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– *Literary Titan* (5/5)

# The Maenad's God

Karen Michalson



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– *BlueInk Review* (Starred Review)

## Praise for *The Maenad's God*

“Karen Michalson’s first fiction release since her *Enemy Glory* trilogy is a genre-blending narrative that combines rock n’ roll and mythology with magic realism and crime fiction to create a highly palatable story with a distinctly unique flavor. . . . Readers who enjoyed Michalson’s *Enemy Glory* trilogy will find this novel a much deeper, richer—and more intimate—story. Blurring the lines between reality and fantasy, the author delivers a strange and beautiful narrative tapestry woven with threads of music, myth, and magic. . . . Adventurous fantasy fans—particularly deep readers—will find this genre-hybridized novel addictive.” — *BlueInk Review* (Starred Review)

“*The Maenad's God* is the latest book by Karen Michalson. The author tackles several heavy themes masterfully. It’s a tale that will keep you on your toes, guessing what’s real and imaginary and what to expect next. Michalson takes the reader in one direction when the expectation is the opposite, making it a thrilling read. The author artfully deals with Peter’s evolving sexuality brilliantly and in a way that is both challenging and not too explicit. . . . I cannot praise *The Maenad's God* by Karen Michalson highly enough. It is a mind-bending masterpiece.” — *Literary Titan* (5/5)

“Michalson’s prose, as narrated by the loquacious Pete, is by turns wisecracking and obsessive. . . . Even so, Pete’s quest takes him in unexpected occult directions, opening up an intricate world of ecstasy and paranoia. . . . the novel’s angst and atmosphere—both authentically ’90s—make for a strangely alluring reading experience. An engaging, snaking, and spirit-tinged murder tale about obsession and control.” — *Kirkus Reviews*

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“An engaging metafictional romp through an improbable New England.” — Tucker Lieberman, *Independent Book Review*

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Novels

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*Enemy Glory*

*Hecate's Glory*

*The King's Glory*

# The Maenad's God

Karen Michalson



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Worcester/Gondal/nowhere

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, locations, and events portrayed in this novel are purely the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, real locations, and real events is accidental, coincidental, and unintentional.

## THE MAENAD'S GOD

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## ARULA BOOKS

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For Bill

these things always are

The universe was not made by god or mortal. It always was, is, and will be a relentless fire. By measures it ignites itself and by measures it dies.

Heraclitus

*On Nature*

## Stave One

Consider this a kind of prayer to the heartless void, for I am now in joyless communion with a dead god.

Peter C. Morrow, former Special Agent  
Boston Field Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation  
Date: Eternity



## Stave Two

Monday morning, August 17, 1992.

I, Special Agent Peter C. Morrow, am sitting with my feet on my dented metal desk, leaning back luxuriously in my dangerously unstable swivel chair, and contemplating all the loveliness of my pale green cinder block office. I am sort of amusing myself by seeing how slowly I can breathe without passing out. It's a much more interesting exercise than filling out reports. It's also healthier than remaining completely conscious, as each precious breath of lousy air is delicately seasoned with asbestos dust. The dust has been spreading like so many cancer cells out of my office's cracked ceiling for the past six months. The union people will plaster up the crack sometime this year or next, but I must wait on their good graces to reduce my risk of dying of cancer before I die of this job. You see, when the dust began, I sealed up the crack with masking tape and immediately earned my whole department a write-up for union rules violation. So my boss made me take it down. Reason? Seems my humble effort to extend my life expectancy could cost some stooge who is incapable of honest work a job, and given the choice, the government considers my life of lesser worth than the stooge's, because the stooge's union boss's brother-in-law pays protection money to our esteemed senator.

And my boss, of course, who is terribly brave in the face of the attempted murder of one of his agents, but is also desperately seeking promotion to some cushy, well-paid do-nothing post in Washington, finds it greatly in his interest to have the same list of priorities as the government. So I had to listen to him fume about how I should know better than to tangle with the union and get us all in trouble and how it doesn't look good if government employees can't all respect each other and work together on friendly terms in the present anti-government climate.

Which is all very well for him to say, as government-ordained incompetence isn't killing him.

Item. I am to fearlessly risk my life to pursue and capture fellow government workers who go berserk and shoot other government workers, but I am to fear the power of the almighty union to level rules violation fees under threat of things "not looking good" should anybody ever care to investigate who fixed my lousy cracked ceiling.

I plastered it myself a few days ago and so earned another write-up. And a day of annoyance while the union people, who can't be bothered to fix the damn thing but have all the time in the world to notice if somebody else does, took four hours to chip away the plaster before cheerfully announcing that they'd be back "sometime" to fix it. And they left all my impeccably typed reports coated in white cocaine-like powder, which I turned in anyway, to my boss's dismay, as they were reports on a recent drug bust and his name was on top. And despite my warranted outrage at the union's intrusion, my boss went nutso at me, waving his hands around and shouting for all the building to hear that I had no business telling the union Gestapo officer who wrote me up that a) he *was* a Gestapo officer and b) I'd send him a box of

inflamed lung if the union didn't fix the damage and c) dropping a Nazi armband in his lunch box that some Klan guy I arrested for arson once flipped at me.

And then when I whipped out my pocket-sized government-issued copy of the US Constitution that I have dutifully sworn to uphold and protect and pleaded first amendment rights he ordered *me* to calm down and stop being so goddamned intellectual about everything.

Which is why I am making a half-hearted show of mindlessly staring at the walls. My door is wide open, and I want the boss to wander by and ask me what I am doing so I can act stupid and ask him to order me to start being intellectual again. I have a nasty habit of making absurd points and throwing them over other people's heads.

But then again, I am an English major. Or was, at one point in ancient history before I decided I needed a job and the FBI took up my offer for their own mysterious reasons. Never figured that one out. Thirteen years ago I got drunk and screwed around with an application someone handed me at my college's pathetic job fair just to see how far it would go. Wrote this horribly funny, horribly juvenile parodic essay that I whimsically entitled in big, black, boldface letters, "Why I Want to be a COP." And I really got into the whole writing experience, describing in detail how I creamed my jeans for the flag when I was eight years old and didn't know what it meant except that it felt good until my father, a WW II veteran who killed and ate forty-three Germans while starving on a besieged mountaintop in Austria with nothing but a Boy Scout buck knife and a rubber band to his name because the Italians had already killed him (twice) for breaking out of a POW camp in Vietnam with his bare hands explained it all to me on a hunting trip in the Adirondacks, where we killed deer and good fine trout like Hemingway and I decided we ought to put everyone in jail and clean up America now for God and gumbo before the blue laws got rescinded by socialist liberals and the family falls apart and we all turn into communist drug addicts—

And they fuckin' hired me.

Interviewer said it was the best essay he'd ever read. I was, of course, intrigued. But since my *summa cum laude* in English had earned me a good job pumping gas for my uncle's convenience store in Pittsfield, I felt I needed a few seconds to consider the consequences of this career change. The interviewer said he "understood" and praised my family loyalty.

Me, I try not to understand anything. Makes my job easier.

Take my office decor. Please. I survey the idiotic government anti-drug posters which lend such *éclat* to my homey little workplace. Black and red geometric lines that probably took some government graphics wizard three months and a ruler to think up, with god-awful yellow lettering unctuously announcing to any drug lords who happen to wander into a fed's office looking for the answer to life's problems that "Drugs are for dopes and dopes are for drugs." Hmmm. Certainly makes me think about life, love, and the universe to see that piece of cleverness staring me in the face every morning as I guzzle my thermos of extra-caFFEinated Jolt. And they made me take down a color print of Botticelli's *La Primavera* as "inappropriate to our work environment" because some dullard might complain about being able to see through the Three Graces' robes.

But I woke up too late this morning to make myself any drugs—I mean coffee. So even though I am trying to look as if an interesting thought never battered against my solidly closed mind, I am really taking my sweet time deciding whether or not to go down the hall for some joe. It is not a trivial decision. I have not eaten since last night. If I get myself some brew, I will feel less miserable physically, and if I feel less miserable physically, I will be less likely to tell my boss to go to hell when he walks past my door, and if I do not tell my boss to go to hell, I will be less likely to get another reprimand for insubordination. Three of those in one month and they make you take a vacation. Which isn't a bad deal, as you still get paid and everything, but I wanted to save it up until Columbus Day so I could use the time to go camping and horseback riding in the New Mexico desert during the off-season. Right now it is late August, which means the sun owns the desert and so New Mexico camping is right out. Figure I might as well be working.

However, as to decisions. My boss usually leaves his door open so as to feel important and play guard with the coffee machine to make sure we all leave a quarter so the secretary doesn't get shortchanged, even if we do all get hit up for a coffee fee every month. And lately old Fearless has been saving up all the inane cases for yours truly. You see, because of my extensive formal training in "critical thinking" and all that, I usually get the nut cases. My first boss once reasoned, fairly accurately, that since I was capable of thinking logically and poetically at the same time, I was probably gifted with the ability to understand the kind of screwball violent behavior that my less "humanistically inclined" colleagues found incomprehensible. And since I've had a lot of success on those cases, they're usually mine to keep. That, and the Mob (talk about government that works), because I once took another agent's place investigating an illegal interstate trucking operation when some secret committee of government accountants decided that the IRS was short on cash. Mob work can be a lot of fun, as you get to meet and drink espresso with more unbelievable characters than you get in a typical day in Congress, but it isn't steady, as it tends to depend on who is paying off which important office holder that month. It's really the lone crazies who pay the rent.

But for a while last spring, for reasons of his own, Fearless was saddling me with a lot of missing persons cases, which weren't too bad except when I began to sympathize with the missing person rather than with the missing person's "concerned" relatives and started doing what I could to slow things down. You talk to some of the parents of missing children and you understand instantly why the kid ran away. Had one guy whose teenage daughter refused to cut her hair. So he cut it for her, and cut up her face as well. Her delightful mother righteously buried herself in a television program "to avoid a fight" while her husband made a hole through the kid's left cheek with a paper punch. But that one, thanks to my quiet non-effort, managed to escape.

But then there was Melanie Ann Miller, whom you might have heard of. I still have a newspaper picture of Al Kanesh, another agent here at the field office, proudly returning the frightened girl to her parents weeks after I discovered her whereabouts and decently chose to play dumb about it. What the paper didn't say was that the poor girl was a few days shy of her eighteenth birthday, was supporting herself waitressing under the table up in Nashua, and ran away in the first place because her stepfather liked to raise welts across her back with a horsewhip. And in five more

days the kid would have been eighteen and free and clear of torture, so it was no skin off my ass to keep my mouth shut about her whereabouts. And she was a sweet kid who brought me free sandwiches because I was the only person she'd ever known who asked if she needed anything, and so she decided I was "nice." She liked to make top of the line sandwiches special with all the works, her own creations, for "nice people" she liked. "Nice people" seemed to mean me and an elderly man who got to feel important when he gave her twenty-dollar tips. The restaurant was run by an older couple who had recently immigrated from Greece and didn't know any better than to be happy with a good employee's good work and so they never checked her working papers. And they all seemed to get along, as far as I could tell. Mellie lived with them upstairs and there were no horsewhips and no problems and she made terrific sandwiches and was learning Greek and quickly growing into a terrific smile.

But Kanesh got into my "extra-secure" computer file "by accident" with the boss's help and figured out where Mellie was. Which put me in the position of having to hand the poor girl back to her wonderful family because the goddamn Department of Social Services types have some bizarre article of faith that says if you're unlucky enough to have a psychopath for a father you're better off getting abused by him than taking your chances elsewhere where you could end up in a gang or a cult or even worse, quietly supporting yourself like an honest citizen.

How else can I explain what happened to Mellie? I know I did my moral duty. That is, I passively refused to "get her" by dicking around for a day, so Kanesh drove up and got her and brought her home like a big hero and got his face all over the papers.

And I got a tearful hysterical phone call from Mellie the next day, but there wasn't a hell of a lot I could do to defend the citizenry against aggression at that point because it was now the DSS's sole affair. And guess what? At the big family reunion dear old dad took out his Marlin .22, killed his wife, poor little Mellie who made sandwiches for nice people, and killed himself. One of his sons found his brains in the salad bowl. It was Father's Day. Nice touch, huh? He was upset at the dog for interrupting a Red Sox game.

But pledge my heart and hope to die, DSS "couldn't have known" this would happen because the goddamn handbook says differently, and they can't be expected to predict things like that, "human nature being what it is," even though I told them the first time I met the guy that he was about as normal as a Tufts School of Social Work graduate. My boss said he wouldn't have put it quite that way, and I told him I was only doing my best to frame things in a way the DSS might be able to relate to, comradeship between us government types being good PR and all.

Anyway, when one of the whiny, supercilious social workers who helped Kanesh return the girl home politely suggested, with all the righteous sensitivity of his psycho-babbling breed, that Mellie's death was my fault because, as a federal agent, I set an example of violence to society by carrying a gun, I decided to set him a personal example of violence by popping him one on the jaw. Which earned me a six-week paid vacation in the Rockies.

Under other circumstances, there would have been an extended investigation leading to a quiet transfer or dismissal, but the *Boston Herald* and the radio talk shows

made a *cause célèbre* out of the case, cashing in on the anti-government, anti-DSS feeling so healthfully rampant right now, and put the governor and the social service people through the media-wringer, so I became something of a popular hero in my absence.

But when I returned from my summer camping trip two weeks ago, Fearless took me off missing persons because the controversy was still sort of raging in the circles he cared about and gave me report and clean-up work to do. Report work means ghost writing for colleagues who can't put a coherent sentence together and pretending that I'm not really embarrassing anyone with my knowledge of English. Clean-up work sometimes means knocking on strangers' doors and telling them in my professionally concerned voice that someone found their favorite child's decomposed body in an industrial waste site and would they like to come have a look so I can finish my flawlessly written, asbestos-sugared report? And I haven't taken to these assignments too well, not because I find it sad to sit across a kitchen table from a grieving family that insists on showing me photographs of a smiling kid in a cheerleader uniform, but because once I hit my thirties, things like that suddenly ceased to be sad. Maybe thirteen years ago I believed the line that everyone is special and worthwhile and precious and all that, but that's because I didn't really know anyone then. Now I know everyone and the line doesn't wash.

Let me explain. Sometime in my late twenties, and certainly by my early thirties, I dimly and reluctantly started to realize that there's nothing charming to do in life. There are six billion people on the planet. Except for cultural and language differences, which aren't all that great after the first five minutes of contact, "human nature being what it is," about 5.999 billion of them are fairly interchangeable. Everyone says the same things on the same occasions and struggles like hell to make sure those same occasions become a daily event. Everyone slogs out of bed in the morning. Everyone then has a rousing family fight. Everyone sacrifices the better part of every day to some useless, senseless job. Everyone sacrifices the better part of every evening to that same job, fights again with the family to kill an hour, or mumbles through practical non-conversations about bills and groceries. Some people stare through a few idiotic TV commercials to break things up, and then come morning it all starts again. Life is such fun. And the fun keeps going for decades, *for decades*, one miserable water-torture day at a time, right down into generations of perfectly matched graves.

Wait, I forgot. There's more. Some people look forward to going out to dinner on a Friday night when they might get to eat a few dead shrimp on a stick and I suppose that bit of trivia gets them through the endless weeks. Some look forward to "doing something someday," but as the years roll by "someday" never comes, or when it does come their bodies are too old to get up and meet it, and whatever remains of their hearts is too derelict to care.

Really, why live? I'm not asking an idle question.

While I was camping in the mountains, I looked into the stars and gave them names and thought about the distances I was seeing into and knew that for every Mellie who gets shot there are millions who don't. The best, most original part of her life was sneaking sandwiches to people she liked—that part was *really* her, if you know what I mean, even if it did take living around the law to bring it out. But time would remove that specialness too. No one likes to say it, but people get redundant.

And if she had lived to die at twenty-five or eighty-three, how many people out of a world population of six billion would even notice? I know I wouldn't. In a month or two I probably wouldn't even have noticed her on the street, and I'm a "nice person," someone she really believed gave a damn.

And if my boss died, would *anyone* care? Sure, there'd be an office collection for flowers for the widow because that's the way things are done and no one wants to look callous. We'd all chip in an honest dollar and move on. And there'd be another jackass bucking for promotion to Washington to take his place. And another jackass to take his place *ad infinitum*.

Anyway, the last time I went for coffee, my easily replaceable boss decided to get me killed. And I've reached a point where I'm not all that angry about it. This was just before all the sordid business with Mellie last June. Put me on that god-awful nut case. The suspect, who wasn't even a real nut as far as real nuts go, was just a pathetic old man who had lost his candy business to the recession and decided to spend his golden years writing badly spelled death threats to everyone in Congress. I sort of felt sorry for the guy, because really he had lost everything he'd spent his life working for, but I nevertheless did my duty and busted him. The reason I nearly got killed is because my partner for that nothing case, Sidney Crensch, wrote the book and the movie on incompetence. His father is a congressman, which probably helped some with the research. And that is all anybody seems to know about Crensch's background, except that he's crazy. First time we got introduced, he broke the ice by bragging about carrying an Uzi into a MacDonald's back in his Idaho hometown to "get a reaction from the locals."

"Did it work?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

Wonderful. Then he popped old Fearless's belt buckle by boasting that his congressman father had been an OSS man but that nobody is supposed to know this. He himself had undergone six or seven or thirteen or seventy-six (the number kept changing) secret initiations into the "Brotherhood," a self-styled secret-secret group of aging CIA special operations people whose only link with real intelligence gathering appeared to be a shared delusion of being James Bond. He had also been trained by Mossad and MI5 and the French Service of External Documentation and Counterespionage and by the Boy Scouts and Captain Marvel's Militia and the SPCA and who knows what else. Told old Fearless he had an uncle in the KGB.

"That's almost as impressive as having a father in Congress," I ventured to remark, in the interest of friendly collegiality. Fearless sent me off to copy a report.

Asked Crensch once, with all of his grand I-Spy-on-Your-Grandmother's Dirty-Underpants credentials, what he was doing in the FBI. I mean, wasn't interviewing serial killers and nut case parents of runaway kids kind of tame stuff for a guy like him?

"Domestic surveillance," he winked. "But I'm working incognito, so don't tell anybody who I really am." He waited for me to say something.

I kept him waiting until Fearless came into earshot. "All right, who are you?" I asked in my urgent "I understand your reluctance to speak, but I can help you with

your problem” whisper that I usually reserve for reluctant stool pigeons who have seen too many cop movies.

“I am,” he looked around, “the FBI.” He actually said this seriously, so I nodded with exaggerated solemnity. Then he laughed. “Get it? It’s a joke.” Then he looked fierce. “The FBI is a fuckin’ joke.” He raised his hand palm outwards. “No offense.” Then my boss laughed, because after all he wants a promotion, and Crensch’s father could be a help, and Crensch laughed again, and I sent myself back to my reports. Who knows? Crensch probably thought he really was doing surveillance, although as near as I could figure Fearless was just giving him nickels and sending him out to sip *café au lait* at the French consulate to keep him out of everyone’s hair.

Anyway, the truth was that Crensch was ours because he liked to play cop as much as anyone else in the field office and Dad liked to keep him a continent away from his Idaho constituency and Fearless needed to suck up to Dad. And on the Candy Man case he was mine, Uzi and all.

It was in the middle of Roxbury, with the suspect sitting quietly in the back seat, and the car lawfully stopped at a red light, that Crensch decided to confide his “secret plan” of the day. “Gonna give the Boston cops a treat,” he whispered for no comprehensible reason. “Watch and learn.” He rolled his window part way down and waved his weapon around to “get a reaction” from the drug dealers on the corner. “Hey—hey you,” he called to a knot of young men who didn’t look like they valued their lives any more than I did, “take a toke on this,” and he opened fire on a second-story window of an abandoned building, sending glass flying into the street, the gang flying into some poor bastard’s place of business, and a brick flying through our car’s back window and smacking poor Candy Man in the back of the head. I immediately pushed the gas pedal against the floor, lurched the car into the intersection, and gave the Boston cops a real treat by getting us hit sideways by a squad car. Crensch laughed his ass off like it was the best joke he’d ever heard in his life and immediately got re-assigned to the consulate and bragging about his prowess as a G-man. I got the paperwork. And Candy Man got a lesson in government at work.

Decisions. The coffee machine was on the other side of my boss’s always open door. So, when my story begins, I was in the absurd position of deciding whether my life was potentially worth a cup of bad coffee. I glanced at the fortress of reports I still had to fill out and decided that it was.

Item. Most of the time you might as well be dead. It’s only going to get worse.

“Hey, Morrow,” yelled Fearless from down the hall. I did not answer. “Hey, Morrow, get in here.” I did not move from my comfortable chair, but I squeaked it to let him know I was deliberately forcing him to come to me. He took the bait and heaved himself into my doorway. I looked up at him with my wide-eyed “dumb southern boy” expression that I picked up hiking with a mountain man in Alabama a few years ago who reminded me of Walt Whitman. He looked at all the reports he had assigned me to do. “You busy?” His tone was unusual, the sort of thing meant to pass for polite solicitation.

“No.” I said this with a straight face.

He nodded and choked on the asbestos. “Come into my office, then. Need your expertise on this one.”

On the way to his office, I ostentatiously filled my dirty mug with coffee but I did not leave a quarter. Ordinarily I would, but by “stealing” the same coffee that my fee has already allegedly paid for, I was making one of my famous statements. Fearless hesitated, dug into his pocket, and tossed in a quarter for me. Since he was treating, I knew that something I really ought to say no to was up.

“Come in.” He closed the door part way. I settled into a brown plastic padded chair and made “serious” eye contact with him across the desk. “Gotta case for you, but I’d prefer it if you didn’t hot dog it on this one too much. Keep it cool, stay low, no problems, no publicity.” He was gently alluding to the social worker I’d decked, not the police car fiasco Crensch brought on, which pretty much got hushed up to everyone’s satisfaction except mine. “For now you’re on it alone. Think it’s mob related.”

“Good. I like dealing with the Mob. That’s where I cultivated my remarkable sense of style.”

He ignored my brilliant touch of humor. “Know anything about Ithaca?”

“Only Homer’s.”

“Whose?”

Really my boss was so remarkably informed. “Homer. Eighth century B.C. Name refers to one or a group of poets who created the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Ithaca is where faithful Penelope waits for Odysseus, her adventurer husband, to return home after twenty years of wandering through an interesting life of murder and mayhem—”

“Yeah, right. Cut the smart crap. Not Ithaca. I meant Rome.”

“Rome. No, never heard of it,” I drawled, slightly comforted by the fact that Fearless could, after all, with some effort, read. Although I could see where he might confuse Ithaca for Rome, the names being so similar and everything. “So. Is Rome like a town?”

“Now, listen. Rome, New York. There’s an army base nearby, and there’s a young private, one Claude F. Hopner, showing more money than he ought, probably dealing, so the commander wants us there to put on a show.”

“Why not send in the guys from Albany or New York?”

“New York’s usually busy for crime.”

“Really?”

“Hey, ask a stupid question, Morrow.” I had to admit, it was a stupid question. New York never had anyone to spare. “And you’ve got more mob experience than anyone in Albany.”

“Right. All of my work experience is mob related.” Fearless looked blank so I chose not to pursue the analogy.

“Anyway,” he glanced fiercely at the woman at the coffee machine until the reassuring plop of a quarter freed him for less important matters, “there’s reason to believe that Hopner’s supplier is a member of a new Utica branch of the Nunzio family, and you dealt effectively with some of those guys here in town a few years back. So I’m suggesting you leave your name around. They’ll remember you. If it’s known that you personally are making the trip to ask questions, it might send a message up the line to the right people to lay off the base, which is all the commander



cares about to keep his general happy, and all we need to do to keep the commander happy. Short and easy assignment.”

“Why do we need to keep the commander happy? Is his brother running for office?”

Fearless looked sheepish. “His cousin—look he’s an important fundraiser, a lot of people owe him favors, could pass a favor along—”

“Never mind. For the commander’s honorable cousin, I shall forgo the considerable pleasures of my current assignment and reluctantly take a day trip to Rome.”

“You mean you’ll go?”

“Do I get a dinner allowance?”

“You get to eat in the officers’ club. Six-hour drive.” He glanced at his watch. “Ten now. You could get there by five o’clock. Stay the night on the base.” It was a dismissal so I didn’t move. “Well?”

“How do you know it’s the Nunzio family?”

“They’re one of the few old families that’s not squeamish about drug dealing. And they have a history of “taking in” their more troubled brethren without the typical gangland stuff, which usually makes the papers and gets everybody upset. The Utica Mob is suffering from the recession like anyone else. They’ve historically confined their activities to skimming off the arcade business and extorting protection money from local establishments. But they’re beginning to understand that you can’t extort what isn’t there, and there’s always money in drugs, and the Nunzio people are going shares in the drug business in exchange—uh, look Morrow, you’ve got to go and none of this is that relevant to what you need to do.”

“In exchange for?” I followed up. “I was an English major, boss. I love irrelevancies.”

He shuffled in his chair. “The Nunzios aren’t a bad family, as far as mob families go. Run a lot of legitimate stuff—construction, fish markets, entertainment, wholesale food industry, liquor distribution, sanitation services—”

“Unions.”

He ignored the remark. “Hey, some of the older guys even donate bucks to the Church. And the Church slides a portion over to some of our friends on Beacon Hill who campaign for some of our friends in Washington—”

I remained mildly stone-faced. “Hmmm. Really? I never would have guessed. How utterly fascinating—”

“All right, Morrow, cut the sarcasm. I ain’t sayin’ it’s right—but it *is*, it happens and since it isn’t illegal for people to make campaign donations there’s nothing we can do about it. Look here’s the dope—”

“Here’s the what, sir?”

He sighed. “It’s just an expression. The Nunzios are cleaning up Utica. Street gangs are getting less visible, fewer drug arrests are making the paper, the citizens are thinking the drugs are disappearing and families are taking their children out for Sunday afternoon walks. And since a good strong mafia presence tends to dampen random drug violence”—I laughed appreciatively and he laughed like my laughter sud-

denly made him comfortable—"well, it's true. The point is, the mayor is happy, because he gets points with the President's Council for declaring Utica a 'drug-free zone,' and some impressive endorsements for his upcoming run for Congress—"

"Gotcha. But if we really interfere with the mafioso drug trade, and the gangs take over and the city goes nasty just before elections, the mayor gets to blame you, and there's no telling where his career might take him—"

"Look, just warn them off the goddamn base and come back, got it?"

"Yes, sir. Uh, sir?" I said in my best fresh-out-of-training green recruit's voice.

"What is it?"

"Sir, do you think, that since my mere presence in a strategically important place like Rome, New York is enough to scare the Mob off one of our crucial defense bases, that if I were to say, suddenly leap out of the broom closet and make faces at a union brother, that I could scare him and his cohorts into fixing my ceiling?"

"You know something, Morrow, you're a damn good fed but you've got one hell of a prize attitude."

"I know." I started to leave, paused in the doorway, and turned around looking terribly confused. "So how do *you* pass the time on a slow day?" Then I tossed him a quarter and flashed him a smile. And to his credit and to my surprise, he actually chuckled a little as he caught it.