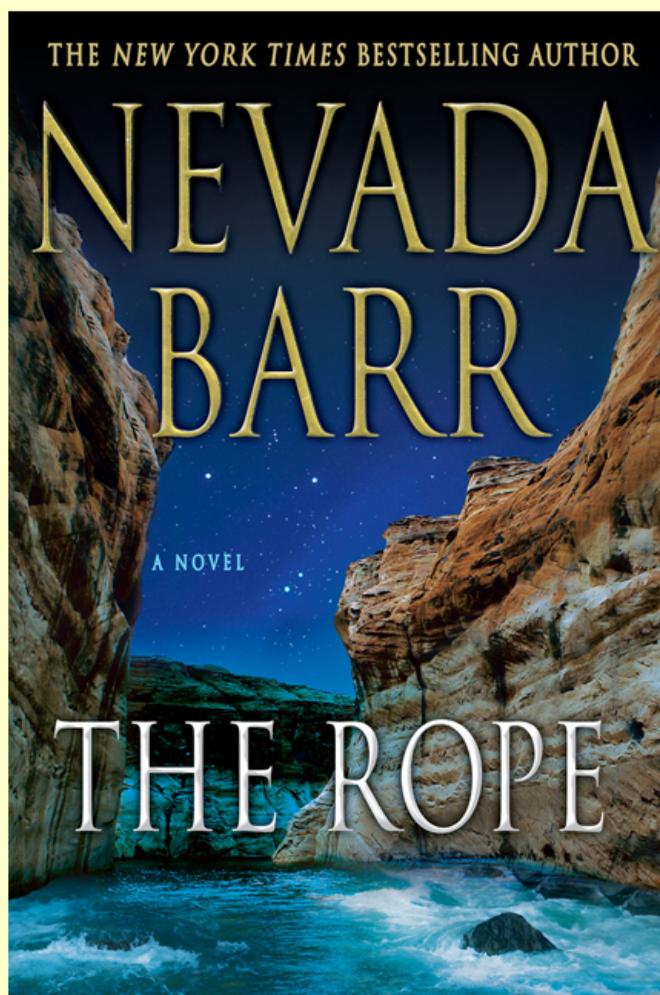


READ IT FIRST



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ONE

Regis Candor took a swig of his beer and watched his neighbor, Jenny Gorman. She was sitting on the other picnic table, her feet on the bench, smoking a cigarette as Gilbert and Dennis swaggered into the square of grass and trees fenced in by seasonal housing. Park employee housing at the Rope was set out in two neat quads, two-bedroom duplexes on each of the sides, surrounding squares of defiantly green grass with four locust trees only slightly taller than Regis and not yet as big around as his wrist.

One square was for NPS seasonals, the other for concessions workers, kids that pumped fuel and sucked crap out of the houseboats and made Dangling Dogs at the Dangling Rope Marina snack bar. The duplexes didn't blend into the red/roan/rust/buff motif of Lake Powell. They were painted the same dead gray as the marina. Regis figured maintenance got a good deal on gray paint.

Gil and Dennis were college boys from Pennsylvania who'd come to Lake Powell to work on their tans and get laid. When they weren't absorbed in one of those pastimes—or both simultaneously, if Dennis was as much of an “outdoorsman” as he claimed—they did maintenance work.

Regis watched them flop bonelessly down, Gilbert next to Jenny, Dennis at her feet, arms thrown along the table. Both were covered in dust and sweat and, no doubt, wouldn't shower until Ms. Gorman had every opportunity to be impressed with their machismo.

"Hey, guys," she said, blowing out a lungful of smoke.

"Hey," they answered in unison. Heckle and Jeckle, clowns.

Jenny Gorman looked like the Girl Next Door every boy wishes lived next door: dark wavy hair, big hazel eyes, a well-cut mouth, and enormous tits. Jenny was used to being ogled, Regis guessed. In high school she must have had to wave "Hi" at breast level when she met guys. That's where they would have been looking. Gil and Dennis still were. Regis didn't think the breasis were implants. Plastic never moved like real flesh and blood.

Gorman didn't flaunt her body, but he'd seen her flash a little cleavage to get some idiot to fall off his water skis or drive his boat into the dock. Served the fools right, he thought, and took another pull on his Dos Equis.

Evenings at Dangling Rope were Regis's favorite part of his job. It was as close to being a kid at camp as a grown man could get and not be arrested. His peers—permanent park employees—whined too much about pay, promotion, retirement. Seasonals, no matter what their age, exuded a sense of childlike freedom, as if they were actors in an old movie and any day now they were going to get their big break. Being around seasonals made him feel like a wise old man, though he'd not yet turned thirty.

Thirty was year after next. He pushed that thought away. Forty wasn't the new thirty, and thirty was the start of forty. Forty was the start of skin sagging, breasts sagging, scrotums sagging, lines and fat and receding hair. Thirty had one upside; at thirty he'd be a rich man. If he fulfilled all the old horror's requirements.

Butt first, Bethy, his wife of at least two more years, came out of their side of the duplex, a casserole dish in her oven-mitted hands. Hash brown casserole, all cheese and butter and potatoes. Four years of marriage and

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his wife's bottom was spreading big-time. To be fair, the weight gain wasn't entirely her fault, but Regis wasn't in the mood to be fair.

When they met she was a seasonal interpreter at Rainbow Bridge. She'd been thin and athletic in those days, canyoneering on her days off. Regis had loved watching her cute little behind bobbing ahead of him in the slots, and he'd needed a wife, so he'd followed that taut, flexing little gluteus maximus right to the altar.

Bethy's charm—other than the tight ass and the convenience—was the gypsy lifestyle she promoted that summer, the sense of a life full of possibilities. The fantasy Bethy. As soon as she had the ring on her finger she changed back to the real Bethy. Two more years, Regis told himself. Two more years and a lot more drugs.

"Hash brown casserole!" Gil ejaculated. Food excited him almost as much as Jenny's chest.

"Goes right to your hips," Regis said, glancing at his wife's rear end as she bent over to set the hot dish on the table. Gil laughed. Gorman shot him an evil look.

Bethy fled back inside. Regis looked at the screen door and considered going in to make sure she was okay. There was no point. What was "okay" for Bethy?

Jenny stubbed out her smoke and tucked the butt into a ziplock bag she'd taken from the pocket of her shorts. Gil Morraine took the opportunity to inch closer. Regis had read Heckle and Jeckle's personnel files. Ciphers. Dicks for brains and beer for spiritual sustenance.

Both had made a play for Ms. Gorman. Jenny was thirty-three to their twenty-one-going-on-thirteen. Big tits were evidently equalizers on the age issue for these boys. When Jenny blew them off—figuratively, not literally—they'd started a rumor she was gay.

Regis smiled into the neck of his bottle. The fools never did catch on. Jenny *was* gay, queer as a three-dollar bill. She just didn't advertise it. The Park Service was seriously homophobic. Regis had discovered her sexual

preferences when he'd gone into her duplex to check on a maintenance report and noticed a letter. "Pornographic" didn't do it justice; it would have won a *Penthouse* Letter of the Week competition.

The letter had been signed "Cindy."

Jenny started rolling another cigarette.

"Oooh, roll your own, tough mama," Dennis said.

"Tougher than you, weenie boy," Gilbert said good-naturedly. Dennis laughed. Regis guessed there was a private joke regarding "weenie boy." He had no desire to be let in on it. Neither, apparently, did Jenny.

She grinned past Gil at Regis, winked, licked the paper, and sealed the tobacco in. The lick was longer than it needed to be and ran lovingly the length of the cigarette. Heckle and Jeckle were entranced.

Dennis took the matches from her hand to light the cigarette. After he'd wasted three without getting a flame he could keep alive in the faint breeze off the lake, Jenny took them back. "Nice try, Casanova." She lit her cigarette.

"I'm off the next two days," Gil said, his tone suggesting this news would be catnip to any kitten. "Got a couple of new videos. How about you bring the popcorn?"

"I thought you'd get enough of this place. I figured you for town on lieu days." Smoke trickled out with the words.

"You call Page, Arizona, a *town*? Come back to civilization with us and we'll show you a *town*." Dennis waggled his eyebrows as if he'd said something wildly suggestive.

"King of the single entendre," Regis said. Jenny laughed. Heckle and Jeckle looked at Regis as if noticing him for the first time. They probably were, hidden as he was behind Jenny's glorious tatas.

"Hey!" Gilbert said. "I almost know what that means. I think you've been insulted, Dennis. You going to take that *lying down*?"

A cue line for the comedy to continue. Tired of the routine, Regis stared coldly at Dennis, finding his eyes in the fading dusk. If Dennis had

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planned on saying something, he thought better of it. Dennis was a coward. Regis could sniff out cowardice like a truffle hound sniffing out morels.

Dennis changed the subject. "I hear you drove that old black pigeon back to New York's Great White Way," he said to Jenny.

This interested Regis. The "old black pigeon" was Anna Pigeon, Jenny's housemate and assistant pooper-scooper for the water quality program. Anna fascinated him. A woman of dark mystery, he mocked himself.

"Looks that way," Jenny said, sounding a little sad. "By the by, Anna's thirty-five. I asked. I'm thirty-three. If you think that's old, get your sweet cheeks off my picnic table."

"Thirty-five's a lot older than thirty-three," Dennis insisted, affronted that a woman with Jenny's dual charms should put herself in the same boat with a skinny creature who dressed all in black and had eyes that let nothing in and very little out.

In the ten days Anna Pigeon had been at Dangling Rope, Regis had tried to get to know her. He doubted he'd have succeeded if they'd been stranded together on a desert island for twenty years. She didn't join the evening potlucks, hang out on her porch, or do the usual socializing. When she wasn't camped on a beach working with the Fecal Queen, she stayed in her room. With her inky clothes and slender silhouette, Ms. Pigeon was a flicker of darkness glimpsed from the corner of the eye. She scarcely disturbed the air when she moved, barely cast a shadow in the sun. Gone, her presence was greater than it had been when she'd glided soundlessly in and out of the housing compound.

Intrigued by her elusiveness, Regis turned on the charm—and, if he did say so himself, when he wanted to, he could charm the paint off a wall. Flattery bounced off of her. Kindly concern annoyed her. Banter bored her. His best trick, showing deep sincere interest, was met with a level stare that suggested sincerity wasn't his best trick after all. When he'd tried plying Anna Pigeon with treats he told his wife to cook, Bethy decided to rise out of her rabbit skin and get nasty about his attentions to another woman.

“Couldn’t take it out here in the wide open and ran back to the city,” Gilbert said, stretching his arm along the table, perilously close to Jenny’s thigh. Regis watched her look at the large dirty paw, and for a gleeful second he thought she was going to tap her ash there. Evidently she was feeling generous. She tapped it on the grass.

“That woman was freaky. For the first week I thought she was a deaf mute. My folks’ Labrador retriever talks more than she did. It’s like a hundred and ten degrees and she’s dressed for a funeral. And what was with the pasty white face?”

“All New Yorkers wear black and have pasty white faces,” Jenny said.

“Not the ones with houses in the Hamptons,” Dennis insisted.

“Every summer one or two seasonals go AWOL,” Regis said. “A bathtub full of Jet Skis doesn’t fit a tree hugger’s fantasy. They come thinking Ed Abbey and *Desert Solitaire* and find beer cans and party boats.”

“Maybe she was kidnapped,” Dennis said with a leer. “Kept for a sex slave.”

Regis inhaled a sip of beer and went into a fit of coughing. Gil came over to pound him on the back, thought better of it, and sat down again. “That’s a thought worthy of your moral rectitude,” Regis managed when he got enough air to speak.

“Dennis ain’t got no rectitude,” Gil said with a laugh.

“If she was kidnapped she took her stuff with her,” Jenny said. “One black bag with black clothes, one set of sheets, one towel, and one toothbrush. Ms. Pigeon traveled light.”

Kidnapping. Anna Pigeon didn’t have much in the way of concerned others, Regis knew. Under “next of kin” on her application form she’d listed a sister in New York. Under “address” she’d written “none.” Unless the sister was loaded, the posited kidnap was for something other than money.

Given the choice, Regis wouldn’t have hired Anna. A cursory background check showed no wants, no warrants, no living relatives but the sister. It also showed no driver’s license, no passport, and way too much

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education. Before he'd even met her, Regis guessed she was running from something: drug addiction, creditors, an abusive husband—something. Glen Canyon didn't need any more action along those lines.

George Fetterman, Regis's boss, wanted her because he had some half-baked notion of starting a living history program and wanted a theater type. The park had other plans and assigned her to Jenny to help with the water quality program. Shit detail, literally.

"Kidnapping a seasonal would be the perfect crime," Gil said. "Seasonals are like Kleenex—one gets snotty, toss it out and grab another one. Out here in the boondocks, no phone, no nothing, who'd notice?"

"When the season was over and they didn't show up for school somebody would," Dennis said.

"Yeah, but what if you were too old for school, dickhead? Not everybody still goes to school in the fall."

The perfect crime. Who hadn't thought about that? The way for a crime to be perfect would be if nobody noticed, if nobody bothered to look for the criminal because nobody knew there had been a crime. Maybe Dennis wasn't as stupid as Regis thought. Seasonal employees came from all over the country. Many were young, unattached, seldom called home even when they were stationed near a phone. Nobody but the rangers they worked with would notice they were AWOL for days, weeks, even months.

The perfect victims for the perfect crime. The crime had to be done alone and enjoyed alone, no telling, no boasting, no hinting. Once two people were involved in anything it ceased to be perfect. Two people couldn't keep a secret. Two people would turn against each other.

Regis was willing to bet there wasn't a soul alive who wouldn't steal or rig the lottery, cheat on their taxes, or cheat on their wives if they knew, for a fact, no one would ever suspect. Husbands would kill wives. Kids would off rich parents. Billy the Kid wannabes would pop their neighbors

just to see what it felt like. Dear old Dad would run over the family dog so he wouldn't have to pick up its shit.

Mother Teresa would have committed the perfect crime if she'd had a chance.

The catch was, nothing is perfect.