

First Chapter Preview Copyright Mike Vogel 2005

ISN'T THAT BIGAMY?

A Novel

Mike Vogel

Strutting like a supermodel with a tray of drinks in her hand, the waitress ignored the pleas of desperate patrons requesting more bottled water or inquiring on the status of their calamari appetizers. One table was getting practically all of her attention, the table with the only gray head in the place. A silver haired businessman was seated with what looked to be an up and coming protégé, giving him some words of wisdom or advice on how to rise in the company. Maybe ask for a blowjob after dessert if that was his thing.

The fact that the waitress lingered at this particular table could only spell trouble for Stan Smith. From where he sat, Stan couldn't resist staring over his girlfriend's left shoulder at the waitress' perfectly round ass.

Stan's girlfriend Gwen stared down at her Ahi tuna, poking it with a fork while planning a trip to Mexico or Spain so she could practice her Spanish with the locals. Spain was the last country on Stan's mind as he watched the Chinese waitress bend over to deliver drinks, laughing at whatever that gray head was saying. She was taller than other Asians Stan had dated, with creamy smooth legs that didn't need calf definition to get him imagining what he'd find if he followed them all the way up her restaurant issued red leather skirt. That skirt made him understand why in China, the color red was lucky.

“I need another drink,” muttered Stan, draining the rest of his vodka tonic and using his empty glass to unsuccessfully signal the waitress as she turned around.

“Have you listened to a word I’ve said?” Gwen groaned.

Stan had been getting this question from Gwen a lot lately. Considering the answer in his head was usually no, combined with his growing fascination with other women’s body parts, Stan had no doubts this relationship, like all others, was doomed.

“Spain or Mexico?” he ventured, making no effort to come up with specifics.

Gwen smiled weakly.

“Absolutely right,” she replied. “If I had asked you five minutes ago.”

As the waitress neared their table, Stan extended his arm to block her way. After a moment of glaring at his arm as if she might tear it off, she reluctantly took his order.

Stan ordered another vodka tonic, inquiring about different brands of vodka in order to keep the waitress at their table longer. She didn’t have a clue which brands the bar stocked—maybe she was new.

The waitress didn’t show a glimmer of interest in Stan, not even the industry brand of flirting designed to rake in tips—a touch on the arm, a confidential smile. She was preoccupied with her big customer, the gray haired man in a suit sitting with his protégé. Stan wasn’t even sure if she’d remember his order.

“We’ve been dating a long time,” Gwen began, swirling her pink Cosmopolitan in a martini glass.

“Over a year, a record for me.”

“It’s been seven months.”

“Seven months? It seems longer.”

“Stan—”

“I meant it in a good way,” Stan recovered awkwardly. “Like we’ve known each other longer than our actual time together would indicate.”

Gwen wasn’t sure if watching Stan attempt to dig his way out of yet another hole should give her any hope. Maybe it was his way of trying to make things work. There was only one way to tell and that was to put herself on the line, risking all they shared together.

Gwen took a deep breath, exhaling serenely like they’d taught her in yoga class.

“Stan, I feel a certain amount of trust and compatibility between the two of us. We share a common language, you and I. A language of the heart.”

Stan wished he’d ordered his second drink earlier. How could he make a relationship work with a woman who talked about sharing a common language of the heart?

“I’m a modern woman, with modern sensibilities,” Gwen continued. “And now is our moment to grow, to wrestle demons from failed relationships in our past.”

She could wrestle demons all day but it didn’t make him want to stop staring at the waitress’ lucky colored ass any less.

“What I’m proposing may shock you.”

“You’re already scaring me, Gwen.”

“Scare you? I want to change you, not into someone you aren’t but into the man you could be.”

Stan blinked, “You lost me at change you.”

A vodka tonic with a damp napkin stuck to the bottom of the glass appeared in front of Stan. He knew better than to look the waitress in the eye, but a Mandarin character tattooed to her wrist got him imagining where else she might have tattoos.

Gwen flashed Stan a coy smile.

“I propose doing something to save our relationship that neither of us have done—unless you lied to me.”

Stan was suddenly more intrigued than he had been when he thought the conversation was veering toward engagement, marriage or some other prison.

“Wait, you aren’t talking about the M word?”

Gwen crinkled her forehead in confusion.

“Which M word?”

“Marriage?”

“How ironic you’d think I’d want to join that patriarchal institution.”

“If you weren’t talking about that M word...”

Stan leaned forward. This was thrilling, totally unexpected. It wasn’t the type of thing he was confident he’d have the ability to go through with, but it was shocking, just as she promised.

Stan felt the forbidden words escape his lips: “*Ménage a trois*?”

The moment he said it, Stan knew he’d guessed wrong.

Gwen froze, mouth half-open, hoping this was another one of his sarcastic jokes but something inside of her knew he was serious.

“Moving in together,” Gwen stated. “That’s the M word I meant.”

“That’s an M phrase.”

“So is *ménage a trois*!”

“Why would moving in together shock me?”

“You look shocked to me.”

“I am. Shockingly disappointed.”

Gwen drained the rest of her pink Cosmo and stood up, a bit wobbly.

Stan knew it was over. It was just a question of how bad his public humiliation would be. Their dinner plates had been cleared and Gwen never ate dessert, which ruled out cold fish dumped on his head or a banana crême pie smashed comically in his face. There was just his vodka tonic, which he was really looking

forward to drinking. A public restaurant break up seemed so ordinary and predictable, which to some extent described their past seven months together.

Stan discreetly slid the glass out of her reach as Gwen intentionally raised her voice bellowing, “I will not have sex with you and another woman. These legs will never spread for you again.”

Gwen stormed off, leaving many of the disgruntled patrons to assume her exit was due to bad service. Which, in a sense, it was.

At least Stan’s drink hadn’t gone to waste.

Stan began taking a sip, wondering where Gwen got that line about her legs never spreading again when his drink was intercepted by a hand marked with a small Mandarin tattoo. The waitress grabbed the glass from Stan, aggressively tossing the vodka tonic on the rocks directly at his crotch.

“You’re an Absolut asshole,” the waitress said, not at all worried about losing her job if Stan complained, which of course he wouldn’t.

Instead, Stan dug an ice cube out of his lap, crunched it in his mouth and spun in his chair to get a lovely departing view of the waitress’ ass in motion. When he turned back around, Stan noticed the gray haired businessman across the room glaring at him like he was ready to kill.



Stan could only imagine how satisfied Gwen felt when she realized they’d driven her car to the restaurant. He pictured the scene unfolding. Gwen storming outside the restaurant, possibly breaking into tears before reaching into her purse for a tissue and touching the keys to her car. Then she’d smile vindicated. Leave that bastard to find his own way home. Good for her.

Finding a way home wasn't as easy as it should have been. The cabs all had fares or else sped past without slowing down. Stan figured they were afraid to give a ride to a man who appeared to have pissed himself.

A walk would be nice. It had been years since Stan walked over the steel bridge he drove over everyday for his commute. He felt good being out in the open air, near the water, until a carload of teenagers roared past yelling "Jump you fucking faggot!" and laughing wildly.

Stan edged toward the nearest iron girder and leaned against it to hide himself from any other drive-by humiliations.

The more he thought about Gwen leaving, the happier Stan was to be single again, on the prowl. Why should he be forced to chain himself to one person? Forget serial monogamy, he'd find another girlfriend and get a mistress on the side. Or have a threesome. Hell, an orgy. One person forever? If animals didn't mate for life, why should we?

Another car parked on the opposite side of the bridge. This one sleek and elegant, the kind people notice on the freeway and wonder what the person driving a car like that does for a living. Definitely not any smartass teenagers on the other end of that tinted glass.

Three men got out. When Stan saw who they were, he almost pissed his pants for real this time. It was the gray head and protégé from the restaurant, along with another new guy built like a linebacker. Stan squeezed up against the iron girder, hoping they wouldn't see him. Why else would they be stopping in the middle of the bridge?

Then he noticed the protégé bleeding from his nose, all down his shirt. The linebacker held him by the collar and shoved him against the girder directly across the bridge from Stan, who had the impression this beating was just getting started.

The gray head from the restaurant reached into his jacket, pulled out a shiny silver gun and pressed the nose against the protégé's skull.

Just when Stan thought the bad part of his evening was over, things were starting to look a whole lot fucking worse.



As they drove to the restaurant, Perch Vardanian realized that in over twenty-five years in business, he still did not have a clever nickname. It was starting to bother him. Most associates referred to him simply as Perch. Even a catchy first name like Perch can't be considered a nickname if it's the one on your birth certificate. Perch also knew the universal law against creating your own nickname.

Perch began to worry he hadn't distinguished himself enough through his work.

"Listen, Kirkan," he said to his driver. "Do you think it's weird I don't have a nickname?"

Kirkan sighed, not eager to have this conversation. He was driving the car—the company car, as Perch liked to call it—to some trendy restaurant. Kirkan had other things pressing on his mind.

"You said tonight someone's going to die?"

"Someone I don't trust," Perch said. "But you didn't answer my question."

"You don't want a nickname," replied Kirkan. "I knew a guy from grade school named Coke Bottle Joe."

"Not a bad nickname."

"He got caught with his pecker in a Coke bottle."

Perch chuckled.

"What was he trying to do, drink it through his meatstraw?"

Perch chuckled again at his own joke.

Kirkan said, “And another girl was Tuna Tammy. Took some Chicken of the Sea and had her cat—”

“I’ve heard that one before. That’s one of those urban legends, isn’t it?”

“Only Tammy knows.”

“And the cat’s got her tongue?”

Perch slugged Kirkan in the arm. He was on fire tonight.

“But seriously,” Kirkan said. “About this guy we’re going to kill? Who is he?”

“Maybe I’m not ruthless enough,” Perch continued. “In business terms, they call it competitive differentiation.”

“You call killing some guy you don’t trust competitive differentiation?”

Perch thought it over. “I call it self-preservation.”

At the restaurant, they got a table with a fine looking Chinese waitress serving drinks. She seemed to make Kirkan nervous, like she was an old girlfriend or something. Perch took note.

Perch Vardanian had only known this kid Kirkan a couple years, but seeing as how he was a fellow Armenian trying to make a better life for himself, Perch was willing to help out. Kirkan was a good multi-tasker, a skill Perch knew was highly regarded in the business world. Kirkan helped with everything from driving the car, laundering money, and running shipments out to the dealers. He witnessed all facets of the business, had quite an interest in how it all worked.

“You’ve risen fast in my organization,” Perch said. “You’ve paid attention to operational issues. You know the business front to back.”

Kirkan shrugged, biting the red plastic straw from his drink.

Perch said, “That’s a lot of important information floating around in your head.”

Some lady started making a fuss a few tables away. Perch glanced around, alert to everything else going on in the restaurant

while this lady told her boyfriend off. It's easy to create a distraction by staging a couple arguing and, while you're watching, someone fires point blank in the back of your skull.

Perch took a good hard look at this guy whose girlfriend stormed out of the restaurant. If there wasn't all this business going on tonight, he'd go over there and bust the guy's nose. Just when he thought, fuck it, he'd go bust the guy's nose anyway, Perch saw the imposing figure of Mad Dog Moogalian coming through the doorway.

Mad Dog Moogalian. Former Greco-Roman wrestler for the USSR Olympic team back when Armenia was part of the Soviet Union. Now he was a knee-capper and dependable hit man.

Kirkan saw him coming, started getting nervous.

"Mad Dog's coming with us?"

Perch grinned at him.

"Like I was saying," Perch said. "You know the business front to end. And now you're going to see firsthand the part Mad Dog takes care of."



All three got in the car: Perch in back, Mad Dog driving and Kirkan riding shotgun.

As they drove, Perch watched Kirkan's jaw slide side to side. Nervous.

"Who is this guy anyway?" Kirkan asked casually. "What'd he do that we have to kill him?"

"Doesn't matter," Mad Dog grunted.

"For you, it probably doesn't. Me, I'm engaged in my work, I want to know a little something about the life I'm going to end."

"I wanted it to be a surprise," Perch said. "But why prolong the joy any longer?"

Perch nodded to Mad Dog.

Mad Dog cracked Kirkan across the nose, blood poured down his shirt.

“It’s not that you know too much,” Perch explained. “It’s that you’re telling the wrong people.”

“What’re you talking about?” Kirkan asked.

Perch wasn’t going to have this conversation. He told Mad Dog to stop, even though they were in the middle of a bridge. Perch helped Mad Dog drag Kirkan out of the car and shoved him against the side of the bridge.

“You know Jack Welch?” Perch asked Kirkan. “Let me tell you what Jack Welch, CEO of General Electric once said. He said, and I’m paraphrasing here, he said he’s a gardener giving water and nourishment to his top people. But sometimes he has to pull out some weeds.”

Perch reached into his jacket and pulled out a semi-automatic 9mm.

“That’s all I’m doing. Whacking weeds.”



Stan saw the gun raised followed by a loud pop. A red mist exited the back of the protégé’s head as his body went limp. The big linebacker guy lifted the body off the concrete and tossed it over the side of the bridge like he was tossing a bag of garbage in a dumpster.

Apparently this protégé wasn’t corporate material.

Mad Dog wiped his hands on his pants, looking down at the blood on his shirt.

“You should have let me whack him,” he said.

“I never get to whack anyone anymore,” Perch complained.

“What is the word you use? Micromanage? When you kill someone, you’re micromanaging me.”

“You’re right,” Perch admitted. “A good leader knows how to delegate.”

Perch Vardanian chucked his weapon into the river before climbing back in the car. Mad Dog started to ease into the driver’s seat, then stopped, almost like he was sniffing the air to pick up a scent.

Stan did his best to remain invisible.

After Mad Dog ducked into the car, Stan exhaled.

Mad Dog Moogalian emerged from the car with the gun in his outstretched arm firing off rounds as he closed distance on Stan. This was it, Stan thought. Time to die.

Two tons of black steel came screeching to a halt between Stan and Mad Dog. Before the tires on the SUV stopped smoking, the doors facing Mad Dog exploded open and a group of agents in Kevlar vests shouted to drop your weapon, drop your weapon. A woman hopped out, easy to notice because she was wearing a bullet proof vest like everyone else, but the only one wearing a red leather skirt.

Stan practically fainted when he saw the size of the gun in the same hand that had recently thrown a vodka tonic in his lap. The waitress wasted no time aiming her chrome plated .357 at him, ordering him to put his hands where she could see them.

“Where’s our man?” she yelled.

Stan pointed across the bridge.

“Hands on your head,” she screamed. “Where’s our man?”

Another Suburban skidded to a stop shining a light everywhere.

“In the water.” It was all he could think of saying.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

A helicopter swooped overhead, shining a spotlight on the river.

If Stan had a fantasy about the waitress involving handcuffs, it wasn’t that she’d be slapping plastic band handcuffs on his wrists,

saying he was coming in for questioning and his prison sentence might be reduced if he cooperated.

Stan saw an identification badge hanging on the side of her red skirt, tried catching her name.

“I was just going for a walk,” he blurted out.

The waitress holstered her gun, saying, “Someone just killed a federal agent and you’re either an accomplice or an eye witness. Either way, I’d say your options are pretty fucking limited.”