

CHIPMAN INN GOSSIP

"Bucky Dragon was the Jesse James of Ripton," Mae says to one of her part-time waitresses. They're having lukewarm coffee before cleaning up from dinner at her bed and breakfast. I'm trying to study for finals, but have a sore throat; besides, that statement is much more interesting than my class notes. I've come down from school for some peace and quiet, and one of Mae's hot toddies. I'm the only student she allows in before the bar is open to the other students. She adopted me last summer because I helped her out some evenings. Her friend, Carrey, is a "townie," unfamiliar with the mountain lore and outlaws. Carrey pulls out the barrette holding up her hair and takes off her gingham apron that matches Mae's. "What d'ya mean," she questions, looking at Mae over the top of her half-glasses.

"Bucky's father was one of eighteen kids. He worked for Robert Frost, but folks say he stole." Mae's voice narrows as she examines what's left in the silver coffeepot. "The old man set some guy on fire a week ago. Guess Bucky got his rotten streak honestly." She chuckles at her own play-on-words.

I lay down my *Medieval Love* book and take off my glasses. I laugh to myself as I look into the whispering fireplace, remembering a scene from *Wuthering Heights* where Heathcliff is eavesdropping on Catherine and Nelly from behind a high-backed settee. The women know I am here, curled up with feet tucked under me, but I don't want to interrupt them. I move quietly off the small calico and pillowed loveseat to stir the fire.

"Bucky's mother works around town as a maid," Mae continues. She tells people, 'I'm goin' ta visit m'boys,' like they're at summer camp or something. Bucky and his brother, Clifton, have been in and out of prison since they were kids."

Jim, who runs Silver Meadows, the camp for the mentally handicapped up road, has been silent, nursing his daily Bloody Mary. He always stands in the corner of the bar, leaning on the wall, scowling at nothing. He never sits. I watched him all last summer before I finally got the courage to talk to him. I imagined him to be part of the Boston Mafia with his clipped accent, square face and unruly, dark hair. He was one of the kindest people I had met up there in the past two years and loved the kids he worked with. But as Mae finishes her sentence with a swallow of coffee, he slams down his fist and roars at her, "Why he bought off the goddam judge the last time--and that hot-shot lawyer! He was scum!"

Mae glances at Jim, ignoring him, and finally notices me pretending to study. I've started taking notes, but not on the French female troubadours. "People 'round here says Bucky hijacked an eighteen wheeler full of scallops and lobster bait on its way out of Portland," Mae tells Carrey. "Tried to bury the thing in the mountains. The place was crawling with FBI and state police this March."

"It was the smell," Jim adds. "You could smell it rotting for miles after the refrigeration unit burned out. Those loggers drive that road every day. But no one could find it. Besides," he growls, tamping out his cigar, "the Dragons had nothin' to do with it. But Clifton knew where it was--he knows everything up here."

I get up from the couch and move to the bar, ask for some matches and light a cigarette. "Want something else, girl? I thought I'd be pay'in t'night." Jim's Irish tongue has tempered a bit. He pats my hand. Mae pours some Bailey's in her mug and sighs into the long wooden pew by the back door. Her friend sits beside her.

"There were more people at his funeral than at the mayor's, come to tell." She's intent

on her spoon, but looks over at me through my smoke like she's trying to make some sense of it all. "Town elders, politicians. Some old woman cried at the casket--they say Bucky took her out to dinner, bought her some groceries once in a while."

"He wasn't a Robin Hood, Mae! He was the lowest form of creep." Jim's eyes are slit and his voice is dark with anger again. "There are kids at my camp; they'll tell you what he did with some of my girls!" He swallows the last of his drink and what sounds to me like bile in his throat. "He died, you know." Jim half turns to me. "Up cutting lumber this spring when there'd been too much rain. Skidder tipped over. Crushed him, right in front of Clifton." There's bitter relief in his voice as he bites off the words, wipes off his mouth, and walks out the back door.

Mae pushes off the bench and moves behind the bar. "Better get ready for the kids, Carrey. God, they'll drive my guests nuts tonight, finals and all." I get up to gather my books and move to a less conspicuous corner. Maybe Mae will let me help her tend bar tonight; she looks tired.

Suddenly the front screen slams back knocking the door harp to the hall floor. A man staggers in. He's bare to the waist with a welt down his chest. Mae snaps on her proprietier face and nods at me to sit back down. She's dealt with these mountain people for years. She knows that they blew the front porch off the Ripton Country Store with shotguns. A bunch of them even jacklighted tourists in their cabins causing them to leave the next day. But, by God, they'd better not mess with her--or the Inn.

The man's eyes are glazed, but move crazy. He catches the back of my stool, almost throwing me out. Then he falls into the one next to me and slurs, "'S'cuse me--Christ, what the hell are you doin' here?" With eyes that slam me with a life I don't want to know anything about, he tries to focus; then he gasps, full of whiskey, "Christ! you look like my sister-in-law! Since her old man died, she's s'posed to be in Burlington gettin' a job. Sorry, lady, but I'm awful drunk."

I start to move slowly from the bar stool, but he catches my wrist. "Hey, what's your name, girly? You one of them rich kids from that school up there? Heard they're havin' a party tomorry. Wannna take me t'the dance?" His last question sneers down my spine.

Mae, who's been wiping down the Vermont pine bar, moves over to us. I try to extract my aching hand, flexing my finger with the small diamond ring on it. "Um, thanks," I mumble, wondering, why me? "I don't think my fiancé would like that much." My throat suddenly aches again as I try to smile. But a strong grip has my fingers pinned to the bar. Mae almost grins and surely winks at me as I swing my legs to the other side of the stool. Wiping the glass rings, real easy, deliberately, she says, "So, what'll it be, Clifton?"



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