

BILL AND SUSAN

THE AMTRAK DOWNEASTER PULLED noisily into the Portland terminal. Bill grabbed his overnighter and briefcase and followed the stream of passengers hurriedly exiting the train. The sun was bright and he had to squint due to its reflection off his glasses. He had a bitch of a headache.

Grimacing, he walked rapidly toward the parking lot.

"BILL! OVER HERE!"

He stopped and turned, surprised to hear someone calling his name.

Susan stood in front of the entrance to the train terminal, waving as she yelled to him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked as he approached her. "You know I have my car. I don't need a ride."

Susan frowned. "Nice greeting. I think you can do better than that, can't you?"

Despite his headache, Bill managed a laugh. "Okay," he said, wrapping his arm around her waist and giving her a lingering kiss. "That better?"

"Yes, it is," she laughed. "Much. Now let's get a cup of coffee. I don't have a lot of time and I want to let you know what's been happening."

Reluctantly, Bill followed her into the terminal. He didn't want to be with her now. All he wanted was to get home, take a pill, and lie down. But Susan was a force and he knew it would be better to accede to her demands than to fight.

Once inside, he purchased coffee from one of the many vending machines that lined the back wall. The place was now almost deserted and they sat down on one of the benches to talk.

"They bit!" she exclaimed. "They're going to look for the bodies on Puffin. And, I've enlisted the support of the Anthro Department at State for grad students to help."

"You mean the police will be going to Puffin? That's good news, I guess. Why the students, though?"

"Yes, the police and forensics. And, the kids from State - they've been on archeological digs and know how to sift through debris and dirt for artifacts. A rep from the Coroner's Office will be coming along, too."

Bill sipped his coffee, thinking. "Do you really expect they're going to find anything? I mean, it's a long shot."

Susan smiled. "I've got a hunch on this one and my hunches are usually right. Yes, I think they're going to find one, if not all, of the six missing men." She glanced down at her watch. "I've got to get going. I'm on the air in an hour, but I just had to tell you the good news."

She reached over and squeezed his hand, then stood and started for the door. Halfway across the room, she stopped and looked back over her shoulder. "Oh, Christ, I almost forgot. Saturday. Keep Saturday clear."

"Why?"

Susan grinned. "That's when it's happening. That's when we're going to Puffin Island!"

She blew him a kiss, turned, and hurried out the door to the parking lot.

Bill sat immobile for a moment staring after her as three words screamed across his consciousness, "Saturday ... Puffin Island."

Without warning, black shadows crept into the corners of his vision and the quiet terminal was abruptly filled with the vicious sound of the winter wind raging relentlessly across the ocean.

The words "Puffin Island" echoed repeatedly, bouncing off the walls and slamming into his mind over and over again. But nothing could blot out the never-ending, icy howling of the wind that threatened swallow his soul alive.

His hands began shaking violently with imagined cold, causing the hot coffee to spill over the front of his pants. The steaming liquid burned, but he was not aware of it. The shadows clouding his vision were growing larger and he feared they would soon erase all that he was or once had been, leaving his mind and his soul lifeless, devoid of all humanity.

And only one word triumphed over the roar of the bitter and relentless wind: *survive*.

Then as swiftly as the shadows and wind had appeared, they were gone. The empty terminal was back and he gazed down in shock to see his once crisp khakis soaked with cold vending machine coffee. His hands still shook and it took him several minutes to remember who and where he was.

Slowly, he stood up, trying to steady himself. As he moved, he realized there was more than cold coffee staining his pants. A look of disgust passed over his face. Swiftly, he grabbed his overnighter and briefcase and headed toward the men's room.

Once inside, he removed his soiled pants and briefs and cleaned himself as best he could. He threw the ruined trousers into the trashcan and dressed in clean ones from his suitcase. Gazing in the mirror, he noted how pale and gaunt he looked - not at all like the man who, earlier in the day, had boarded the train in Boston. His head was once again throbbing painfully and he longed for one of those magic little pills the shrink had prescribed that could make the whole world disappear.

Or Karen.

Karen could make the pain go away. He dredged up a memory from a time long ago when they lived in California. He'd had a hard day at work and was lying on the couch, his head in her lap, and she was gently and soothingly massaging his temples. They'd been so happy.

How did he lose all that? And could he ever get it back again?

As he walked out of the terminal toward his car, his thoughts turned to Susan. There were times, he had to admit, when he could almost see a life with her. She was attractive, intelligent with a good sense of humor, and, in a lot of ways, they complemented one other. But she was driven, ambitious. No, she would not be content to stand by his side and share his limelight. She wanted it all and heaven help the person or persons who stood in her way.

He thought about her planned excursion to Puffin and wondered if all her hoopla about dead bodies was just some sort of stunt she'd cooked up to draw the attention of the national media. Did she honestly care about getting justice for him? Or was he only a pawn in her greater game plan?

Shaking his head, he got into the car and, for a moment, leaned forward, resting his forehead on the steering wheel. The pain throbbing in his skull was relentless. It was always like this when he got back from Boston after a session with the doctor. If only he could remember. Maybe then the headaches and nightmares would stop. Maybe then, he could be free.

Sitting up straight, he started the car, but, before backing up, pulled out his cell to check for messages. Only one caught his eye.

Karen called! She wants to see me!

Hastily, he hit redial, but the call went immediately to voicemail. He left a message saying he was on his way home and that she could come over anytime.

Finally, he was beginning to feel better. The headache was fading and all thoughts of Puffin Island and the fear he had experienced in the terminal were wiped from his mind. All he could think about now was Karen.

He backed the car out of the stall and headed toward the ferry terminal. He would still be able to make the four p.m. boat and, maybe, just maybe, he would see her that evening.