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Bestselling author of *THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY*

A painting of a dense forest with a path leading into the distance. The path is a light brown color, winding through the dark green and blue foliage. In the distance, two small figures are visible on the path. The overall mood is mysterious and romantic.

SLOW WALTZ IN CEDAR BEND

A NOVEL

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Publisher's Note: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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For high plumage and southern winds.

*S*LOW WALTZ
IN CEDAR BEND

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RJW

*Cedar Falls, Iowa
January 28, 1993*

One

The *Trivandrum Mail* was on time. It came out of the jungle and pounded into Villupuram Junction at 3:18 on a sweltry afternoon in south India. When the whistle first sounded far and deep in the countryside, people began pressing toward the edge of the station platform. What could not walk was carried or helped along—bedrolls and market baskets, babies and old people.

Michael Tillman got to his feet from where he'd been leaning against a sooty brick wall and slung a tan knapsack over his left shoulder. A hundred people were trying to get off the train. Twice that many were simultaneously trying to get on, like two rivers flowing in opposite directions. You pushed or were left behind. A pregnant woman staggered in the crush, and Michael took her arm, got her up the steps,

and swung himself into the second-class car as the train moved out.

Wheels turning, engine pulling hard, running at forty miles an hour through the edge of Villupuram. No place to sit, hardly a place to stand. Hanging on to the overhead luggage rack with one hand as the train curved out of brown hills and into green rice country, Michael slid the picture of Jellie Braden from his breast pocket, looked at it, reminding himself again of why he was doing this.

Bizarre. Strange. All of that. This curious rainbow of man and knapsack out of Iowa and into the belly of India in search of a woman. Jellie Braden . . . Jellie . . . belonging to another. But Michael Tillman wanted her. Wanted her more than his next breath, wanted her enough to travel the world looking for her. He kept thinking this whole affair was like songs you used to hear on late night radio.

How does it all begin? Who knows. And why? Same answer. The old Darwinian shuffle. Something primal, something way back and far down. Something whispering deep in the bones or genes, "That one." So it happened: a kitchen door in Iowa opened and likewise did Michael Tillman when Jellie walked through it in her fortieth year.

The dean's autumn reception for new faculty in 1980, that's when it was. Just back from India after his second Fulbright there and still jet-lagged, Michael slouched against the dean's refrigerator, tugging on his second beer of the afternoon. He looked past faces looking at him or what they took to be him and answered tedious questions about India, suffering the

white noise of academic chatter in the spaces around him.

An accountant's wife had taken over the India interrogation. Michael gave her 38.7 percent of his attention, planning escape routes and taking a long-slow swallow of beer while she spoke.

"Didn't the poverty just bother you horribly?"

"What poverty?" He was thinking about Joseph Conrad now, being half way through *Heart of Darkness* on his third reading of it.

"In India. It must be awful."

"No. I was in the south, and the people looked pretty well fed to me. You've been watching those television shows that concentrate on good Catholic sisters hobbling around in the guts of Calcutta." She jumped a little when he said "guts," as if it were a word she hadn't heard before or maybe didn't like to think about.

"Did you see any cobras?"

"Yes, the snake charmer in the marketplace had one in a basket. The snake's mouth was sewn shut to keep it from doing any damage."

"How did it eat?"

"It didn't. It eventually dies. Then the snake man goes out and finds another one and sews its mouth shut, too. That's the way it works."

"My God, that's cruel, even though I abhor snakes."

"Yeah, working conditions have gone downhill all over. On the other hand, it's pretty much like the university. We just use heavier thread, that's all."

The accountant's wife blinked at him in the way

some people do when they encounter lunacy and went on. "Did you see any of those naked men with white paint or whatever on their bodies? Isn't that strange?"

"No, I didn't see any. They're mostly up north, I guess. Benares, or Varanasi as they call it now, places like that. Whether it's strange or not, I can't say, depends on your worldview and career plans, I suppose."

"Jellie Braden's been to India, you know." The senior man in comparative economics leapfrogged the accountant's wife and had Michael's attention.

"Who?"

"Jim Braden's wife. He's the new guy in economics we hired away from Indiana." Michael heard a car door shutting in the driveway. The senior man turned and looked out the window. "Oh, here they come now. They're a delightful couple."

Braden? Braden . . . Braden . . . Braden? Ah, yes, Jim Braden. He'd interviewed him six months ago before going to India. Never met his wife. She'd been out with a realtor looking at housing during their recruiting visit. Michael felt like writing "Standard issue, greater than or equal to earnest and boring" on the evaluation form. But he didn't and wrote instead, "Jim Braden is a perfect fit," which amounted to the same thing.

James Lee Braden III came into the dean's kitchen, smiling, shaking hands, being introduced. Jellie Braden smiled, too, in her pale blue suit with a fitted jacket that came to just over her hips and a skirt reaching to midcalf, medium-heeled black boots below the hem. Subtle Jellie Braden.

But not subtle enough. It was all there. The cool

patrician face coming only from an upper-shelf gene pool, the night-black hair and good skin. A body the old French called *rondeur*, polite writers would call superb, and flesh magazines would lose control over. Gray eyes coming at you like an arrow in flight and a confidence with men indicating she knew what they could and could not do. Where she had learned those easy truths wasn't clear at first, but you didn't have to be around Jimmy Braden very long to know it wasn't from him.

The faculty and assorted others with short attention spans laid down India and took up repertoire number two, another set of standard questions. This time with the Bradens, leaving Michael slouched there against the fridge by himself, watching Jellie.

"How do you like Cedar Bend?"

"Are you all moved in now?"

"What courses are you teaching, Jim?"

"Jellie—what an *interesting* name."

The dean's wife came over. "Hello, Michael."

"Hi, Carolyn, what's up?" He and Carolyn had always got along well even though the ol' deanaroo secretly wished Michael would pack it up and go somewhere else, anywhere. He occupied a high salary line, mainly because he'd been at the university fifteen years, and Arthur Wilcox would have preferred something a little less expensive and a lot more manageable sitting in Michael's office.

But Carolyn generally looked him up at these affairs, and they'd talk a bit. The decline of romance was one of their favorite subjects. A few years earlier she'd gotten acceptably drunk at the Christmas bash and said, "Michael, you've got balls. The rest of 'em

are eunuchs.” He’d put his arms around her and whispered in her ear, “Merry Christmas, Carolyn.” Over her shoulder Michael had seen the chairperson of accounting watching them. The Chair was holding a glass of nonalcoholic punch and had a green star pinned to his lapel with “Hi! I’m Larry—Happy Holidays” printed on it in red felt-tip. Michael had grinned at him.

For a while he’d called Carolyn “Deanette.” She’d liked it well enough to have a T-shirt made up with that handle printed on the front and had worn it to the fall picnic where the faculty was supposed to play volleyball and get to know one another better. Arthur-the-dean had taken offense and wouldn’t let her wear the shirt after that.

When she’d told Michael about the T-shirt ban, he’d said “Screw ’im.”

Carolyn had laughed. “Fat chance. Arthur’s Victorian to the core, all bundled up.” When he’d heard that, Michael’s faith in things working out all right had died another small death. Carolyn was fifty-three but still had fire in her belly, quite a lot of it, he suspected. And he thought it was a damn shame, not to mention the waste of a good woman. How the hell does it happen, he wondered, these mistakes in the matching?

He and Carolyn talked a few minutes. Michael was looking past her, looking at the back of Jellie Braden’s head and wondering if her hair was as thick as it seemed to be, wondering how it would feel to grab a big handful of it and bend her over the dean’s kitchen table right then and there. He somehow had

a feeling she might laugh and bend willingly if he tried it.

Carolyn Wilcox followed the point of Michael's eyes and said, "Have you met Jellie Braden yet?"

"No, I haven't."

The deanette reached over and tugged on Jellie's sleeve, rescuing her from the fumes of vapidty in which she was swirling. Deans' wives are allowed to do that when they feel like it, and they do it regularly, leaving a small semicircle of people holding glasses in their hands and looking stupid as the object of their focus is torn away. It's a shot they ought to put in the yearbook.

Jellie Braden turned around. "Jellie, I'd like you to meet Michael Tillman. If there's anything incorrigible about this faculty, it's Michael. In fact, he's probably sole owner of that property."

Jellie held out her hand, and he took it. "What makes you incorrigible, Dr. Tillman?"

"Just Michael, if it's okay with you. I don't like titles." He grinned a little when he said it. She smiled at the casual way he discarded something it took him nine years in various medieval institutions to acquire. "Aside from that, I happen to believe I'm highly corrigible, it's only Carolyn and the rest who think otherwise."

Carolyn patted his arm and drifted away. Jellie Braden looked at him. "I recall Jimmy mentioning you when we were here for his interviews. Somebody on the faculty told him you were eccentric or something like that."

"Jaded, maybe. A lot of people mistake that for eccentricity."

"If I remember correctly, he came back from the interviews and said you're a regular idea factory. He brought it up again the other day and said he was looking forward to working with you. That doesn't sound very jaded to me."

Michael felt a little tight in the chest and needed breathing space. "Word is you've spent time in India."

"Yes, I have." As she spoke, he watched the gray eyes shift up and to the right, to another place, the way people do when they go on time-share, go somewhere else for a while. The way he did, often.

India. The idea of it always brought smells and glinting images rushing back to her for an instant, always the same smells and images—jasmine on Bengali night winds, dark hands across her breasts and along the curve of her back, the scent of a man as he pulled himself up and into her. And his words in those soft and transient moments,

. . . did I ever play this song before?
Not in any lifetime I remember.
. . . will I ever play this song again?
Not in any lifetime yet to come.

"I just got in from there," Michael said.

"First trip?" She came back from wherever she'd been and turned to set her glass on the kitchen table.

"Second. I was there in 1976, also."

"You must like it." She smiled and tilted her

head. "I noticed the cigarette bulge in your shirt pocket. Is smoking allowed here?"

"Forget it. We can go outside and stomp 'em out on the dean's driveway, though. That pisses him off, so I usually do it at least once when I'm over here."

Someone with less a sense of herself than Jellie Braden would have sideslipped away from the invitation. Bad form and all that, particularly for the wife of a new faculty member. But Jellie tilted her head toward the door and said, "Let's do it." The kitchen was almost empty, since the dean was holding forth in his parlor, and attendance was required unless you had a note from your doctor.

They sat on the dean's back steps, where she bummed a cigarette from him. He asked, "When were you in India, and for how long?"

"Some time back. I spent three years there."

She was being casually imprecise, and he wondered about that. "What part?"

"Southeast, mostly. Pondicherry."

"I've heard of it, never been there. Old French city, isn't it?"

"Yes." She blew smoke out across the dean's azaleas and didn't say anything else.

"Like it?" he asked. "Dumb question. Must have if you stayed three years."

"It was up and down. Overall, pretty good. I went to do some work for my master's thesis in anthropology and kind of got caught up in India in general. Never finished the paper."

"That happens. India pretty much splits people into two categories, you love it or you can't stand it. I'm in the former group."

They were sitting only about a foot apart, and she looked over at him. "So am I."

"How'd you meet, you and Jim?"

"After I came back from India I wanted to hang around Bloomington even though I wasn't in school. I wangled a job as secretary in the economics department. Jimmy was a junior professor, just out of graduate school with his bright, shiny degree. He always was polite to me and wore expensive suits, wrote articles on esoteric topics I didn't understand but which I dutifully typed. I was pretty much lost and wandering back then. When he asked me to marry him, I couldn't think of any good reason not to, so I said yes."

Michael listened to what she said and how she said it. She married Jim Braden because she couldn't think of reasons not to. That was a strange way of putting it. Close to her like this, gray eyes steady on his, he upgraded his earlier idea about putting her on the dean's kitchen table. The new plan involved stripping her naked, taking off his own clothes, and flying in that shimmering state of affairs all the way to the Seychelles, first class. Upon arrival it would be a headlong and forever plunge into lubricious nirvana. He was quite certain Jellie Braden would look better than wonderful under a jungle waterfall with a red hibiscus in her hair.

"How long ago was that, when you got married?" As soon as he asked, a voice in his head groaned, "You dumb ass, Tillman, why'd you say that? It's more than you need to know and too damned forward—you just met the woman." He stood up and stomped out his cigarette on the dean's

driveway. Anyplace else he field-stripped them and stuck the butts in his pocket, but not in the dean's driveway. Michael was like an old dog there, staking out his territory, making sure he left a little something behind for Arthur to sniff.

She walked over to her car and put hers out in the ashtray. "Jimmy'll complain like crazy when he sees that. He won't let me smoke at home when he's there. I'll get a lecture on our way out of here, and he'll spray the car with air freshener two minutes after we hit the driveway." She looked at him and chewed lightly on her lower lip. "Jimmy and I have been married ten years. I suppose we better go inside."

He started pulling off his tie. "You go ahead. I'm going back to my apartment and snuggle down with Joseph Conrad."

"Nice meeting you," Jellie Braden said.

"Same here. See you around."

She smiled. "Sure."

And Michael thought of a waterfall in the Seychelles that would be just perfect. Fifteen months later he rode the *Trivandrum Mail* into south India, toward places he'd never been, looking for her.