pressing in.

Declan was a professional, specially trained to break up brawls, but his sense of duty was not as strong as his curiosity. He had never seen his brother like this.

Eventually he felt compelled to intervene. "Cut it out!" Declan hollered. The volume of his voice seemed more violent than the fight. Ivy Oppel's mourners exited the funeral home to bear witness to the battle, unofficially lead by Smithley and the attentive woman from the hall. The woman pulled back her jacket to reveal a gun holstered under her armpit. Another man, also armed, stood behind her waiting his charge.

Joss and his opponent indulged in two more full revolutions, but their passions had diminished. Dumasha announced that she was a police officer, ordered them to stop, and placed her hand on her weapon. Both men collapsed away from each other as if they'd been awaiting permission to cease.

Holding his groin, Oppel rolled to one side and gritted his teeth. His face didn't look all that different in pain as it did at rest. His moans of "shit, shit" seemed almost dignified.

Joss fell over and faced the sky. His clothes were caked with gravel dirt and tears made blue mud streaks on his face. His pupils disappeared as he stared up, into the clouds and beyond. He'd suffered no apparent injury, but his body heaved with sobs.

Officer Dumasha shared a disgusted look with her partner. Nothing going down today. Not here. Nothing useful, anyway.

"Mr. Smithley?" she asked.

Smithley shook his head, eager to dismiss the incident. "As long as they vacate the premises, I don't care what happens."

Steven Oppel's wife crouched by his quietly agonized body. She crowded him with her arms and uttered calming words directly into the mottled flesh of his neck. Their sons stood back on the front stoop of the funeral parlor, fists jammed deep into the pockets of their church pants, looking on with smothered glee.

Declan knelt by Joss. "You ready to go now?"

Joss didn't answer, but after a moment he raised up on his elbows.

Oppel stopped cursing, and he sat up with his head hung over his knees. He concentrated on his pain, as if that were the only option for survival. His wife continued her caresses.

Dumasha studied Steven Oppel and tried to figure out what he was like outside the culture of funerals. Did he rake leaves, eat meatloaf, make love? No way.

And Joss Bells. She couldn't imagine two more different men. Bells radiated while Steven Oppel sucked light. Fall apart, pull together. They'd been waiting their whole lives for this conflict, this war.

And it was a draw.

Poor Ivy Oppel. She never had a chance.

Dumasha tapped her holster and closed her coat. What a difference a gun makes.

Joss ran his hand over his mussed hair, but not out of concern for his appearance. "Declan?"

"Right here Joss."

"Dec," he croaked. He was so tired. "If I didn't do it, and you didn't do it . . ." He didn't have the heart to complete the cliché.

"Then who did."

"Uh huh."

Dumasha and her partner froze in place, waiting for this surprise butterfly to land. Declan sensed the sudden tension in the two cops,



especially in her. Her thighs flexed and her fingers waited rigidly over her belt.

Dec blew a tight sigh, and then lowered himself onto the gravel. He tried to explain it as simply as he could. "It doesn't fucking matter Joss. She's dead. Who did it, it doesn't matter."

Dumasha winced and managed to send a telepathic scream into her partner's skull.

"Shit," said Dec. "I still think you did it. Most people do." Dec surveyed the crowd that had wandered from the gallery into the parking lot. It was so obvious now. He could tell exactly which ones were family, which ones were cops, and which ones were scummy reporters. It was a new way of seeing, just like when he learned all the names of the wildflowers, or when he figured out that child molesters didn't play handball quite the same way that armed robbers did. It was a new way to look at an old world, and something you had to accept. You always know more, you never know less. It was too bad. The woman cop waited for more. Well, fuck her all to hell. This was family.

"Joss, it doesn't change anything. Doesn't change who you are, whether you did it or not. Doesn't change how I feel about you, either. You're such an ass."

Dec grinned for Dumasha. "Isn't that insane? That there's probably nothing a guy can do? Can't even murder somebody to make yourself different."

Joss accepted his little brother's ugly love. He let Declan help him to his feet, and they limped back to the car as the small crowd watched. Officer Dumasha strained to catch a last glimpse of Joss Bells sliding into the passenger side. Under cover, in her street clothes, she was a sexy contender, someone Joss would have noticed. Before following the Opper family into Smithley's, she'd been stationed in the bar across the street and was disappointed that Bells had made uncharacteristic choices that day.

But for now the gray dirt on his black clothes made him seem like an ancient, dusty god in a pagan theology—not *the* god, but one of many in the shrinking heavens, still occupying a dying religion. Men

like him, the unnatural beauties, had become irrelevant, and the believers in Blind Angels were losing faith, fading out . . . A lot of them were dead.

She suppressed a pang of tart desire with the not-so-sad knowledge that the next time she'd see that pretty man he'd be in shackles, stumbling towards a holding cell. And that was important, for Dumasha sensed that Ivy's murder was the last of its kind, and that the natural history of pretty men was finally coming to a close.

Dumasha's pager vibrated, and she nodded to her partner. They moved towards their vehicle.

"You think they'll go back into the funeral home?" she asked.

"Who? The family? I dunno."

"I'll bet they don't. Bet they skip out. Take advantage of the distraction." Dumasha imagined several watery great-aunts-by-marriage backing away from this raw experience, scrambling to the safety of their empty homes.

Would any of them—even Funeral Steve—bother to show for the morning service? Dumasha tried a little sigh of female sadness. It would happen to her someday, too. A funeral populated by uncomfortable, distant relations.

Ivy Oppel was one hard cousin to cry for. And a hard woman, too. "Hard" used to be a bad thing for a woman. Then it was a good thing for about two and a half years in the late '80s. Now it was just a thing, like "blue eyes," "conservative," or "computer literate."

A hard woman, but Oops! Kapow! There's a hole in her head. Not hard enough, then.

I'm harder, thought Dumasha. A girl with a gun can have some fun in this world.

The unattractive brother drove angry, spinning up gravel as they pivoted in the lot. Dumasha paused to get another good look at Bells through his window.

"Bye-bye Petey Prickles."

Her partner snickered along with her. And even though the window was rolled up tight, Joss turned as if he'd heard.

The age of Blind Angels passed long ago. There were just these last few stragglers who depended on the earthly hustle of clear-eyed, well-armed Dumasha to effect passage into oblivion.

Joss stared, recognizing her from some place, and settled his centerless blue eyes onto her unyielding expression. There was no youth or flirt left in him, but an imperative sexuality bloomed and died in his beautiful face; the bright light flickered on, then off--perhaps permanently--as he accepted her immovable nature.

