

NOVEL 1: SEA TO SKY

CHAPTER THREE - [TITLE TO COME]

The man across from them on the ride up was fortyish, near as Leo could guess, tanned and fit-looking with the predatory good looks of a male model and brand-new, top-of-the-line skiwear to match. But very short, not much over five feet.



His after-shave was strong at close quarters. His hair, styled to perfection, was modishly long and a striking silver-grey; likewise the thick muttonchop sideburns framing his narrow, Mediterranean face.

Leo was sure he had seen him somewhere and in fact had an uneasy feeling that he might be Nick DiPuma, though he couldn't be sure after all this time and given the distance at which he had viewed him those three, nearly four summers ago.

The girl squeezed in beside the man was thin and fair and striking in an ethereal sort of way, dark-eyed with thick black lashes, yet very pale, with a long plait of wheat-colored hair falling forward over her shoulder.

Her porcelain skin contrasted dramatically with her companion's dark tan. She was much taller than him, at least six inches, and young enough to be his daughter -- Leo's own age -- though he didn't think this was the case: Beyond their being such dissimilar physical types, there was nothing he could remotely recognize as fatherly about the guy; he seemed much more the cradle-snatching Playboy Man type. And there was something creepily proprietary about the way his right arm was stretched out along the top of the backrest behind her narrow shoulders.

She seemed tense and jittery, fidgeting with her hair as they ascended and looking past Leo back down the mountain out of big, dark doe eyes that were filled with apprehension and avoided his own at all costs -- though not without first giving him a strange, intense look upon sitting down across from him and his brother in the cramped gondola.

Leo and she were positioned directly opposite one another, toe-to-toe practically, and he was keenly aware of how close her knees were to his own. Mere fractions of an inch separated them, and it almost seemed that hers were surrounded by some weird force field that caused his own legs to tingle and tremble and an erection to threaten.

Straightening, he drew in as far as he could, and looked out the side window at the snow-covered slopes below, entertaining fantasies of rescue and romance, improbable scenarios in which the silvery old sleaze was confronted and called to account and sent packing, dislodged from the damsel's affections and replaced by none other than himself...

When he looked up again he found that she was once more regarding him with big, troubled eyes but quickly looked away -- over at Russ, as it happened... out of the frying pan and into the fire, his brother favoring her with a wolfishly winsome smile that served only to heighten her evident discomfort.

Again her gaze darted away, dropping to the door of their cab, to which was affixed a metal sign the size of a playing card specifying the gondola's maximum permissible capacity (4) and weight (1200 lbs.) in three languages (German, French, and English), which she stared down at, blinking and trembling and in fact looking as if she were about to jump out of her perfect creamy skin.

Leo thought that Russ's sunglasses might be bothering her. They were mirror-lensed and a bit sinister and she likely was feeling ogled through one-way glass. This certainly was possible but he had a feeling it was not necessarily the case. Lovely as she was to his own way of thinking, her looks were a bit subtle for the likes of his brother, a bit fragile and anemic and perhaps -- though the bulky powder-blue ski jacket she was wearing made it difficult to say for sure -- a bit unbuxom: Russ's tastes tended to run to the more blatantly provocative.

In any event, Russ pushed the glasses up atop his head and turned his gaze out the window. Was it possible he had sensed her discomfort? Surprising, if so. He wasn't much known for his attunement to the feelings of others.

Now Leo glanced over at the girl's companion who likewise was looking out his window at the woods to the east, dark-green stands of mountain hemlock and subalpine

fir and pine bordering the gondola cut, casting long blue shadows across the snowy slopes beneath them.

Leo wondered again if the man were DiPuma. On his face was a bored expression, and between the multi-ringed fingers of his left hand, a black cigarette, gold-filtered and unlit. A big gold wristwatch peeped from the black nylon sleeve of his jacket. His face and neck and hands were very dark -- the sort of deep mahogany tan that was difficult to acquire locally this time of year and likely attested to leisure time spent recently on a beach or by a pool at some sun-drenched resort for the affluent: Palm Springs... Maui... PeeVee...

From the bottom of the mountain to the top of the gondola was a ride of not much more than ten minutes but it seemed endless, passing in stony silence after an initial pleasantries from Russ noting the splendor of the day went unacknowledged by their fellow riders, and likewise a second attempt a few minutes later, after he had pushed his glasses up, this time remarking the magnificence of the natural surroundings, and again ignored by their co-passengers.

A snub, no mistaking it -- Russ certainly didn't and clearly he wasn't happy. 'What the fuck's the problem with these two?' was the question written all over his expressive, scowling face and, Leo feared, not far from his lips. He kept quiet though, for once, donning his mirror-shades again and folding his arms and sinking into a sullen funk.

Big silence set in, and as the minutes crawled by it only seemed to mount, gathering into an oppressive, almost palpable mass inside the tiny aluminum capsule and weighing down upon them -- upon Leo, at least -- more and more heavily until at last they came within sight of the upper terminal, a three-sided marine-green shed atop a ridge adjoining the base of the chairlift that would carry them the rest of the way to the top of the mountain.

As the oil-blackened wire cable hauled them up the last little ways toward the shed their uncongenial fellow passengers twisted round to watch the approach -- just in time to join Leo and Russ in viewing a more compelling spectacle: a spraddle-legged, out-of-control shussboomer bearing down at speed on the lift line-up, scattering waiting skiers right and left as he barreled through and shot out of bounds through the trees and

down a precipitous drop-off that plunged a hundred near-vertical feet to a yellow-cedar storage hut below.

Halfway down, he crossed his tips and launched himself into a spectacular airborne maneuver -- a flailing front somersault in a semi-pike position that opened into a bellyflop as he set down, followed by a headfirst slide the rest of the way down into the side of the hut.

Fortunately a safety net was in place out front, but it gave way when he hit it and though it slowed him down some he still went into the hut hard enough that the girl gasped and stiffened, her knees brushing Leo's, causing him to startle and sit bolt upright. Her companion meanwhile looked on impassively, while Russ brightened a little. "Guy should get into freestyle," he observed. "Aerials. Some definite talent there, man... biggest hotdogger since Oscar Mayer." He grinned and pushed his sunglasses back up atop his head.

The silver-haired man faced back around and gave him a chilly, what's-that-bad-smell sort of look; then, as their gondola approached the open end of the terminal shed, looked away and muttered something in a foreign language. Italian, Leo thought -- which would be consistent with his being named DiPuma. Translation was not necessary to understand that it was an expression of disdain.

Russ's grin vanished. His eyes narrowed and he began breathing heavily through his nose. A muscle at the side of his jaw started to jump. Leo braced himself for an intemperate rejoinder, but before there was time for such they were inside the shed, their gondola was shunting off the cable, the attendant sliding the door open, and the silver-haired man mooning them with his narrow, Bognered haunches as he exited, leaving behind a pungent musky-lemon smell.

"SUCH a Brut," lisped Russ loudly.

The girl gave them a flustered look. "Sorry," she whispered. "He's just so... he's just so... he's so..." Tears welled in her dark eyes as she groped for the word, then gave up. "God! I can't handle this!" she blurted. "I'm not supposed to get upset! It's bad for me!" Grimacing, she ducked through the door after her ineffable companion.

By the time the brothers had followed her out the man already had unloaded her skis and poles and his own from the exterior pockets on the front of their gondola and was

making for the exit with the equipment under his left arm and the black cigarette, still unlit, in the corner of his mouth; the girl hurrying after him.

Russ raised a cupped hand to the side of his mouth: "Nice talking to you!" he called after the receding figures. "Have a good one! Go for it!"

The girl looked back over her shoulder, smiling dazedly. The man kept going.

"REAL NICE TALKING TO YOU!" Russ persisted. "HAVE A NICE DAY!"

The attendant, a rangy Nordic type, cut his startled blue gaze their way as he leaned into an incoming cab, steadying and slowing it down as it came rocking off the grip.

"Be cool, Russ," cautioned Leo, but his brother was past the point of no return. "Y'ALL BE SURE TO LOOK US UP WHEN YOU'RE IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD, Y'HEAR?" he shouted.

The man was down at the far end of the shed now, a few steps from the exit, but he was stopping to greet someone, a bulky, smiling, bearded man in a one-piece navy ski-suit and a red headband who had taken his free hand and was pumping it vigorously.

Leo glanced over at Russ. His face was flushed and there was a worrisome, all-too-familiar look in his eye. He reached out and touched his brother's elbow: "C'mon, man, the guy's--"

Russ pulled his arm away. "HAVE A REAL GOOD ONE, YOU LITTLE PIMP!!" he screamed, the sinews in his neck standing out and his face going as red almost as his red plastic ski boots, which were brand-new and very red indeed.

Leo gaped at him, as did the attendant and the bearded man and everyone else in the shed except the girl -- she threw her hands in the air and kept going through the exit -- and the man himself, who betrayed no reaction at all.

Russ had an uneasy expression on his face now, looked like he might not be entirely comfortable with what had just come out of his mouth. Reaching up, he plucked his sunglasses from atop his head and slipped them back over his eyes.

Leo wondered if the little lavender tablet might have something to do with this madness. But wasn't it supposed to take longer to come into play? Russ had figured an hour, at least. And wasn't mescaline supposed to mellow a person out? As opposed to turning him into a raging bloody lunatic?

Alarmed, he checked himself for onsetting symptoms, not that he had much of an idea as to what these might be, but in any case he could not yet detect anything out of the ordinary.

It occurred to him now that the age discrepancy might be a factor. When Russ's father -- his 'real' father, blood father -- abandoned Julie and his toddler self it was for a nineteen year-old. Paul had been thirty-two at the time; and when he married for a third time last year, his new wife was twenty years his junior. Did this help account for the tantrum? Was Russ confusing the silver-haired man with Paul, of whom he never spoke and whose occasional attempts to make contact he always rebuffed?

Or was it just his usual incaution, not to say recklessness, and quick temper rendered even more hair-trigger than usual by the hangover and lack of sleep he had complained of?

Now the man glanced over his shoulder, gave them a casual look then turned back to the bearded man, who was still looking past him at Russ with a baffled expression on his face. Letting go of the silver-haired man's hand, he gestured their way and said something. The silver-haired man shook his head, pointed toward the exit, indicating that he should go ahead, that he need not concern himself.

Leo thought it might be prudent to put some distance between himself and his unruly step-brother. He walked back over to their gondola and fetched his skis and poles and fanny pack and set them down by a row of burlap bags of rock salt stacked knee-high along the east wall of the shed; then strapped the cobalt-blue nylon pack to his waist and pulled the zippered pouch around front over his right kidney and sat down on one of the top bags. Folding his arms, he leaned back against the rough-cedar wall. This one he would be sitting out. Whatever it was that had set Russ off he could deal with the repercussions himself.

And it did seem there would be repercussions.

The bearded man was headed for the exit now. When he was gone the silver-haired man leaned the two pairs of skis up against the wall, then turned without haste and gave Russ a long, level look as he slipped a hand inside the front of his jacket and brought forth not a weapon, as Leo for an instant feared he was about to, but rather a small gold cigarette lighter, with which he lit his exotic cigarette. Puffing on this and

staring at Russ through narrowed eyes, he projected an aura of menace that was impressive for someone who was just an inch or two over five feet, sustaining the look until Russ, despite the advantage of his sunglasses, looked away.

The man smiled for the first time, if only slightly, and started back toward them, staring hard at Leo as he approached; then, having divined that he was on the sidelines, focusing exclusively on Russ.

Walking right up to him, he stood very close, not saying anything, just puffing on his sinister cigarette and crowding him and squinting through his smoke like some pint-size Man With No Name: The Good, The Bad, The Ugly, and The Very Short.

Russ stood his ground at first, looking at once defiant and apprehensive (mostly the latter), but he flinched and backed off a step when the man reached out and whisked the mirror-shades from the bridge of his nose.

The guy folded them and passed them back, staring at Russ expressionlessly as he held them out to him; then, when Russ accepted them, he reached into his breast pocket again and brought out a black leather billfold. Flipping it open, he tweezed something from it with two fingers, a slip of paper or a photograph, and held this up for Russ's inspection.

Russ regarded it warily for a moment, then blinked several times and backed away, stumbling in his heavy boots, nearly going over backwards.

The man smiled again and returned the thing, whatever it was, to his billfold, and the billfold to his pocket, then stepped toward Russ and said something that caused him to look even more dismayed than he already did; as dismayed in fact as Leo ever had seen him look, including the night the roof caught fire, and the time back in California that he accidentally shot Claire in her tender infant wrist while fooling around with his BB gun in flagrant contravention of strict standing orders that he never bring the thing inside the house, nor point it at any living creature whatsoever, much less at one of his baby sisters.

The man's smile broadened. He reached up and draped an arm round Russ's shoulders, puffed smoke at him, patted his cheek and beamed like a fond featherweight uncle from the Old Country; then gave his back a slap and turned and made his way

back to the far end of the shed, stopping to pick up the two pairs of skis again before disappearing through the exit.

Russ stared for a moment at the sun-flooded doorway, wide-eyed and bereft for once of all cockiness. He put his head down and touched a finger to the bridge of his nose. When he looked up again he didn't meet Leo's eye. His voice when he spoke was ever so slightly more highly pitched than usual: "Wow. Can you believe that guy? What an asshole! Acts like we're not even there the whole way up... guess he hasn't been properly introduced or something, who knows... only his hairdresser for sure... did you see that hair-do on him? What a joke, man... every hair in place and individually plastic-wrapped... fuckin' guy looks like The Man From Glad with a thyroid problem... like, the Dwarf From Glad!" He reached inside his jacket and came up with a single white-filtered cigarette and stuck it in the corner of his mouth. "And his skinny girlfriend looks like she's gonna have a nervous breakdown any second... too uptight to even look at you!" He shook his head wonderingly as he patted his pockets for matches. "Fucking Canadians, man! I guess they must've been too RESERVED to be POLITE -- but that's not very NICE of them, is it? What's wrong with these people, Lee? They're as bad as Brits! I mean, Americans are pretty crazy and they're liable to put a bullet in your ass if you look at 'em funny but at least the fuckers'll talk to you if they find themselves practically sitting in your damn LAP!"

Leo stood up, feeling light-headed and strange. What was Russ talking about? His reading of the situation, like his recent behavior, seemed itself pretty crazy. Clearly the girl was high-strung and upset about something, too freaked out for small talk; while her intimidating companion was hostile (not 'reserved') for reasons that didn't in Leo's estimation have much to do with his nationality, nor seem all that mysterious. Just last week Alan had taken him to a screening of the Olivier OTHELLO at the university, and with the tragedy of the Moor of Venice still fresh in his mind it seemed to him possible that what Russ had run up against was an older guy with a young girlfriend feeling less than eager to strike up a conversation with a scruffy but tall and allegedly good-looking (Leo couldn't see it himself) young longhair with mirrors over his eyes and an eight-inch ponytail and last night's liquor on his breath -- and, for all he knew, designs on said girlfriend.

So at least it seemed to Leo, but he didn't say anything. It would be a waste of time and breath. Instead he asked: "What was that he showed you?"

Russ looked at him but said nothing. His eyes were anxious, haunted.

"A photograph or something?"

Russ made a sour face. "Yeah, right. Picture of his family... the wife and kids," he muttered. Starting to recover his attitude, it appeared, and his sarcasm, but he was very pale, as pale almost as their agitated co-passenger, and his hands shook as he raised a match to his cigarette.

Leo licked his lips. His mouth was very dry all of a sudden; parched in fact. He felt all keyed up, his motor revving high; and he had a strange sense that some sort of time slip or warp somehow had come to pass: The ride up in the gondola seemed hours ago, and breakfast at the Red Dog the distant past.

"So uh what did the guy say?" he asked.

Russ shook out the match and dropped it to the floor by the blood-red toe of his right boot and looked down at it vacantly for a moment; then walked over and set his cigarette down on the stainless-steel lip of a sand-top smoking urn next to the rack to which the attendant had transferred his Dynastars while he himself was busy taunting the silver-haired man, and from which he now retrieved them. Setting them on his shoulder, he started again for the exit.

As he walked away Leo stared at his feet, struck again by how incredibly red the new boots were.

Russ pulled up short after a few steps and about-faced and came back for his cigarette. He retrieved it from the ashtray and dragged on it once then grimaced and pushed it tip-down into the sand as he expelled smoke through his flared nostrils.

He looked up at Leo and frowned. "Lee, what are you waiting for?"

Leo roused himself and pushed the fanny pack around to the small of his back and cinched the strap. Picking up his own equipment, he started after his brother, trudging toward the exit with his gaze fixed once more upon the boots, marveling at the richness and vibrancy of their color as the sunlight pouring in through the open doorway struck them; indeed transfixed by their intense carmine beauty...

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