

Cat Fever

a novel by Rick Lacey

Prologue

Steadying myself before the door, I handed the crutch to the nurse and leaned more heavily on Elaine. The doctors were on the other side in the press room answering questions about my condition. Soon the door would open, and I would take their place before the assemblage of hungry reporters. It had been nearly four weeks since the delicate operation which had removed the bullet from my back, and though I still couldn't quite walk on my own, I was being discharged from the clinic to continue my recovery at home.

The tiny waiting room was full of my sudden entourage, and I decided to use the time to make eye contact with each one in turn so that they might all have one final chance to influence me. Each had a vested interest in the way I would handle myself in this, my first public appearance since the shootings.

Rotating my head carefully to my left, the first eyes I met belonged to my agent, "a large woman." During the few weeks of our association, I had heard her describe herself in those terms so many times that it would seem inappropriate to refer to her without adding it. Whenever I'd hear her make an appointment over the phone for an initial meeting, she would always issue her standard warning, "You can't miss me; I'm a large woman." Even that would not preempt the surprised expressions when people were confronted with her presence. When I regained consciousness after the second operation, she was waiting to introduce herself. Though she hadn't asked to see more when I originally sent her the three sample chapters of my novel and we had never actually spoken, she had publishers lined up to make offers before it was even clear that I would live. She was all business and a tireless worker, and aside from her tendency to treat me like a property, I don't believe I could have been better represented. She thrived on our success and wanted me to direct any question I wasn't comfortable with toward her. She was checking her lipstick with a tiny mirror which she dropped into her enormous purse when I turned toward her. "Just say, my agent will be better able to handle those types of questions."

After hers were the anxious eyes of my publisher. He had the most at stake and was visibly and justifiably nervous. Except for movie and merchandise rights, he owned my book. He had outbid all other houses by far and was paying several times my highest expectation. The three sample chapters my agent used to convince him of my ability were well written, but to pay such an amount of

money to an unpublished author without even knowing if I could sustain a plot was a career gamble for him. He was squeezing his left hand under his right arm and rubbing his right fist very hard against his left cheek. He pulled his fist away and opened his palm toward me. "Just say, you'll have to read about it in the book."

Next to return my look were the calm and confident eyes of the editor. This project was the opportunity the young man had only dreamed would come his way. He, too, had only seen the three chapters, but we had been talking several hours each day, and he had an excellent understanding of the characters and events described in the book. Time was of the essence as we all wanted the finished product on the shelves quickly to capitalize on the publicity of the shootings, so the pressure and much of the credit would fall on him, and he relished it. Once the press conference was over, our first stop would be my safety deposit box where I had stored two of the four existing hard copies of the manuscript as well as the computer disks. One of the other two copies was in the possession of the police and was locked away as the subject of several court orders. The remaining copy was in San Francisco where Catherine had entrusted it to her best friend, Michelle, before coming to Cleveland to see me. In the unedited form the book would be very painful to Catherine's family, and I was the only one who knew Michelle had it. During the negotiations at the instruction of my agent, I had refused to allow access to the safety deposit box, claiming that there were personal items in it that I absolutely couldn't allow anyone to see. The editor was eager to get his hands on those disks and get started, but he appeared relaxed as he stood coolly with his hands in his pockets. "Be a tease, and leave them screaming for more."

His advice caused a look of disgust in the eyes of the publicist standing next to him. She had gone out to one working dinner with him, and this was not the first time she had heard him use the word, tease. She had orchestrated this whole media event and knew what she wanted it to accomplish. It was free national advertising for the book. It would begin to satisfy the public's lust for scandal while wetting their appetite to learn more. It would appease the press and give us a measure of privacy within which to work. Her hours of coaching on what to say and how to handle myself could be summarized by the two words she wanted me to repeat at every opportunity. She raised her fist and pretended to be pounding with a hammer to give them emphasis as she reminded me. "Cat Fever, Cat Fever, Cat Fever."

Next were the prim and prudish eyes of the personal secretary who had been hired for me by the publisher. In the last week she had furnished and stocked a condominium I owned in a secure building where I was to be undisturbed as I completed the book by

adding the events between the original ending and the night of the shootings. She saw to it that Elaine's things were moved in as well as a computer, fax machine, and rehabilitation equipment. She knew shorthand and had taken down some stream-of-consciousness dictation from me, but my writing style required a word processor. She stood erect, hugging a leather portfolio and poised to react to my every request. "Best of luck, sir."

Not able to turn further, I rotated back in the other direction. Elaine's eyes greeted mine with concern and reassurance as I scanned past her to the probing eyes of my private nurse. Being a physical therapist, she was to be a vital member of our team. She would be staying with us at the condo where her round-the-clock job would be to allow me and my healing and hurting back to spend the maximum amount of productive time possible at the word processor. She had a "butchish" look about her, as Catherine would say, and she was strong and highly skilled in massage. She was demonstrative, but not repulsively so, and she usually had her hands on someone. She held up the crutch and offered it to me. "Sure you won't take it, sir?"

Shaking my head cautiously, I turned further to my two beautiful daughters. First and most affected were the puffy and reddened eyes of Marie, my eldest. The shootings had extracted two weeks of steady tears from them as she spent most of her time at my side, fearing first that I would die and then that I would never walk. Partly because my first wife, her mother, was a cold and selfish bitch, my daughter and I had developed a closeness in her early childhood years that remained strong. Emotionally weakened from worry, she handled the aggressive press rather poorly. Less-than-flattering images of her crying and screaming at reporters had made the news. The publicist had begun schooling her, but she was being dispatched along with her sister to an exclusive spa in Colorado where the staff was practiced at keeping out the media. She was biting her lip to fight back tears and didn't say anything while her eyes told me how badly she wanted it all to be over. She wanted me to say that I had been completely devoted to my second wife and that the various insinuations in the media were all terrible lies.

Her sister Angela, standing close to her, had held up much better. She had not allowed herself to be seen without every hair in place and her face perfect. Her outward appearance of detached calm often caused me to worry about what was taking place inside, and her dark, secretive eyes refused to provide a clue. She had steadfastly maintained to the reporters that her father was doing fine and that her sister was prone to overreacting. Had I not recovered, she would have been painted as cold and unfeeling. Now that my recovery was certain, she was enjoying the attention of the press and only agreed to accompany her sister to the spa when

she heard the names of some of the celebrities who frequented it. The worst about me would not upset or even surprise her, for heredity had given her a privileged knowledge of my mind. She and a girlfriend had once written a song together called "All Men Are Slime," and she accepted the fact that her father was a man. It thrilled her to have suddenly become the daughter of a famous author. She flashed her perfect smile. "Show'em who's boss, Dad."

Next were the black eyes of my mother and her sister. My mother had suffered silently through the period of uncertainty, refusing to talk to the press. It was shameful that some reporters had so little respect that they would harass a grandmother whose only son lay next to death. The Cleveland Clinic was good enough to provide her with a room in the complex and escorts to protect her from the most intrusive of reporters. Mourning dead husbands and sons had become a way of life in my mother's family where the women tended to rely on one another and seemed to live forever. She had six sisters and a ninety-year-old mother. There was little doubt that she would eventually weep at my funeral though I hoped I'd at least get the ten years life still owed me. She had worked a rosary constantly while I was in danger, and I was relieved that it was finally out of sight. It didn't matter to my mother what I had or had not done, only that I was alive and well. My aunt had agreed to accompany her to visit family in Italy. They both smiled with the same passive contentment as they held each other's hands. "You do what you think is best."

Standing a few feet from my aunt was our bodyguard, a professional monster. He looked like he could beat his way through a brick wall with his bare arms, and his eyes were intensely alert. He was to protect any of us from any threat he might perceive and to keep back the more aggressive members of the press. He stood tall with his hands at his sides and didn't change his expression when I shook my head at the ridiculousness of the very idea of having him around. He could frisk a man in a few seconds whether the man permitted it or not. "Got it covered, sir."

The pleading eyes next to him belonged to a man who was a recent subject of one of those searches. This was Alexis' husband, a weak and sadly dependent man. Alexis had been missing since the night of the shootings, and their yacht was found adrift near the western end of Lake Erie two days later. It didn't take the media long to connect her to me, and speculation grew that she had committed suicide and that her death was somehow related to the shootings. There was no indication of robbery or violence on the yacht, nor was there a note. Her husband had readily embraced the suicide theory, but then I was the only man Alexis had ever

permitted to know her, a fact he begged me to deny. "She must have loved you. Be good to her memory."

The door opened, and we made the few short steps to the podium through an assault of flashing light and noise. Elaine tried to leave my side, but I held her to me as we waited for the others to file in and take their seats. I didn't want the cameras to get my picture without her. Over the previous eighteen months I had come to know myself. There were no lingering illusions about my worth as a human being. Without a beautiful woman to lean on, I was nothing, and I wouldn't pretend personal strength. The light began to lose intensity, allowing what had been shadows to become reporters. In a minute the noise went away, and I could feel them waiting. I could read their collective mind and knew they wanted to see remorse on my face, remorse that conscience would have forced on an ordinary man, a better man. My challenge was to keep that damn smirk off my face. It had always plagued me, and we knew that if I allowed it to creep over me before the cameras it could do more to condemn me than anything I had done or would say.

"Can you all hear me?" There was an affirmative response, and I began. "I have a brief statement before I take your questions," I said and paused. It suddenly didn't seem fair to Elaine to make her stand with me, so I took my arm from around her and put my hand on the podium. She stepped a few feet back and to my right. "Though I have not watched the news or read the papers since the incident, I have been briefed and am generally aware of what has been widely reported. As a basis for your questions, I can say that you have been correct in that the principles are, in addition to myself, Catherine Kennedy, Margory Lydon, Elaine Fox, and Alexis Harrison."

"You bastard!" The threatening shout interrupted from behind me along with the sound of a chair falling to the floor. Since my back wouldn't allow me to react, I stood still and waited as the bodyguard dragged Alexis' husband back through the door and into the waiting room. His angry shouts had turned to pathetic pleadings before the door closed again behind them.

"Mr. Harrison would have preferred that I deny any involvement with his wife," I explained after their attention returned. "Alexis was my closest friend and..." Suddenly in danger, not of hiding behind the smirk but of tears, I paused to take a deep, erratic breath before continuing. "I only hope that, some day, he can come to understand how I felt about her and how sorry I am that my insensitivity to her started the series of events that ended in this tragedy." The silence in the room held for several seconds then broke suddenly as they felt compelled to press for details concerning my relationship with Alexis and her role in the shootings. I pointed to the reporter who was repeating my name loudly over the others.

"Were you having an affair with Mrs. Harrison?" The room went immediately silent. The seeming openness of my statement had caused them to hope that I was going to answer all of their questions honestly and completely.

"No, I was not," I replied crisply. The same reporter was able to be heard over the others with his follow-up question.

"Can you describe the nature of your relationship with Mrs. Harrison?" They grew quiet again in anticipation.

"Our relationship is documented in some detail in my book and..." The room grew too loud to continue and the tone angry until they yielded to the same questioner.

"The public has a right to know the truth. Do you intend to hold the truth hostage for the price of a book?" It must have been the perfect consensus question, for they seemed to settle down to business, and it appeared that things could proceed in a more orderly manner.

"I'll answer your question, and then the next question is yours," I said, pointing to a reporter on the opposite side of the room who I recognized as the one our publicist had instructed me to call on. "And please, all of you, remain seated. My back won't allow me to stand here much longer, so let's not waste time shouting." The reporters were surprised. I was surprised. I went on. "My relationship with Alexis Harrison will not be summarized by any of you in a headline. I owe her more than that."

They waited briefly, expecting me to go on. When I didn't, the previously appointed questioner asked, "Do you believe Mrs. Harrison committed suicide?"

"I can say with absolute confidence that she did not." Anticipating further interrogation, I proceeded to clarify by quickly adding, "I have had no contact with her since before the shootings, and I can provide no clue to her current whereabouts." The tone of the rumbling reporters was somehow less threatening as I recognized the next questioner.

"Were you romantically involved with the murder victim, Catherine Kennedy?"

"Again, Catherine was my friend, and I believe I can only do her memory justice through my writing. I won't respond to another question about Catherine." As always, ending a sentence with her name caused me to pause. "You're next," I said to a pretty blonde who seemed much more relaxed than any of the others.

"The rumor around the publishing community is that you signed a seven-figure contract for what everyone is saying is your first attempt at writing. How much were you paid, and who, besides your editor and publisher, can attest to the quality of the work?" The publicist had warned that the questions would come in random order because the reporters were each interested in the aspect of the

story that was pertinent to their particular segment of the media. This reporter must have worked for a writer's magazine.

"In answer to the first part of your question, I won't discuss the deal. You will have the opportunity to ask my agent those kinds of questions later. As for the second part, Cat Fever is my first effort, and there is no one who has read the book and is in a position to comment. That includes my agent, my editor, and my publisher." The same reporter followed up immediately and loudly, contrary to her body language as she remained in the same relaxed position.

"What are you saying? Could you explain and be more specific?"

"I'm sorry." I had expected the question and knew how I should respond, but my personality wouldn't allow me to say anything dramatic. That inability to speak emotionally is what made it necessary that I write. Taking another coached deep breath, I went on. "Excluding myself, only three people have read Cat Fever." After a short pause during which the reporters seemed to be holding their breath, I further informed them, "Two are dead. The third is missing." Those short, rapidly spoken sentences had a matter-of-fact tone which gave the reporters reason enough to attack. The pretty blonde jumped to her feet.

"Do you expect us to believe they paid you a million plus without reading it first? Your people have been quite calculating with what they have leaked to the press, the book's name for example. This smells too much like an attempt to create a headline that will sell books."

She was right, of course. The news, that everyone who had read Cat Fever was dead or presumed dead, would certainly create enough interest to make the book an immediate financial success. That didn't make it any less true.

When I started writing, only about half of what the finished manuscript is based on had actually occurred. Every time my writing threatened to catch up chronologically with the events it described, something new and surprising would happen. It had literally reached the point that I stopped calling Catherine for fear that something else would spring up to add still more chapters to the story. It was as if the book had taken over all of our lives. What had started out to be a two-hundred-page love story had grown into a four-hundred-page adult novel before I finally printed it. The events that the completed manuscript caused will push it toward five hundred pages. Perhaps it can all end when the final completed version is released though I don't really believe it ever will. Somehow, I know my book will eventually destroy me, too.

"I expect you to believe everything I say," I answered. "I'll take one last question. You decide who asks it as long as it isn't you." The pretty blonde smiled and for the first time

seemed to be enjoying her job. She gave the final question to a network correspondent.

"Would you describe your relationship with Margory Lydon and tell us why she committed murder, why she tried to kill you, and why she turned the gun on herself?"

The publicist had warned and warned about the various ploys they would use to try to provoke me to answer questions that I had no intention of answering. Still, I stood wondering why an experienced reporter would ask basically the same question that I had already avoided answering twice. Perhaps he just wanted to hear me give exactly the same answer regarding each of the three women. Whatever his game was, I wasn't experienced enough to play it. Turning to Elaine, I held my arm up to indicate that I wanted her assistance. As she put her arms around me, I began my response to the question, "I think any one of your fellow journalists will be able to answer the first part of that question for you." Holding up my hand to stop the reaction, I continued. "As to why she committed murder, I don't think it would be appropriate for us to assume that she did before the police have completed their investigation. There are too many missing pieces, the bartender's reluctance to speak and the role and fate of Alexis Harrison chief among them. I will concede that whatever did happen in that bar was the fault of the manuscript and an unfortunate coincidence of circumstances. Why did she try to kill me? I don't know that she did." Again, I had to hold up my hand to quiet them. "Why did she kill herself? It's been difficult for me to accept that she did, so I could only speculate, and I'd rather not. I'm certainly not an authority on the motivations of women. The best I can do is to provide the facts in an addendum to the book and let readers come to their own conclusions. That'll have to be all for me today."

Elaine and I turned to leave the stage while the reporters shouted questions after us. One strange and loud, deep and righteous voice was clear over the others as it repeated its attack on me from the rear of the room. "Sir! Admit it was your fault. Admit to your extramarital affairs. Sir! Does your conscience bother you? Tell the truth. Admit the guilt is yours alone. Clear their names and admit to your deceptions. Admit to your extramarital affairs." It insisted until I stopped in the doorway and turned back to face it. The room went still while the owner of the voice and I stared at one another. He was a tall, thin man wearing a black suit with a black shirt buttoned to the top with no tie. The suit hung as if he had been a much larger man when he purchased it, and I supposed it was his only one, kept at the back of the closet for weddings and funerals. His was definitely not one of the faces in the pictures that the publicist had used to brief me. His skin was dark and leathery with long,

deep wrinkles as if he had spent his life working the fields. He held his head high with his chin thrust defiantly forward and stared at me with eyes that held more confidence than any man deserved. As I glared back at him, it became increasingly clear to me that the book would never stop writing itself. He was out of place, and his characteristics and manner were so strikingly different that he appeared to me as he must appear to you, a fictional character. At that moment I felt the right to be dramatic as if, by virtue of my ordeal, I had earned dramatic license. "All right," I thought, "I will play their game. I'll give them a tabloid quote and disappear behind the door. They won't see me again until the book is published."

Forcing an expression of outrage over my face, I said sternly, "I don't have affairs. I commit crimes."

We turned and went through the doorway followed quickly by the nurse, who closed the door and rushed to help me lie down on the hard-surfaced therapeutic table. As she worked to comfort me, I was beginning to feel inwardly smug over my performance. She adjusted my position until my back relaxed and a smile widened across my face. When she stepped toward the foot of the table to work on my legs, her absence left my smile in direct confrontation with Elaine's blank expression. "What the f was that supposed to mean?" asked Elaine tentatively, not sure if she should be angry. As I started to answer, the nurse pulled on my right leg and I winced.

"How's that feel, sir?" she asked.

"Do the other. Oh!" It hurt, but I felt better knowing my back was stretched and properly aligned.

The bodyguard appeared next to Elaine, who was still waiting for an answer. "I put him in his car, sir. He won't be bothering us again." Expecting my question he claimed, "I didn't hurt the little guy."

"He's six feet tall," I said. The monster just shrugged and took up a position near the door. Noise came and went as the door opened and closed, and my editor walked up to us.

"When I told you to leave them screaming for more, it was just a figure of speech," he said smiling. When I didn't respond, he abandoned his smile and went on, "Please tell me that crime comment is explained in the book."

"Chapter One," I assured him.

"All right," he yelled and held out a flat palm for a low five. When I didn't move to slap it, he turned it over and pretended to slap mine. We had developed a good friendship quickly during our talks as we learned that we shared some important viewpoints. "Speaking of crimes," he said, noticing the growing look of anger on Elaine's face, "this little misdemeanor looks like she's turning into a felony."

"And don't think I didn't notice the way you were flirting with that blonde out there, either," Elaine warned, ignoring the editor. She started to walk away then stopped, turned back, and bent slightly toward me so she could see into my eyes directly. "Maybe you can get her to give you your next blow job." She threw a quick scowl at the editor as she turned and stomped off.

"Sounds like she means it," he teased.

"What happened after I left?" I asked.

"We had to change the batting order after your crime remark. I took a chance and told them that it was a reference to the book and that they deserved it after they provoked you the way they did. Then I explained that I planned to leave the original novel basically as you wrote it, that there was no constituency for changing it since the reader wants to see it in its most lethal form. At that point I left the stage. I'd say, all things considered, it was going better than we had hoped."

"What happened to the guy in the black suit?"

"That was a weird dude, wasn't it? I didn't notice him again after you left."

Although there had been something slightly familiar about that man, I knew it wouldn't be enough for me to be able to remember him and decided not to try. "Who took the podium after you?" I asked.

"Your publisher and agent are sharing the limelight," he said, sarcastically expressing his dislike for my agent. In his view her role was complete when the contract was signed, and she was only staying on to get publicity for her agency.

"You wouldn't be here if not for her," I reminded him. At my suggestion she had insisted on an inexperienced editor who would not be as likely to want to make wholesale revisions to my original manuscript. There was a painful, emotional evolution going on within me as I wrote and lived the book. My maturing as a person coincides with the changes in the level of awareness and depth of feeling that is expressed in my writing. I'm not so good a writer as to be able to create the illusion of a metamorphosis, but while sincerely doing my absolute best with what I was along the way, I was naive enough to have done it. That honesty can't be subjected to edit.

"A fact she draws on me like a gun," he complained. "Anyway, I'm sure she's out there bragging about the way she squeezed every last dime out of us, and he's confusing himself with his explanation of book versus novel versus novel based on a true story, not that there is anyone left to file suit."

"Get away from me," I said. He was every bit as insensitive as I had once been, yet that was probably good for me and for our working relationship. He prepared to speak, and I could tell by

his expression that there was no apology on his mind. "Would you ask Elaine to come back over here?" I rushed.

He smiled and shook his head in disgust. "Wait her out. In five minutes, she'll be back begging you to forgive her."

"I don't need lessons in manipulating women from you, son. Maybe I want to give honesty a try this time."

"That'll never work," he said with certainty.

"I'll get her for you, sir." The nurse had been taking it all in and was looking contemptuously at the editor while she spoke to me.

"Better not ask her for a neck rub," I laughed after the muscular nurse had gone.

Before she could walk across the room, the door burst open, and the rest of our group tramped in. The sound of the reporters going out the other way added to the noise and excitement level. Everyone seemed to be talking at once, and the mood was decidedly upbeat. My publisher and agent were actually congratulating one another. The first to reach us was Angela, who hurried to intercept Elaine and tell her what she had missed. Marie was bouncing with her long-absent, but customary, happiness. She could hardly contain her joy as she leaned over to hug and kiss me. "Help me up," I said.

"Stay down, I'll get the nurse. You wouldn't believe it, Dad. A reporter asked what kind of person you are, and your agent made you sound like a saint. Everything changed. There wasn't one bad word about you after that. I can't wait to watch tonight's news. Stay down, I'll get the nurse." She turned and nearly bumped into the nurse. "My Dad wants to get up." As the nurse helped me up, I watched my daughter spread her arms and shuffle over to hug my mother and aunt. Their enthusiasm made me laugh as they acted like they hadn't seen each other in years.

The party atmosphere was a sharp and welcome contrast to the somber tone that had described this same collection of people just twenty minutes earlier. Smiles turned quickly to laughter and handshakes to hugs as we celebrated, not so much our victory but the avoidance of disaster. Pent-up tension melted from us, and our spirits lifted as the weight of worry fell away. All was forgiven, and our team thrilled in the moment.

The room grew progressively louder until the secretary had to call out, "People, people, listen up. We have a schedule to maintain." She waited momentarily for attention before beginning her instructions. She had carefully planned our coordinated departure, and she gave instruction as she referenced the itinerary clipped to her portfolio. There were four limousines packed and waiting to whisk us all away to our various destinations. My daughters were to take limo one to Burke Lakefront Airport where a private jet waited to fly them to the

Colorado spa. My mother and aunt, in limo two, would be taken to Cleveland Hopkins International Airport to begin their flight to Europe. The rest of us would take the remaining two limos to the Ameritrust Building on East Ninth Street to pick up the computer disks before we would separate.

In short order she had us making our way through the corridors toward the underground parking lot escorted by the clinic's own guards and representatives. It was comical to me that we were acting and being treated as if we were visiting heads of state. Our getaway plan included tinted glass and three different exit routes for the four limos so as to divide the media's chase vehicles, but as far as I could tell, there was no one waiting to follow us when our cars broke into the sunlight.

It was nearly three hours later before Elaine and I slipped into bed together to watch the evening news. The publisher, editor, and publicist, along with the computer disks and an original hard copy of the novel, were well on their way back to New York City to begin the next phase of their work. The bodyguard and secretary had gone home for the night, and the nurse was in another room of the condo. It was so unbelievably good to feel the full length of a soft, warm female body against mine again. No amount of medical care could possibly have the healing effect on me that Elaine's physical affection would provide. "Not now," she said as I pulled her more tightly to me, "I don't want to miss the news."

Elaine was devoted to her family, and her current priority was knowing what her parents and brother would see on the news. Her brother didn't like me and had accused me of using her. Even before the shootings they had argued about her involvement with me, and it was reasonable to assume that her parents must have since found out about it.

"What are you so worried about?" I asked.

"What am I worried about?"

"You heard Marie. They made me sound like a saint. As soon as I heal a little more we can have your family over for dinner. Your mother will see how happy you are with me."

"How happy I am?"

"That's how mothers are. If you're happy, they're happy."

"That may be how Italian mothers are but not Ukrainian mothers. My mother hasn't stopped crying since she found out about us. She'll never forgive me for this. Never! She won't come over here. She made me give back my key, and she won't even let me in the house unless my father is home. Do I have time to make a drink before the news? Let me loose so I don't hurt you getting up." She was back in a minute with two glasses and a bottle of Absolut. She poured three inches into each glass. "This will make us both feel better."

"If all that's true about your mother never forgiving you, why does it matter how I come off on the news?"

"Why does it matter?" She lit a cigarette and took in a long, deep drag as if she needed it. She turned her head and forcefully blew the smoke upward away from us through thinly parted lips.

"If one of the neighbor ladies would just say a good word about you, or me, if anyone would, even the news, it might at least stop my mother from crying."

"Why haven't I heard about this before now?"

"What was I supposed to do, whisper it in your ear between beeps of the heart monitor while you were lying there ready to die at any minute? If you had any idea what went on in those first two weeks." She was shaking as she let the thought hang and drank down the rest of her glass of vodka. The introductory music from "The Nightly News" drew her attention, and she sat straight up in bed to watch. I used the opportunity to rub my face against her side down to the smooth curve of her hip. "Finish your drink," she ordered as she poured herself another. I climbed back up and sat next to her where I downed my vodka and set the glass on the nightstand.

The news began by showing the two of us standing together, then portions of three of my answers, and the two of us walking out together. While the anchor read his copy, our picture occupied the upper corner of the screen. They billed it as the day's top story, didn't make any sort of value judgement, and I was certain it would sell books. Elaine was doing some serious crying by the time it ended.

"I don't get it, babe. What could be so bad? You looked gorgeous, and they didn't say a bad word about either of us."

"You really don't know, do you?" she managed to blurt between sobs. She turned and threw herself over me, letting her half-full glass of vodka spill out on the bedspread and putting my back in severe pain as she hugged me tightly and continued to cry violently. Elaine was a strong person, a survivor, and I couldn't imagine what was driving such emotion. It wasn't merely relief at having the worst behind her or the overdue release of tears held back. It was much more, and it persisted like the expression of grief after having lost everything, as if she was crying over the dead body of someone she loved much more deeply than she could me.

Her tears streamed intermittently from a pool at the base of my neck, in hot little bursts down my chest, her body growing hotter and sweating harder, her face red and the top of her head burning and becoming wet against my cheek. I slid myself down the bed until her face was against mine separated only by strands of wet blond hair pressed between us. Her hot breath sweetened the taste of her tears until I took her head in both hands and turned her mouth to mine. She continued to cry hard as we began to kiss,

then, as her sobbing turned to breathy passion and her grief to unrestrained desire, I longed to fall in love with her.

Later that night when the pleasure of holding her finally had to give way to the pain, I shook her. Waking and realizing where she was, she smiled and hugged me and kissed my chest.

"Together," I said. "Can you believe it?" She stayed silent and snuggled closer. "I need one of those pain pills." She tilted her head back until she could see my face. "I missed holding you more than anything." Her response was to kiss me slowly. She opened her eyes and looked deeply into mine, our lips still touching slightly. Another kiss and she got out of bed. In her absence the pain, or my awareness of it, grew rapidly. The sight of her long, lovely body coming back toward me helped, but I was still ready to scream when she handed me the pill. "Get me another." I swallowed the first one and accepted a glass of iced tea. When she came back with the second, I swallowed it and downed the full glass of tea before letting my head drop back to the pillow where it was to stay until the pain relented.

"We have to talk," she announced, crawling back into bed and reclaiming her original position with her head on my chest. "I have to tell you what's happened to my life."

"You know how the nurse pulls on my legs?" I asked.

"Pulls on your legs? OK, if you'll listen to me, I'll try." She continued speaking as she stood and went to the end of the bed. "Didn't you ever wonder how I was able to spend so much time at the hospital?" She looked up at me as she leaned back with a hand under each of my ankles.

"That's perfect," I said, "just stay like that a minute." The muscles of my back were relaxing as I gazed up at her. There was a contradiction to her body that was exaggerated by the particular pose in which she was suspended. The muscles of her upper back made a straight line from her neck down at a forty-five-degree slant to her shoulders. The precise line and angle mixed power into the soft voluptuousness of her curves and lent an alluring uniqueness to her body.

"Moon Oil suspended me," she said loudly after she set my legs down and put her hands on her hips. She wanted me to understand the injustice.

"They're still paying you, aren't they?"

"You knew?"

"No, I didn't know, but I don't see why you're upset about it." Her face told me that she had no idea what I was trying to tell her. "I won't be going back to Moon Oil," I announced and paused to watch her develop a question then interrupted before she could ask it. "You won't be going back either."

"They can't fire me. I didn't do anything wrong. This isn't fair."

"Life isn't fair, especially in big oil. This is a major scandal. The company will do everything it can to distance itself from both of us. When things settle down, they'll contact you with an offer. You'll get a year's pay, maybe two."

"What about you?" She was accepting it and wondering why she had to have it spelled out for her. She had been witness to enough of the cruel realities of the oil business.

"My contract with Moon required that I conduct my personal life so as not to reflect negatively on the company. This thing is a breach. I'm out. They may make a deposit into my account to further insulate the company from me, but I'll never work in the oil business again."

"At least I know," she surrendered. She sat down on the bed facing me and crossed her legs in front of her, a distant look in her eyes. She shook her head abruptly as if to wake herself and asked, "Do you know who left a message on my phone?" She paused a second and provided the answer. "Playboy. Playboy magazine!"

"They don't waste any time, do they?" I said, laughing. If she had told me a day earlier, I might have advised her to do it.

"There's nothing funny about it. And that's not the worst of it. One day during the first week, I was walking up the hallway toward your room and some camera man snuck out and shot some film of me from behind. I never knew he was there until I seen it on television. The whole country seen it. You couldn't turn on the tube for days without seeing it."

"What were you wearing? Were you in a hurry?"

"Jeans and a sweater top. Yes, I was in a hurry. Why?"

"I'll bet he made a bundle on that film. I'd almost pay to see it myself." The pain pills were affecting me, and it was too easy to think about her walk. In my mind it was all right for the whole country to see her with her clothes on and envy me the sight I lay there enjoying.

"That's still not the worst of it," she said, surprised by my reaction. "Just think about it. Catherine Kennedy is some fancy consultant from the West Coast. Alexis Harrison, Ms. Successful Businesswoman herself, owns the biggest advertising agency in town and everyone admires her. Your wife is this rich socialite, on the committee of every charity, patron of the arts, pillar of the community. They practically shut down the whole city for her funeral. Then there's me, an oil company clerk, a stupid nobody. My biggest accomplishment in life is sleeping with a married man. The whole country is telling jokes about me. Remember all the blond jokes? They still tell them, except now it's my name instead of blonde. I'm the biggest bimbo since Jessica Hann. Why does Elaine Fox wear hoop earrings? So she has somewhere to put her feet. The Enquirer called my roommate trying to buy pictures of me."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know," I slurred. "They kept all this from me."

"I know. First they told me it would hurt your recovery to tell you. Then they told me not to upset you with it before the press conference. Everything depended on the press conference, they said. Everything you worked for, they said. So I kept quiet. They tried to help Marie look better to the press, but they wouldn't help me. I think they wanted me to look like a slut. I wonder if your editor wrote some of the jokes about me, himself. It's just killing my mother. She's ashamed to leave the house."

"If we just lay low for awhile, it should all pass," I said in slow motion. "The public has a short memory."

The pills were putting me to sleep, and Elaine reached out and poked me. "How can it pass? Your publisher will be doing everything he can to keep it in the news until the book comes out. That's one month. Then the book will start it all over again." My eyes started to close, and she poked me again. She was hoping I could fix it.

"You're a public figure now. We can't go back. You'll just have to live it down. Something else will happen to take people's attention away from us. It'll take time, but eventually, everyone will accept the truth." With that I dropped off.

It was probably five hours later, about three in the morning, when I awoke to find that Elaine had left me. Her note explained that she was going to stay with her parents until it was over and her mother had forgiven her. She didn't know how long it would take, and she asked that I please not contact her. Quickly pouring and drinking a glass of the vodka from the nightstand, I knew it couldn't begin to fill the scared hollowness her absence had left inside me. "You stupid bitch, I need you," I said out loud, hours after I should have told her, hours too late to save us.

There was a glass wall at the end of the bedroom, and I carried the bottle and glass out through its door and onto a large veranda. The Grove Court Condominium building is atop a cliff on the west edge of the flats, tucked in next to the Hope Memorial Bridge. The view of the city skyline is magnificent with "The Pink Palace" in its center. Walking to the railing, I looked down at Hoopple's, the waterfront bar where it had happened. Across the Scranton Peninsula I could see Alexis' yacht resting peacefully at its dock, still cordoned off by a yellow police line. The whole story was spread out before me, and I hoped I was finally standing at its end. Recognizing the possibility, I poured the glass full again and staggered to a lounge chair to examine and memorize my thoughts and feelings.

Tears refused. Even in drugged drunkenness my emotions wouldn't surface. My wife, my best friend, and my first love had all been

lost, and every day I seemed to care less and less. During my hospital stay I searched my soul in vain for the reason. Lonely and drunk, the answer would come to me. The bottle emptied and the city lights merged into a dirty glow by the time the repulsive truth broke through. Honest emotion was being suppressed by my mind's eagerness to analyze and record my feelings. It was the book itself and my responsibility to complete it that was destroying my own capacity to feel. My readiness to dissect my deepest emotions prevented me from having them. The book will have to end without an ending.

Catherine was my first and only love. She understood love and refused to love me back. Alexis was my friend. She loved me and was in love with me at the same time. Margory was my sanctuary. From her I thought I could venture out with immunity to chase experience. Elaine was the embodiment of my pursuits. She was at once pain and pleasure, success and disappointment. So in the end, though Catherine had forced me to love and suffer, Alexis had forced me to admit to human emotion, Margory had forced me to pay for my actions, and Elaine was forcing me to face loneliness, I couldn't say, in the absence of love, I was anything different from the prick I had been the day Catherine first entered my life.

When you turn this page, you will find Cat Fever as I originally wrote it. Be aware that I was insanely in love the whole time I was writing but that the early chapters describe the process of falling in love and accepting that truth. When you reach the addendum, the emotion and insight that is expressed in the original book will be gone, and I will be reduced to reporting the bare facts from this condominium. It will be left to you to judge the five of us.

It's certain that their lives became tragically intertwined only because they all suffered the misfortune to care for me. You may well find them innocent and blame me for it all as I do, but consider the possibility that my biggest crime was to arouse the buried passions in each of them.