

The Three Dollar Phoenix

By W. Sautter

Copyright Sautter 2010

Chapter 1

Newark, New Jersey - 1979

"Holy Christ! I haven't seen you in seven years. How the hell are you doing?"

Ed hadn't spoken to Charlie since; he had to think now, 1972. Yes, and it was June 1972 to be exact. Charlie probably didn't even remember it. He was so drunk that he could just about talk, much less remember. That was the day the Raiders drafted him.

"I read about you being traded to the Giants" said Ed.

"I thought the only things you'd be reading by now would be x-rays and stock reports" Charlie quipped.

Ed drifted back to the days when dreams of success were a common bond between him and Charlie. They had spent many nights at Terry's Tavern rehearsing the conversations they would have after Charlie made the Pros and Ed got his M.D. It seemed to Ed that he knew exactly what would be said next. It had all been said before, many years ago at Terry's. The next line would be about meeting to talk over the old days that is if Ed remembered the script right.

"How about going out for a drink now that I'm in town and we'll talk about old times" Charlie said.

"Somehow I thought you were going to say that" replied Ed.

"How about I meet you at Finnegan's Rainbow" said Ed.

"Tomorrow night okay? Around nine?" he added.

"Sounds good to me" said Charlie.

"We've got a lot of talking to do after seven years."

Ed proceeded to give Charlie directions to the place. As Ed put down the receiver, he flashed back to all the sights and sounds of his years at Penn State. He and Charlie had some good times alright. They both pledged Kappa Delta Chi. How Ed got into that frat still puzzled him. He was a pretty good athlete but not a jock. Maybe it was because he was a real good handball player. In four years nobody ever beat him, not even All American Charlie Rode. Handball had made him a lot of friends and kept him in

drinking money for four years at State. It was joked that the reason he was asked to pledge Kappa was so the brothers could get the bill of sales back for their markers from him.

“How did I first get friendly with Charlie anyway?” Ed mused to himself.

“I think it was because of old Doc Stevens. That bastard could give a mean chemistry test. I saved Charlie’s ass a couple of times in that course. That was when we first began to hang around together” thought Ed.

Charlie wasn’t dumb. It was all the football that kept him away from the books. I guess it paid off for him though because he went to the Pros like he said he would.

The next night Ed drove to Finnegan’s. As his lights flashed across the cars in the parking lot he saw the license plate - ALL PRO on a blue BMW.

“That’s probably Charlie’s car” he thought. Ed parked his car and walked into Finnegan’s. It was a large, dimly lit room. Charlie was sitting at the far end of the bar. Ed saw him immediately,

How could anyone miss Charlie? Two hundred and forty-five pounds takes up a lot of space. Charlie looked up and caught Ed’s eye. With that he instantaneously jumped to his feet and let out his old cowboy holler.

The dozen or so customers sitting at the bar straightened up as if their stools had been electrified. Ed felt Charlie’s powerful grasp as they shook hands.

“You haven’t changed a bit” exclaimed Charlie, “Only a little uglier.”

“You look good yourself you two ton tub of shit” said Ed in reply.

As the evening wore on Ed and Charlie felt the old bonds of friendship regrow. Their conversation was a collage of old memories and old stories. It was as if time had been suspended for the past seven years.

“Last call for alcohol” shouted the bartender.

Ed glanced at his watch. Two A.M. already! It seemed like the evening had just begun but over two hours had passed and the bartender was closing up.

Give me a call tomorrow, afternoon that is, and I’ll show you around “said Ed as they walked out into the parking lot.

“I’ve been here two dozen times but only to play and run so to speak. Now that I’m going to be living here it would help to know where I’m going” replied Charlie.

“I’ll call you about two or three” Ed said as they left the bar.

Ed and Charlie saw each other several times during the following weeks in between Charlie’s practice sessions and Ed’s hours at the clinic. It began to seem almost like old times all over again.

The huge grey gothic topped by dozens of fluttering red and blue flags rose out of the swamp plain. A large blue banner hung from its wall. It read "METRO STADIUM HOME OF THE GIANTS." It waved in a light breeze over the meadows. The bright afternoon sunlight gave it a neon-like appearance as its brilliant colors gently fluttered. Ed pulled into the huge, almost empty parking lot.

He shut off the car and sat motionless for a moment. He had been here hundreds of times before but it was many years ago, before the stadium was built. When he was a kid all this was nothing but marshes-marshes and garbage. Thousands of sea gulls and rats lived here, all eager to attend the daily banquets brought to them by the convoy of garbage trucks moving continuously in and out of the meadows. The air was heavy with the foul odor of decaying refuse. Even now, an occasional unfavorable wind brought unpleasant reminders of the past from the yet unimproved areas of the swamp lands.

As a boy Ed had been on many a treasure hunt here. He could still hear his mother's screams as he entered the house after one of those expeditions. He would have to take off his clothes on the outside porch and put them in a plastic bag to contain the gagging smell before he entered. After he was showered and changed she would then give him a dollar and send him to the launder mat to wash them. She wouldn't even allow them in her own washing machine for fear that the vile odor would contaminate all of her future washings.

Well, all that is gone now, the marshes, the garbage and most of the time the smell. Not so much as an empty beer bottle was left in view. It's was all buried below where he was now standing waiting for the year five thousand and be discovered as priceless artifacts found by some lucky archaeologist. For a moment the whole thing, the metamorphosis of a garbage dump into a football stadium seemed almost surrealistic to him.

Ed awoke from his momentary trance, and exited the car. He walked towards a waiting security guard at the main gate. He instinctively reached for his wallet and withdrew the pass Charley had given him. As he entered the mammoth building, he could hear the echo of a callisthenic cadence resounding through the thousands of rows of empty seats. He walked in the direction of its source. He rounded the final turn of the maze he had been following and walked into the center of the stadium. He glanced upwards towards the rim of the bowl like structure. The rows of vacant seats appeared to be endless in all directions. He tried to imagine how it would look four weeks from now. The Giants opened against Detroit on September 10th. It would be a sea of yelling, screaming bodies, about sixty thousand to be precise.

Out at the center of the field, he saw five neat rows of bright blue clad players, all responding in perfect unison to the instructions barked by several men whom they were facing. Ed looked for number sixty-six. That was Charlie's number. It was usually easy to spot him in a crowd. He stood out like a grizzly bear at the zoo. This time it wasn't that simple. They were all grizzlies. Ed sat down at the edge of the field by the railing and watched. He never was a football nut but he'd watched a game now and then. It was usually a Penn State game or a pro game in which an old friend from State was playing. Three guys were in the Pros now, Buck Horn for Miami, Joe Petaliza for Dallas and of course Charlie.

Soon the lines of players separated and formed several smaller groups. Ed caught a glimpse of number sixty-six in the group closest to the far sideline.

He tried to keep his eyes keyed on that number. From what he knew about football it appeared to him that number sixty-six was doing a pretty good job or at least he was in on most of the action. Ed hoped Charlie would do well. Of course there was no reason to suspect that he wouldn't. He had been All Pro two years ago at Oakland. Ed liked the idea of having Charlie around and he didn't want to see that end.

About two hours passed. The hot summer Sun had moved around to where Ed was sitting and it was uncomfortable now. He wanted to move but he had to be by the entrance to the locker rooms. This was the third time he'd promised Charlie that he would be there. This time he'd made it. He had to be sure that Charlie saw him. Just then he heard a long, hard whistle sound. All the players moved hurriedly to the center of the field. Two minutes later another loud whistle and they headed straight towards him. He saw Charlie clearly for the first time during the session. He looked even bigger than usual in full equipment. He looked at Ed and smiled.

"No emergencies at the clinic today? Wait for me. I'll be out in a few minutes" Charlie said as he disappeared under the stands towards the locker room.

Ed looked at his watch. It was 4:25. He was due at the clinic at 6:30 and that was a twenty minute drive. If the traffic was bad downtown, it could be thirty minutes or more.

In about fifteen minutes, Charlie emerged from the doors leading under the stands wearing a smile almost as broad as his shoulders.

"How'd I do?"

"Looked pretty good to me" replied Ed.

"The way things are going so far, I think I'll be here for a while" said Charlie confidently.

"Let me show you around this place" he said eagerly.

One of Charlie's greatest assets was his enthusiasm. He did everything with enthusiasm, no matter how trivial the task and when you were with him it always seemed to rub off a little. In a few moments Ed found himself a willing member of Charlie's private tour.

"This field is a miracle of modern science- Astroturf. Out in Oakland it was strictly grass." This stuff is great. I met a guy here on the grounds crew that I knew at Oakland. He left there about four years ago to come east. His wife's mother was sick and so he had to come out. He got a job here because he had experience out there. He says even the guys on maintenance love it. All they need is a vacuum cleaner. It really plays fine."

"Do you wanna see the locker room?" "You'll like the training equipment" he added.

Charlie showed all the emotions of a kindergartner showing off his classroom. He paraded Ed through every nook and cranny of the stadium explaining each and every detail of its functioning.

Ed looked at his watch uneasily. It was 5:50 now. He had to be downtown by 6:30. Fortunately, Charlie had just about run out of superlatives and the tour was coming to an end.

Ed and Charlie emerged from the stadium into the parking lot. They walked towards their cars.

“What do you think of this baby?” Ed said as he pointed to his 1962 Chevy convertible.

“There’s my Mercedes. Pretty nice for an aspiring young medicine man, huh,” he added facetiously.

The car was old in years but not in appearance. It shone in the bright sun as if it were new. There wasn’t a speck of rust on it anywhere.

The chrome had a mirror like luster and the interior was mint from the dash to the carpeting. Ed was particularly proud of it because to him it represented real success. Its brilliant paint and its fine running engine were but minor features which he prized. What he truly prized was that it represented his selflessness. Any M.D. four years out of med school could have a new Mercedes or Porsche but few would ever own a car like this one. It was a car driven by one who went to the ghetto in the poorest city in the country and lived the Hippocratic Oath on a daily basis. It showed his zealous commitment to helping those less fortunate than he. It helped to portray him as someone who had forgone wealth and prestige for the sake of others.

It had started about four years ago at Albert Einstein when Ed met Rita. Rita was a year behind him in med school. She was a tall, slim, black haired girl with a dark complexion. As a matter of fact, her great grandmother was Negro -Black that is. That’s one of the things that helped get her into Einstein -ethnic quotas and all. On her application she listed her race as black. After all the state courts down South had just ruled that one twentieth black is considered all black. Her features contained the most desirable of both ethnic origins and resulted in a beautiful composite.

Rita’s ambitions likewise influenced Ed and his desire for monetary success was transformed into a lust for healing. Neither could remember whose idea it was at first, the idea of opening a store front clinic in Newark. It was Ed though who pounded the pavements to obtain the needed financial backing. That was probably because he finished med school first.

The clinic was three years old now and he viewed the car as one of the testaments to its success. It was a gift from one of his patients, not a fee, a gift of appreciation from people who felt a deep need to say “Thank you” for what he had done for them. Ed looked at that car as a medal for his service to his fellow man- a poor man’s Nobel Prize.

As he drove across the parking lot towards the exit, Ed glanced in his rear view mirror. The stark, gray walls of the stadium loomed large in the background. It couldn’t help but remind him of a huge, well decorated mausoleum.

He pulled onto the highway and headed south towards Newark. As he drove passed the lines of cars moving north to escape the city before nightfall, he thought over the just past events of the day. He was glad that he had finally kept his promise to Charlie. It was Friday, one of the days that the clinic stayed open late. A long, hard night was ahead and his mind drifted to the schedule that awaited him.

During the next several weeks Ed and Charlie saw each other only a couple of times.

The season was in full swing and Charlie was on the road as much as he was home. Ed was busy too. The start of a new school year required hundreds of kids needing shots or treatment for colds and viruses.

September slid into October. The Giants were doing well, three and one so far. Ed had seen a game or two on TV. Charlie offered him tickets for every game but that would mean an entire day and he really didn't have the time. From what he read in the paper Charlie was doing pretty well and it looked like he would be staying.

Ed was glad of that. He liked going out for a drink together or just bullshitting, even if it was only once in a while. It took his mind off things and with Charlie he always had a few good laughs.

It was late October or early November when he got the call. He couldn't remember the exact date but he did remember being at the clinic.

"How've you been Old Buddy? Been watchin' any football lately?" the voice said. It was Charlie. He hadn't spoken to him in about three weeks.

"Not bad" replied Ed.

"Don't got much time but I did see you against Miami. Weather's pretty nice there I bet."

"Sure is" replied Charlie.

"Ed- I want you to do me a favor."

"Sure!" said Ed.

He wasn't in the habit of agreeing to anything before he knew the details, but in Charlie's case it was different

"Do you remember I told you about the guy I knew in Oakland who came out here and was working at the stadium?"

"The one who's on the grounds crew?" replied Ed.

"That's right. His name is Al Druse. Did you ever meet him?" asked Charlie.

"No, but I remember you telling me about him when I came to the practice at the stadium last August" Ed answered.

“Well” said Charlie, “I didn’t see him around yesterday one of the other grounds guys came around to collect a few bucks from everybody for a gift for him. They said he was sick but nobody knew what was wrong with him. I called his wife to find out how he was and she didn’t know what was wrong either.”

“Did he go to the doctor?” asked Ed.

“Sure he did, and his doctor sent him to the hospital and they’re not sure what’s wrong. Ed, would you go down to the hospital with me and take a look at him?

I don’t mean go down and try to take over the case. Just go to visit and tell me what you think” Charlie replied.

“What does Al’s wife say?” asked Ed.

“She just wants to know what’s the matter with him? I told her that I thought you knew your stuff and might be able to help. You did graduate from Einstein!”

There was a pause.

“I’ll pick you up tonight, about six, okay?” Charlie continued.

There was another brief silence.

“Alright, I think I can make it. Pick me up at the clinic” said Ed.

Charlie arrived at six o’clock sharp. He pulled up and tapped his horn. Ed peered out through the window. It was difficult to see clearly. The street light in front of the building had been broken since June and a cold drizzle coated the pane making everything even less visible. Ed recognized the outline of the car and its burly driver behind the wheel.

“Guess you remembered how to get here alright” said Ed as he entered the car.

“It wasn’t that long ago” replied Charlie. He had been to the clinic in early September and received a tour in similar detail to the one he had given Ed at the stadium in August.

“You’ll have to help me find the hospital. It’s Saint Ann’s in Jersey City” Charlie instructed as the car twisted and turned through the city streets under Charlie’s control.

“How did you get involved in this anyway?” asked Ed.

“Well, I was pretty friendly with Al out in California. I’d even been to his house once or twice for dinner. When I went to Oakland, he was one of the first guys I met from the east. As a matter of fact, he grew up in a town about five miles from my hometown. We even used to hang around there once in a while, when I was in high school. I knew a lot of the guys he did and so we had something in common, plus he and his wife were good people.

When I called Angie, that's his wife, she was pretty upset and so I felt the least I could do is try to help out. That's when I volunteered you" explained Charlie.

The hospital was a large, brick building situated on a crowded street at the heart of the city. It appeared to be one of many buildings in that area whose date with the wrecking ball was long past due. It sported a small modern addition which was probably the reason for its over extended life span.

Ed and Charlie parked the car and walked towards the front door. Inside, the ten foot ceiling made it look more like a train station than a hospital. In the center of the lobby sat the receptionist's desk amidst the array of worn sofas and chairs. Behind it sat a heavy, middle aged, black woman equipped with a stack of five by seven file cards. Several visitors sat in small groups at the corners of the room.

"Al Druse, room 309" Charlie said. The woman silently shuffled through the stack for several seconds.

"No such name here" she announced.

"Are you sure?" questioned Charlie.

"Al Druse, room 309" he repeated. Again the woman searched the cards, finally holding the file open between Drose and Dew.

"If Druse was here, he'd be right here" she said as she pointed to the vacant space in the pile. "You don't see a card there, do you?" she added.

Charlie looked at Ed with a disbelieving expression.

"I talked to Angie just yesterday and she said he was here. This is Saint Anne's in Jersey City isn't it? Is there another Saint Anne's in this town?"

"No, this is it" Ed replied.

"Is there a phone around here?" Charlie asked the receptionist. She gestured toward the far side of the lobby. He reached into his pocket as he moved in that direction.

"I'll be right back."

Ed sat down to await his return. He hadn't even gotten comfortable before he saw Charlie coming towards him.

"I called Angie. No answer." Ed walked back to the desk.

"Was there a patient named Al Druse here during the past week?" The woman looked up at him with a thoughtful stare.

"I think I remember that name but I'm not sure" she said in a slow drawling voice.

"We got over two hundred people here and you only remember the ones that stay for a long time or get lots of visitors. He couldn't have been one of those or I'd remember for sure but that name sounds a little familiar" she added.

Ed motioned to Charlie. "Let's go. I'll call the business office tomorrow and we'll find out exactly what's going on here" he said.

Ed was on the phone to Saint Anne's the next morning before he left for work. Despite his persistence he obtained little information. Al Druse had been a patient there for three days. He was moved to a private hospital in upstate New York on Tuesday. The reason for his move or any details of his illness we're not available. Ed did find out the name of his doctor though, it was Doctor Robert Alpert - phone 693-8818.

Ed dialed the number as soon as he hung up from the hospital call.

"Doctor Alpert's office" a woman's voice answered.

"Hello, this is Doctor Ed Bennett. Is Doctor Alpert available?"

"I'll find out" she replied.

After a brief moment Ed was greeted pleasantly by "Hello, this is Doctor Alpert speaking."

"Hello, this is Ed Bennett. Do you have a few minutes?"

"Sure!" Alpert answered.

"I'm calling about one of your patients, Al Druse."

"I don't have any patient by that name" Alpert responded instantaneously in an abrupt tone.

"He was hospitalized by you last week according to the business office at Saint Anne's" said Ed.

There was a pause.

"Well, he's not a patient of mine now" replied Alpert. There was another even longer pause.

"I'll have to check my records. I'm pretty busy right now. Give my girl your number and I'll get back to you" he said even more abruptly.

"Can you give me any information about?" Ed suddenly realized Alpert had put the phone on hold.

"Now what is your number Doctor Bennett?" a woman's voice interrupted the silence.

Ed was puzzled as he mechanically recited his phone number. Why did Alpert go from Jekyll to Hyde when he heard Druse's name? How could he not remember the name of a patient he had just hospitalized only three days before? As he put down the phone, Ed stared into space. It was very strange to say the least. Ed didn't remember the drive to work that morning. It was as if he was Captain Kirk

rather than Ed Bennett and had been beamed to the clinic. During the trip, he was continually thinking about his conversation with Alpert.

“Oh, Alpert thought it was a just a routine call about a patient and he would call back and it would all be settled” he told himself in an unconvincingly.

He was glad that this was Rita’s morning on the road, making house calls. It allowed him to answer the phone. Every time it rang he expected to hear Alpert’s voice. It never was and his curiosity continued to rise

He glanced at the clock on the wall. It was one o’clock now. She would be back any minute. Soon he heard the familiar sound of Sam’s Caddy. Seconds later they entered. It looked like the beauty and the beast. Rita’s petite good looks stood in sharp contrast to those of Sam. Sam was a huge, bearded, black man with thick protruding scars on his face and upper arms. His mere presence cast an aura of intimidation.

Sam was Rita’s self-appointed body guard and chauffeur. It was his way of paying a debt. Sam did more than just driving her around on her calls. He was also the reason that the clinic was the only operating store front in twenty blocks that didn’t need pull down window gratings or Fort Knox type security equipment. He had been Ed and Rita’s “main man” as he called himself, almost since they started.

He had come stumbling through the door about three years ago. It was early on a Saturday morning and Rita had only been there about ten minutes when suddenly she heard a thud on the front window. A man was leaning against the glass and sliding towards the door. As he moved across the pane a stripe of blood traced a zigzag line behind him.

He flung the door open and stood tottering in its opening. She instinctively drew back at first, but then reached towards him and guided him to a cot at the rear of the room. A large red blotch covered his upper left shoulder and arm. He spoke weakly but in a demanding tone.

“Get my arm fixed and I’ll get goin’.”

Rita opened the shirt to examine the wound.

“I can’t just fix your arm. It’s a mess. You’ve got to go to a hospital for this” she said.

“I don’t want no hospital shit. This is a bullet in my arm, girl. Can’t you see? Hospitals mean cops and I don’t need no cops in my life” he said in a loud voice as he struggled vainly to get up. It was clear that he was not going to a hospital.

Rita must have worked on his arm for two hours.

Three days later Sam got up from that cot. Rita had stayed by him for the entire time. The bullet had torn the subclavian artery and she never told him how close he’d come to dying but somehow he must have known. He drilled a hole in the bullet and put it on a chain around his neck for a good luck charm. Sam never told anybody how he got shot that Friday night and no one ever dared ask. Ed thought he

knew what had probably happened though. In the three years since the incident he had picked up bits and pieces from different people.

Sam was an enforcer for the drug trade or so it was told. He made sure that the local dealers didn't decide to keep some extra profits for themselves. The guy who shot him had some different ideas on free enterprise. Three months after Sam recovered; they found the guy dead of a heroin overdose. The cops never could figure out why he had injected himself through the throat with the needle.

Although Ed really never knew for sure if it was all true, things did add up. Sam dressed well, drove a year old Eldorado, always had a pocket full of money and never held a job. Rita said that every once in a while when they were making calls, he would drive to an out of the way spot, down off Feylinghesuen Ave. and meet a couple of white guys in a black Mercedes. They would talk for fifteen or twenty minutes while she waited in Sam's car. He always returned with a box of expensive cigars and a smile. She often wondered if there were really cigars in the box. She had never seen him smoke one in all the time she knew him.

Ed didn't care about Sam's sordid business affairs. All he knew is that without him things would be much tougher than they were already. Sam had laid a protective veil over the clinic and its people. He saved its life as surely as Rita had saved his. Every mugger and drug addict in the city knew him and his reputation. The word was out; don't screw around with Sam's people.

As the two of them stood in the doorway, the phone began to ring again. Ed gestured a welcome as he quickly snatched the receiver from its cradle. It was Charlie.

"I just called Al's wife for the four hundredth time and I finally got her. She had been up at the hospital by Al. She said he was moved up there the day before yesterday and she tried to call me before she left but didn't get an answer. She says she doesn't understand what's going on."

"Is she home now?" asked Ed.

"Yeah, she had to come back because she couldn't afford to stay in the motel any more. She said she's going to go up on weekends if she can. She wants to talk to you" said Charlie.

"I'll go over and talk to her. What's her address?" He hastily jotted it down as he hung up the phone.

Rita had removed her coat and was beginning to fill out one of the many forms which made up the daily routine. Sam was gone. He probably went to "collect his eggs" as he put it.

"That was Charlie" he said as he looked up.

"Let me tell you about what's been happening." He proceeded to explain about Charlie's call the previous evening, the trip to Saint Anne's and the conversation with Alpert. Rita listened intently. She agreed that some of it did seem a bit peculiar but dismissed much of it as his over active imagination.

"Do you think you can hold down the fort here for a while?" asked Ed. "I'm going to take a run over to see what Al's wife can tell me. I'd like to see her in person. I think she might need some hand holding about now."

"If it'll make you feel better then you better go. I'll be okay here" replied Rita.

Chapter 2

It was an old neighborhood with well-kept closely spaced two family houses shaded by an occasional tree sprouting from the sidewalk. Cars lined both sides of the street. One ninety two one ninety four, one ninety six was a yellow house with aluminum siding. A statue of the Virgin stood in the front surrounded by a bunch of plastic daisies. He found a parking spot, walked up the grey wooden steps to the door and rang the bell. In a few minutes the door opened. A short woman, with long brown hair and a round face greeted him in a heavy accent. He couldn't quite decide if it was Spanish or Portuguese.

"Mrs. Druse?" she nodded.

"I'm Ed Bennett, a friend of Charlie Rode" he said.

"Doctor Bennett?" she replied.

"Yes - Charlie and I tried to see Al at Saint Ann's last night" he answered.

"He's not there" she said as she turned and began to walk in to the house.

"Come on in" she shouted over her shoulder from halfway down the hall. Ed followed her into the living room.

"Can I give you a drink?"

His host hurriedly picked up several newspapers from the floor and attempted to straighten the bunched up slip cover on an adjacent easy chair. Then she disappeared into the kitchen shouting as she did so "A soda, beer, ice tea?"

"Soda's okay" he replied as he sat down on the sofa. He looked around the room while he waited. His eye caught several pictures, in small frames on the mantle.

They looked like children's school pictures and family snapshots. There was one that looked like a New Year's Eve picture of Al and his wife. Well, he assumed it was Al anyway. They were wearing hats and a banner in the background read "Welcome 1972"

Al's wife returned carrying a tray with two glasses of soda.

"My name's Angie" she said as she put down the tray.

"Tell me what happened to Al, Angie" he said.

Angie began to explain the events of the past several weeks. She spoke in a staccato like fashion. Her speech was punctuated by pauses during which she searched for the right words to be used in the next phrase.

"Al" she began, "He didn't feel too good the week before last."

She told of his beginning to feel fatigued and nauseous. Evidently, he had been feeling poorly on and off for some time. It finally came to a point where she persuaded him to see a doctor.

"We went to Doctor Alpert last week. He took a lot of tests, blood and stuff."

She continued, "Last week he really started to get bad, sick almost every day, so I called the doctor again and he put him in the hospital."

"Did the doctor say what was wrong with him?" asked Ed.

"He said he wasn't sure. He didn't know" she replied.

"What happened at the hospital?" Ed asked.

"Al was there for about three days. Then one day Doctor Alpert called me.

He said that he should be moved to a hospital in upstate New York. He said he knew what was wrong with Al and this hospital was the best place for him."

"Well, what was the matter with him?" asked Ed again.

"He didn't tell me. Just that he should go to this new hospital." She paused and drew a deep breath.

"Doctor Bennett, you have to find out what's going on with my Al" she pleaded tearfully.

Al had been sent to the Caramore Clinic up around Ellensville. Ed had heard of the place but didn't know much about it. They had told Angie that he would be there for an "extended time." That was hospital lingo for not being sure when he would be released.

As he drove back towards Newark he tried to remember what he could about Caramore Clinic. He seemed to recall reading something about it in a magazine someplace.

When Ed arrived at the clinic he was greeted by a chorus of shrill screams. He opened the door just in time to see Rita withdrawing a hypodermic needle from a three year old's bottom while the child's mother struggled to hold him still. He walked over to his desk and searched through the pile of notes and messages lying there. There were about ten in all and none of them from Alpert.

Rita finished with her howling patient and turned to Ed.

"Did you ever hear of Caramore Clinic in Ellensville, New York?" he asked her.

She thought for a moment.

"Isn't that the place where they dry out movie stars and politicians?" she responded.

Ed paused, and then his face lit up.

"That's it. I knew I read about it recently. I thought I read about it in a medical journal but it was one of those movie star mags in the barber shop. That was the place they put the rock group "The Slugs." All of them were druggies and they all signed up at once to get straight at Caramore. They played a concert at the place the day they were released and it made the paper and the magazine."

"Why are you interested in it?" asked Rita.

"That's a big money operation: It costs big bucks to stay there" she added.

"That's where they've got Al Druse, the guy Charlie and I tried to visit last night at Saint Ann's. His wife just told me" replied Ed.

Why was Al in a drug rehab hospital? Angie didn't mention anything about drugs or booze but then, of course, Ed didn't ask either. If he did have a habit, why didn't Alpert just tell me, thought Ed? And why did somebody put him a place like Caramore that costs thousands and is all the way up in New York state and even more puzzling is who's paying for it? It sure isn't Angie from what Ed could see.

Ed picked up the phone and dialed Alpert's number.

He'd waited long enough. After a customary greeting from the receptionist, and a long pause, Alpert answered.

"Doctor Bennett, I tried to reach you this morning. Your phone was busy.

You were interested in Albert Druse, one of my patients. I'm sorry I couldn't talk to you yesterday but the office was very busy. Mr. Druse came to me last week complaining of nausea and fatigue. I sent him for several tests. Upper and lower GI, blood work, urine and so forth."

Alpert spoke in a long string of unbroken sentences with little or no pause separating them. It sounded like a sixth grader reciting his part on the opening night of the school play.

"His condition persisted so I admitted him to Saint Ann's" he continued, still in a rehearsed tone.

"How did he wind up at Caramore?" Ed interrupted.

"The second day he was at the hospital, the hospital administrator called me and said that his staff physicians had reviewed the case and decided it was best to move him up there."

"Did you request a review of the case?" asked Ed.

"No" replied Alpert.

"I was told Mrs. Druse had requested that" Ed added.

"Did Mr. Druse have a drug problem, drugs or alcohol?"

"Not that I know of" said Alpert

"May I see his records and test results? I'll get authorization from the patient's wife if you like" said Ed.

"I don't have them."

"Who does?" asked Ed.

"A representative from the State Medical Examiner's office called me the day Mr. Druse was to be moved and asked for all records" Alpert replied.

"Isn't that a bit unusual?" asked Ed.

"Well, that's not for me to say" replied Alpert. He spoke more calmly now.

"Don't you have the copies of the originals?" Ed continued to question.

"I did but two days after the State called me about the records my office was robbed. I never even really got a chance to take a good look at them. I knew the patient had been removed from my care and so I didn't see any point in rushing to look at his records."

"You were robbed?" repeated Ed in a surprised voice. "And patient records were stolen along with drugs?" he added.

"Yeah, some drugs and records too" replied Alpert.

"That's a strange combination. Why would a druggie steal patient records?" asked Ed.

"My own opinion is the drugs being stolen was to cover the real purpose of the break in. The records were the real target. It looked like they just took a few at random.

Maybe it was because the night watchman interrupted them and they were in a panic and they just grabbed a bunch from the area they thought might contain the one they were looking for. If the watchman hadn't come by they would have just taken the one file and no one would have known until someone looked for that particular file. Up until then the whole thing would have been simply a drug theft. If a long time passed between the robbery and the discovery of the missing files, who would even relate the two?

That's the only thing that I can think of that might relate the theft of two items like drugs and a handful of random files" said Alpert.

"And Druse was in the handful that was taken?" said Ed.

“Right! That’s why when you called yesterday and asked about him it took me by surprise. That combined with all the other incidents involving this guy. I called the County Medical Association to see who you were. To be honest the whole thing is getting nerve racking. The robbery, cops, calls from the State. I didn’t want to be talking to the wrong people, so I checked” Alpert explained.

“What was wrong with Druse?” asked Ed.

“I really don’t know. Like I said I never really even got a chance to look at the test results” said Alpert.

As Ed ended his conversation with Alpert he at least understood Alpert’s reluctance to talk with him the day before. The circumstances surrounding the whole situation however had become even more perplexing.

The next day he called the state Medical Examiner’s Office. He wasn’t quite sure to whom he should speak. They didn’t have anyone in charge of stolen records or mysteriously transferred patients. Alpert wasn’t sure of the title of the inspector who had picked up the papers from him but he did remember his name - Samford. No one named Samford worked for the examiner’s office according to them. His call to Caramore didn’t help either. They said that they couldn’t discuss any patients on the phone and they wouldn’t even acknowledge Druse’s being there. That of course was what Ed might have expected from a high class, private rehab hospital like Caramore anyway.

Chapter 3

It was a cold, clear morning as Ed pulled up in front of 196 Selma Street. He rang the bell. Within seconds Angie appeared with a small shopping bag and her purse tucked under her arm. She greeted him as she pulled the door closed behind her and rattled the handle to check its security.

They got into the car and headed north towards Ellensville. It was about a two and one half hour ride ahead of them. The scenery was beautiful as the traveled up the Thruway and Angie proved to be an interesting conversationalist despite her accent.

She spoke of Al as having been a schoolboy athlete and an All-Stater in football. He attended college for two years but a knee injury ended any aspirations he had for the big time. His cousin in California lined up a job for him on the grounds crew at Oakland after he dropped out of college and he worked there for five years. He and Angie met out there and they were married about the time her mother got sick. She was originally from New Jersey and her mother still lived in Union City at the time. Al got the job at Giant Stadium so they could come back and help take care of her. She died shortly after they returned, about three years ago. They decided to stay here instead of going back to California. The weather isn’t the best but Al liked the new job and it was too expensive to move back again.

Al's troubles began on and off about a year ago. He would get sick to his stomach and it would last for a couple of days. After that happened three or four times he went to the doctor. They told him he had the beginnings of a stomach ulcer.

Recently, he felt sick almost every day, sick and drained out. The medicine for the ulcer didn't seem to help this time. That's when she insisted that he go back to the doctor. The doctor sent him to the hospital.

When she saw him at the hospital last week he said he was feeling a little better but he had lost about fifteen pounds. Shortly after that he was moved to Caramore and now she hadn't spoken to him for over a week. She was told that his room was located in a special area where phones weren't allowed. She wrote a letter to him but she hadn't gotten any answer yet.

Ellenville was a small New York town. Route 57 was its main street, lined with a quarter mile of shops and stores, a couple of gas stations and the local bank. The Catskills cradled it with their huge white, snow covered hands. Caramore was at the far end of the town.

A large iron gate with the words "Caramore Clinic" formed an arch over the entrance. Attached to the gate was a high iron picket fence stretching for five hundred yards in both directions. The buildings were faintly visible in the distance. They drove to the guard house which was attended by two men wearing police like uniforms.

"We've come to visit a patient" Ed announced.

"Who's the patient?" asked the guard abruptly.

"Al Druse" replied Ed.

The guard picked up a clip board and scanned list for the name. Upon finding it, he walked to the front of the car, wrote down the license plate number and returned to Ed.

"May I see your driver's license, sir?" he said. I'll need some identification for the lady too."

Ed reluctantly withdrew his wallet, removed his license and handed it to him. Angie passed over her social security card.

"Please sign here" said the guard as he thrust the clip board and pen toward the open car window.

"Drive straight ahead, building A-3, parking on the right" he said as they signed.

Ed rolled up the window and slowly pulled away.

"You were here last week, right?"

"Yes" replied Angie.

"Who brought you up?"

"My sister, Theresa" she said.

"Did you have to show any ID or sign anything?"

"No, they only wrote down the plate number and asked who we wanted to visit. That was all" she answered.

They parked where the guard had told them and entered A-3. The building was old. It had to be fifty or seventy-five years old Ed estimated but it was well cared for. The entire complex consisted of five or six closely spaced buildings of similar vintage and two newer structures situated in a park like setting.

The inside of A-3 was completely modernized and furnished with a decorator's touch. Ed and Angie walked over to the receptionist's desk. She was a young, blonde girl in a neat white uniform, wearing a bright smile. "Good morning. May I help you?" she sang.

"We would like to visit Al Druse."

"He's in 309" Angie added.

The girl typed several symbols into a computer terminal on the desk.

"I'm sorry but Mr. Druse is receiving special therapy today and visitation won't be allowed" she said in a sympathetic tone.

Ed turned toward Angie with a startled expression on his face. "Aren't your visiting hours ten to six on Saturdays and Sundays?" he snapped at the receptionist.

"That's correct but this treatment is required on a daily basis" she responded.

"Let me see the physician in charge here, please" Ed said. She immediately picked up the phone.

"Please ask Doctor House to come to the lobby" she announced.

After a few minutes, a tall, dark haired man, sporting a goatee, dressed in a white lab coat appeared.

"Doctor House, these people have come to see Mr. Druse in 309. I told them that he would not be receiving any visitors today because of his scheduled therapy" repeated the receptionist.

"I'm Doctor Ed Bennett and this is Mr. Druse's wife Angie. We've come 120 miles to see Mr. Druse. We were informed that visiting hours are ten to six on weekends and we're obviously disappointed. Nothing was said about therapy" Ed said as he extended his hand toward House.

"This is unfortunate" said House.

"We always like our patients to receive as many visitors as they can.

You know, it's good for morale. Maybe we can let you see him since you've traveled so far but I don't believe he'll be conscious" said House as he glanced down at the clip board he was holding.

"Please wait here for a minute and I'll go see if that's possible" he said while he turned and walked away.

In several minutes he appeared at the entrance of a long corridor and motioned to them. He led them towards room 309.

"Mrs. Druse has asked me to examine her husband on a consulting basis" said Ed as they walked.

"She's not aware as to what is exactly the problem and it's causing her great anxiety" he added.

"As long as she agrees, we're certainly willing to share with you any information we can about Mr. Druse's condition" replied House. Angie nodded in agreement as House looked towards her.

"May I have a copy of his records?" Ed asked.

"Surely" said House.

They arrived at Al's room. It was a private, well lit place with a nice view of the mountains. Al was lying quietly, clothed in the usual white hospital pajamas. He was a large man, with dark thinning hair, a sparse mustache and a square jaw. The hollowness in his cheeks made his face appear longer than it probably was. It was hard to tell his age exactly. He looked to be somewhere between forty and fifty. Ed thought back to the New Year's picture he had seen on the mantle at Al's house. There, Al had a bushy head of black curly hair and heavy dark mustache. His face was full and he looked about thirty or thirty-five at the most. That was only three years ago in 1975.

Angie immediately moved towards him and hugged him around his neck. He remained motionless. Ed moved a chair towards the edge of the bed for her to sit on.

"He'll be out for some time" said House.

"This particular treatment requires a pretty strong sedative." He hesitated for a moment.

"I'll leave you alone for a while" he said as he began to walk out the door.

Ed followed as he left. When they got into the hallway, Ed spoke. "Excuse me, Doctor House."

House stopped and turned.

"What is your diagnosis of Mr. Druse's illness?" he said in a low tone.

"Barbiturates" replied House abruptly.

"You mean drugs?" exclaimed Ed.

"That's right."

"May I see the test records?" asked Ed.

"I'll give you copies of his complete file before you leave as long as Mrs. Druse signs for them" responded House.

"How did Mr. Druse wind up here from Saint Annes?" said Ed.

"It's my understanding, that his employer, not wishing to generate any adverse publicity, asked him to transfer to Caramore where we can be a little more discrete" replied House.

"You know drugs anywhere in the sports business can cause big problems and they want to keep everything clean if they can help it. They don't want any bad PR" House continued.

"Who authorized his transfer?" asked Ed.

"Mr. Druse, of course. He signed himself out of Saint Ann's and into Caramore the same day he came here" House answered.

"That's odd" thought Ed out loud as he walked back into Al's room. Angie had no idea of Al's habit or that he was going to be transferred until after he was moved.

She was still seated next to the bed holding Al's large hand in both of her hands. He didn't stir. Ed reached over and felt his pulse. It felt slow and heavy. His arms displayed several bruise like marks where tests and injections must have been administered. It was surprising that in such a high class institution, the nurses weren't more careful. Those kinds of marks were generally the results of poor technique. There were several similar marks on the backs of the arms and forearms. They looked like bruises that occur in old people when an overzealous helping hand grasps them too hard by the upper arm.

Not much was said during the next hour. Al continued to remain almost motionless and Angie stayed there by his side hoping for a sign of his awakening. House had brought the copies that he had promised. Ed sat perusing them. They indicated routine test procedures, those that would be expected for an individual complaining of nausea and fatigue. No unusual results appeared, except of course, the positive tests for barbiturate levels. All of the records that he was given pertained only to the tests done at Caramore. Ed had asked for all test records including those conducted at Saint Ann's. House said he had requested copies of those from Doctor Alpert but Alpert had told him of the break in and that he no longer had the records. When Ed asked why copies weren't obtained directly from the hospital, House told him that the hospital said they weren't available.

They gave no specific reason as to why; they just weren't. Without those tests how did anyone know that Al was addicted unless, of course, a referring physician from Saint Ann's had made such a diagnosis. If that was the case then who was the physician? His name should be on the admission form along with his diagnosis but it wasn't.

Alpert said that he didn't even get a chance to look at the test results before they were stolen. Certainly, he couldn't have been the referring doctor. When Ed confronted House with that question, he merely said that the cause for treatment was indicated on the admission form. How it was arrived at, or by

whom, he didn't know. He told Ed if he wanted more information he would have to call the admitting physician at Saint Ann's and with that House turned and walked away.

Ed looked up from the papers. It appeared that Angie realized her vigil was in vain. Reluctantly, she put his hand by his side and rose from the chair. Together she and Ed walked towards the parking lot in silence. It was a long ride home, long and quiet. The air of optimism that had existed on the way up was gone. In its place there was the knowledge that something was seriously wrong. They had ridden for at least a half hour before either spoke more than a few words.

Ed finally broke the heavy silence.

"Angie, did Al take medicine regularly for anything?" he asked the question warily.

He wanted to be sure not to evoke a reflexive denial so he didn't mention drugs point blank.

"No!" she replied.

"Al, he never even took aspirin. He always said the drug companies were a conspiracy to poison the country. You know, get everybody hooked so they could sell even more. To Al, heroin and vitamin pills were the same thing - drugs. We were constantly fighting about him taking the pills for his ulcer. It's a strange way of thinking, but that's Al. I bet they have to hold him down now to give him his medicine at the hospital."

"Was he acting any different lately? I mean mentally?" asked Ed.

"Well, only tired out" answered Angie.

"How about groggy, like he was drunk?" Ed continued to question her.

"Sometimes he'd drink a little too much wine like at my cousin's wedding last month, but that's all, just once in a while" she replied.

"No, I mean did he ever act groggy when he wasn't drinking?"

"No, only when he drank wine" she answered.

Ed dropped Angie off and drove towards home.

"Some day off!" he thought to himself.

He was tired from the drive, frustrated at not being able to talk to Al and more confused than ever about what was happening. Maybe he had gotten involved in something that was none of his business and he should butt out. What had started as a simple gesture of friendship to help out Charlie's friend had become an enigmatic whirlpool. It was sucking him deeper and deeper into circumstances he somehow felt would be better left unexplored but an inner force kept pushing him towards the eye of the turbulence. His curiosity was no longer under his own control. The whole thing had grown into an

overwhelming preoccupation which dominated most of his thinking. He really couldn't extricate himself now even if he wanted to.

When he arrived home, he called to check out the day's happenings at the clinic.

"This is Doctor Ed Bennett, no one is in the office now" the voice began.

It was the answering machine He hung up immediately.

"She must have left early" He looked at his watch "6:30 already! I guess it isn't early after all" he thought.

He redialed to get the messages left on the recorder.

"Hi Ed! I left about 5:30 today. We had the usual good time today."

With that greeting, Rita went on to enumerate the events of the day in a chronology of patients with minor medical problems and interspersed phone messages. It was all strictly routine kind of stuff. He'd see all the details tomorrow.

"Charlie Rhode called you. He said he wanted to talk to you personally. Left no message except that he would call back" the recording ended.

"Charlie's on the road this week. I wonder why he called from Dallas. It must be important" thought Ed.

It couldn't be a social call. When Charlie plays a game he gets so pumped that he doesn't think about anything but football; certainly not trivial bull shit.

Ed put down the phone after the last message had been delivered. He went over and sat on the bed next to his briefcase and withdrew the photocopies that had been given to him by House. He started to read the test results for the third time. Again everything appeared as it did before. Nothing seemed unusual.

Ed recalled his conversation with House about the missing test results from Saint Ann's and the apparent inconsistency of admitting Al as a drug rehab patient with no prior indicative test results and no referring physician's diagnosis. House said that most probably the admitting physician at Caramore would be able to clear all of that up for him. Ed scanned the forms for the name. The signature was unclear but it looked like McCarthy. He'd call tomorrow. He had a lot of paper work to do that night, but he didn't seem to get much of it done. Every time he began, he found himself distracted by rehashing the events of the past several weeks over and over in his mind.

The next day began as usual. He arrived at the clinic at 8:00 A.M. Lucky was waiting at the door as he unlocked it.

"Hold on boy, I'll have this open in a minute" he called to the dog that was eagerly standing before the unopened door.

As the door swung open, a large black and white dog bounded through the entrance. He looked to be half German Shepherd, half Doberman with a little bit of Collie and Boxer thrown in.

“Take it easy” yelled Ed while attempting to calm the exuberant animal.

Lucky was Rita’s dog. She picked him up the same way she had befriended Sam. She found him limping down the alley between the clinic and the building next door. He was rummaging through the garbage looking for what he hoped would be his first meal in days. His hip bones protruded prominently through his shabby fur as did his ribs and shoulders. When he turned and looked at her with his sad brown eyes, Rita saw Pepper reincarnated. Pepper was her dog when she was a child. Lucky and Pepper both came from the same non-aristocratic lineage. They were both mutts!

That one soulful glance and Rita turned and walked across the street to Bill’s and bought a bologna sandwich. She returned shortly to Lucky still unsuccessfully rummaging through the trash.

“Here boy! Here’s something for you” she called as she unwrapped the sandwich and placed it on the ground. She stepped back several feet and waited. The aroma of fresh cut bologna finally reached him and he warily began to move forward towards its source. When he reached it, he instantaneously devoured the morsel with three rapid gulps.

Rita looked more closely at the right rear leg. A large oozing sore spread over the entire flank.

“Here Lucky” she continued to coax him towards the clinic entrance and he anticipating more reward, eagerly followed.

When they entered, she shouted to Ed “Look what I found. This is Lucky.”

“How do you know that’s his real name? Maybe he’s a fugitive from the dog pound and he gave you an alias” replied Ed laughingly as he looked the dog over. That day Rita made a lifelong friend and the clinic got a damn good watch dog.

Ed calmed the dog, walked over to his desk and sat down. In a few minutes the phone began to ring and patients started to flow in and out of the office in a slow but steady stream. In between the calls and patients he tried to whittle down the stack of paperwork that covered his desk. It was business as usual. It was around noontime when the telephone rang for the twentieth time that morning. Ed answered it to hear the familiar sound of Charlie’s voice.

“Ed, I’ve been trying to get you for two days now” Charlie said in a relieved tone.

“Rita left a message that you called yesterday and it sounded important. Aren’t you in Dallas? Don’t you have a game today?” replied Ed.

“I’m in Dallas, alright. I want to have a long talk with you but this phone call will have to do for now.” He paused for a moment as if to collect his thoughts.

"Yesterday morning, before we left, I got a message from the front office. They wanted to see me. I went up and when I walked in, there's five guys in suits and ties, executive types and the owner too, John Sims, all waitin' for me. Everybody's real nice, asking me how I like playing for the Giants and how I like the east coast and New York City and so forth. Now I know this is no social, let's get acquainted meeting. Then out it comes. One of them says 'Do you know Ed Bennett?' That kinda took me by surprise, your name being mentioned out of the clear blue like that. 'Of course' I said. Then another one of them said 'We're a little concerned about you hanging around with this Bennett guy'. I immediately asked him why, and then a third guy said that you're involved with drugs and it's a bad association for members of the Giants to be seen with drug dealers."

"What! You are kidding, aren't you?"! exclaimed Ed.

He knew that there was no kidding going on here.

Charlie liked practical jokes but this was far from a joking matter.

Besides, he wouldn't have called twice all the way from Dallas, just before a game, unless it was pretty serious stuff. He would never joke about something like this.

"I told them they must have the wrong Bennett" Charlie continued. "But they knew all about you, about the clinic and they mentioned a guy named Sam. They said he was your distributor and strong arm man."

"This is incredible" interjected Ed.

"Then Mr. Sims chimed in and said we want you to stop associating with Bennett. We can't afford bad PR here. We're trying to give you some good advice before a problem develops. With that they all got up and thanked me for my understanding shook my hand and said goodbye. I walked out dazed. I still am."

"What else was said?" asked Ed.

"That was about it. I've been going over and over this in my head for two days now and that's the whole story" replied Charlie.

"Do you know who the five guys are?" Ed asked anxiously.

"Well, Sims introduced me to them but I'm not good at remembering names. I tried to remember them after I left but I can only come up with two of them, a Mr. Harb and a Mr. Sonetti. Another one's name might have been Sloan but I'm not sure" said Charlie.

"Did Sims say who they were; I mean what their positions were?"

"No" replied Charlie.

"I don't understand any of this. You know me. I was never involved with drugs. Maybe a little grass now and then but that's about it. Even at State some of the guys used to do a little coke and pills and you know I never took any of that stuff. I had dozens of opportunities" said Ed.

"I know you were one of the straightest guys in the whole place. I tried to tell them that but they didn't want to listen" responded Charlie.

"I'm going to have to find out what's going on here" Ed thought out loud.

"I had to call and tell you this. I was so dumbfounded by the whole thing that I just had to tell you right away. I was hopin' that you had some explanation" said Charlie.

"Well, I don't. Call me when you get back and we'll go over this again. There must be some mistake" said Ed.

He hung up the phone in slow motion.

"Drug dealer? Me?" He thought, "It's all insane."

This was the second time in two days that someone had been accused of involvement with drugs; first Al and now him? It was all very hard to deal with. It seemed to Ed that the two circumstances might be related. If not, it was very coincidental that two innocent people suddenly became drug suspects. Ed was anxious to know more about the accusations that were made during Charlie's conversation with Sims. From whom, when and why did they arise? He could contain his curiosity and outrage no longer. He called the Giants' head office. When he tried to speak with Sims he got the usual secretarial run around with the promise of a return call. It was just what he expected.

Ed made another phone call that afternoon this one to Caramore. No one at Caramore ever heard of Doctor McCarthy and no one knew who Al Druse's admitting physician was either.

When he left the clinic at 6:30 no return call from either one had been received and he realized neither probably ever would.

Chapter 4

The next day was a Tuesday. On Tuesdays he could come in to work a little late. It was a nice scheduling arrangement. Every other day, one of them would come in late. It helped to make things seem less routine.

Ed emerged victorious from his morning battle with the city traffic. He parked his car and walked towards the clinic. As he approached the door, Rita ran to meet him. She was shouting and crying simultaneously resulting in an unintelligible stream of high frequency shrieks. She threw her arms about his waist like a drowning man hugging a life buoy. After a minute or so her incoherent babblings calmed in to a more collected flow of sobbing punctuated speech.

"Somebody murdered him.

Somebody murdered him” she repeated.

“Murdered who?” replied Ed in an alarmed shout.

She gestured towards the open door. Ed gently freed himself from her grasp and moved towards the door. He noticed the window glass of the door had been shattered. Several feet inside the entrance lay Lucky with his mouth open and his tongue protruding. The body was motionless and the eyes wore a wide glazed stare. He was dead alright.

Rita followed him into the room and walked over to her desk. She picked up a sheet of paper upon which rested a large gray mass of half-eaten ground meat. A white crystalline, powder decorated its surface. She silently handed it to Ed. The paper was a plain white sheet bearing bold magic marker lettering partially covered by the meat.

“I found this next to him this morning” she said. “That white stuff looks like rat poison” she added.

“What was taken?” asked Ed.

“I haven’t looked yet, but I don’t think anybody even came in. It looks like they broke the window just so they could throw the meat in.”

Ed looked at the lettering on the paper. It read “Keep on putting your nose ...” He couldn’t see the rest. He took it from her and carefully dropped the darkened meat from the paper onto a piece of old newspaper being sure not to touch it. Now the note was all visible, a bit blurred by the stains but easily readable.

“Keep on putting your nose in the wrong place and the next corpse you find will be wearing your face” it said.

“What the hell is this?” exclaimed Ed.

Rita looked at the message and repeated it aloud in a slow deliberate voice. Her sorrow at the loss of her dog gave way to alarm. She had been so overwhelmed by the sight that greeted him when she arrived that morning that she hadn’t even noticed the writing.

“Who could have done this?” she said.

“It must be a warning but a warning for what?” said Ed.

He looked over at her and saw a combination of grief and fear on her face. Then he gently put his arms around her.

“I’m sorry about Lucky. I know how much he meant to you. Whoever did this they murdered him to send me a message and they wanted to make sure I’d pay attention to it. They want to let me know they mean business. I know it was all directed at me but I’m not sure I know why.”

Rita continued to sob. Her cry was a combination of grief and fear.

Sam walked in at the usual time, around 9:30. By then the body had been placed in a plastic bag and put out around the back of the building. Rita wasn't sure what to do with it. Ed would probably wind up burying him in the vacant lot down the street. The cops had just left and Ed was calling the glazer to get the window replaced. The police took a report and the chopped meat along with the note. There was little they could do except look for finger prints and check out the poison on the meat

The questions of - "who has a grudge against you, were any threats made, did any unusual people come to the clinic lately" - all were asked. It all looked very thorough and official, but Ed knew very little could and would be done. In the back of his mind, he was sure that his persistent search for information relating to Al Druse had something to do with it. Exactly how and why, he didn't know but somehow he felt there was a relationship. What other reason could there be? He never mentioned any of that to the cops. It was too long and involved. They would probably just think he was paranoid anyway. Then too who could he accuse?

Rita had taped cardboard over the broken window pane. It stood out like a sign pointing to the damage.

"What happened here?" Sam said in his gravelly voice.

"We had a little problem Sam" said Ed. "Somebody didn't like Lucky."

"What you mean - where's Lucky?" said Sam as he bent over and looked under Rita's desk to the spot where Lucky was usually lying.

"Somebody murdered him" exclaimed Rita and then she continued to explain what had happened.

Sam liked Lucky. They shared a common origin, the streets and a common task- survival.

"I'm gonna go out in the street and put my ear to the ground and I better hear those mothers who did this ridin' outta town. I don't want nobody bustin' up my part of town or messin' up on my friends. If I catch 'em there's gonna be some heavy bleedin' goin' on." What Sam lacked in diction, he made up for in sincerity. He spoke of revenge and little else that entire day.

A week passed. Sam's search for retribution ended in vain. The best he could determine from his sources was that a guy from New York was responsible. It was strictly a hit and run operation by a hired gun, so to speak. The identity of the hit man was unknown. There are a million guys in the city that would take a job like that for a hundred dollar bill. The question of who did the hiring was something else. The word was that big money was involved exactly why no one knew.

Ed and Charlie spoke several times on the phone but they hadn't seen each other since Charlie's call from Dallas. Charlie said he was sure he was being followed on occasions. Ed thought he might be a bit melodramatic but then again they did have a lot of information about him. They certainly must have done some detailed investigation to obtain it.

During that week Ed had telephoned Sims' office at least a dozen times. The secretary knew the sound of his voice by now and didn't even bother to ask who was calling. He even took the time to go in person

after the first ten calls failed to put him in contact with Sims. At each encounter, he was told politely that Mr. Sims was a busy man and would get back to him at a future date, which of course, was never specified and never materialized either. He was a little bit surprised at their patience. They always greeted him in the same unruffled, courteous tone, despite the frequency of his calls and his insistence on talking to Sims.

He had also driven to Caramore a second time. Angie's eagerness to see her husband appealed to his compassion and he felt obligated to take her. When they arrived he wondered whether not taking her would have been more compassionate. Again, Al was unconscious throughout the entire visit. Angie was looking more and more haggard and spoke less and less each time Ed saw her. The whole experience was taking its toll that was obvious.

Ed spoke to House again and obtained little more information than the last time. When he questioned the name of the admitting physician on Al's records, House merely alluded to the transitory nature of the many young doctors employed at institutions such as Caramore. He said McCarthy was probably one of those and therefore no one remembered his name. He had come and gone too fast. That's why when Ed called Caramore; McCarthy's name was not recognized. Ed attempted to question House on the specifics of Al's case but each time House suggested that he re-examine the records he had given him.

When he had questioned the nature of the treatment that rendered the patient unconscious during each visitation, House became indignant, suggesting that his knowledge in the area of drug rehabilitation was unparalleled. He added that he made use of the most modern techniques to which Ed was probably not even privy. Ed's inquisition was so intense, that House became irritated and the conversation ended with House's abrupt departure. In spite of his efforts Ed learned little more than he already knew.

Ed sat at his desk writing a list of things for Rita to do the following day. He felt a little guilty about burdening her with all the extra work but she said she understood. He had volunteered to take Angie to Caramore for a third time. He wasn't looking forward to it at all. Each of the other two visits had resulted in a further decay of her spirit and it appeared to him that a state of full blown depression was developing. It wasn't hard to understand why.

This time he had called Caramore and spoken to House. He had requested that Al's treatment be postponed until after the visit. He had been assured that the request would be honored and Al would be awake when they came. That would be sure to brighten her spirits. It would be the first time she'd really seen him in over two weeks. Ed was hoping House would make good on his promise.

Just as he completed the list his telephone rang. It was Charlie. "Ed, I want to come down and speak to you" he said.

"I thought you were being followed" replied Ed in a half joking manner. The attempt at humor went right over Charlie's head.

"I probably am, but I think I can get away if I take the long way to your place. Traffic in the city is pretty rough around this time and unless they're real good, I don't think they'll be able to keep up with me. I'll go down through Harrison and Ironbound to confuse them."

Charlie wouldn't say why he wanted to see Ed in person, he just insisted on coming to the clinic.

Two hours passed and Charlie wasn't there yet. Ed was just about to give up on his ever coming when an old yellow Ford pulled up to the curb and out he stepped.

"Where the hell have you been?" asked Ed.

"Well, first I borrowed a friend's car and then I took the long way over like I said I would. That's why I'm so late. I thought taking a different car would help. They're probably lookin' for the BMW" explained Charlie.

"So what do you want to tell me?"

"First, where's the john? It was a long ride" said Charlie. When he returned, he began to explain.

"I think my phone and maybe yours is tapped. I don't have any proof but how else did they get all that information about you? I'm hoping that if they are tapped it's just a recording bug and they're not listening all the time. Look out the window. Do you see any unusual cars or people?" Charlie answered.

Ed moved to the window. Everything looked normal. No unfamiliar cars, no unfamiliar people.

"If you were being followed, it would probably be white guys and I don't see any of them outside. They'd stand out here like tits on a bull" commented Ed.

"If somebody was there actually listening to a phone bug they would be here now, so I guess I was right. I don't think anyone will question me about seeing you, even if they do hear me talking to you on the tape because then they would have to admit they're tappin' the phones. I don't want anybody to know what I'm telling you" continued Charlie.

"This might not have anything to do with Al but then again, maybe it does. Yesterday, they fired the whole grounds crew and some of the maintenance guys at the stadium. I mean all of them, all the guys that used to work with Al. They claimed they were drinking on the job and fired the bunch of them"

"Were they drinking?" asked Ed.

"Not exactly. They'd go out for a beer or two at lunch like everybody else. But they'd been doing that for years and nobody ever said anything. Now, all of a sudden, bang, it's a reason to can them all. They knew about them drinking a couple of beers at lunch before. They never got drunk, not even close. How come they decided to fire them after all these years?" Charlie answered.

"Did you speak to any of them about it?" asked Ed.

"A few of them came to the players to ask for help. They thought that we might have some influence with the head office. We all signed a petition asking for them to be reinstated, but so far, no go" replied Charlie.

As he spoke, his eyes darted nervously back and forth between Ed and the street.

"How could they fire everybody? Who's going to keep the place up?" asked Ed.

"Not everybody was let go. There's still a skeleton crew, maybe a half dozen men mostly the new guys. They said the older men should have known better but the newer ones should get another chance. I guess they're not going to hire them back either. Somebody said they saw an ad in the Times for maintenance and grounds people today. We're not going to be practicing at the Stadium anymore either, not until they get a new crew. The word is that we'll be at a local college field for the rest of the season and use the Stadium for games. That will give the skeleton crew time to get the place in shape for the games" said Charlie.

"This is all very interesting but what's it got to do with Al?" asked Ed.

"Well, just before all this happened, another fellow that worked with Al was out sick. He supposedly had the same kinda problems, sick to his stomach all the time and tired a lot. Some of the guys went to the management and asked them to look into it. They thought that maybe some of the chemicals they were using at the Stadium might be causing the trouble. Then this other stuff happened, so I think maybe there's some relationship. Maybe I'm wrong but it seems funny" said Charlie.

Ed had to agree that again the circumstances appeared to be beyond coincidence, but of course, there was always the possibility it was all pure chance. As the conversation continued, Charlie danced between the window and Ed's desk with ever increasing frequency. After a while, he couldn't contain his anxiety any longer.

"Ed, I told you everything I can. If I get more information I'll get back to you." With that he bid Ed an apologetic goodbye and hastily left.

Ed continued to plod through the pile of paperwork at his desk. He had to finish it before he left, otherwise he couldn't go to Caramore the next day with a clear head. He had taken down some notes and names from Charlie's conversation, things he would mention to Al. Maybe he would be able to put some more pieces in place, if he was awake and coherent. That was yet to be seen.

Two or three hours passed. Between the meandering between patients and phone calls, he was finally making a dent in the pile.

Suddenly the door opened. Ed looked up expecting to see another case of chicken poxes or measles, instead two men, in dark suits, carrying drawn guns, stood in the doorway. Ed, startled by what he saw jumped to his feet.

"What the hell is going on here?" he yelled reflexively.

“Move the chair away from the desk with both hands and sit down” one of the men commanded in a slow deliberate voice.

Ed’s heart was pounding in his throat. He could feel the veins at his temples pounding. He slowly slid the chair to the center of the floor and carefully sat down. The men approached him in silence. They both looked to be middle aged, one black, and one white. The white one spoke.

“You are Doctor Bennett aren’t you?” he said.

“Yes” choked out Ed as best he could.

In all the years he had worked down here, not once had he even seen a gun, much less one pointed at him.

“My name is Pete Hollar and this is Sergeant Stan Mercer. We’re with the Narcotics Enforcement Division. Is anyone else in the building?”

“No” replied Ed in a stuttering voice.

“We have a warrant to search these premises as well as your personal effects for suspected narcotics violations” Hollar continued.

With that his companion reached into his vest pocket, withdrew a paper and held it out while displaying a badge in the other hand. Ed slowly reached for the document. He unfolded it and began to read. He had never seen a search warrant but this did have an official look and the men had badges. It said something to the effect that the bearer was entitled to search the place which was described in specifics as the Springfield Avenue Clinic. At the bottom, it bore the signature of a judge. The entire form was done in the legalese as one might expect. Ed handed it back as slowly as he had accepted it.

“What do you expect to find here? We have the usual pharmaceutical compounds you might expect to find in a clinic. We have proper licensing for all of them” he asked.

“We’re not concerned about those. We’re told that you’re running a private little drugstore here” replied Hollar.

“Please stand up and lean forward against the chair” he added. Ed complied and Mercer proceeded to search him.

“We didn’t think you’d be armed but you gotta be careful today. A cop was shot by an eighty-two year old granny a couple months ago in a drug bust in Chicago. After I read that in the paper I’d search a nun if I was thinkin’ about bustin’ her” said Hollar.

“You can sit down now” he commanded Ed.

“I’ll look in the desk. Make sure there’s no piece lying in there” said Mercer as began to rifle through the drawers. Then as he spoke the rear door to the building opened and three men entered.

“OK! Let’s get this over with” snapped Mercer.

The men began to dissect the clinic, drawer by drawer and shelf by shelf. They removed every band aid and bottle, opening each as they did and sniffing the contents. Every once in a while one of the men would release a loud gasp as he uncorked and sniffed one of the stronger reagents. The desks and cabinets once emptied were inverted and inspected from all angles, top, bottom, back and front. Once the inspection of a particular unit was completed its contents were replaced and the next unit’s inspection was methodically begun in the same manner. The search continued for half an hour, Mercer sat across from Ed the entire time like a cat watching a cornered mouse. He had put his gun away but he sat at the edge of his chair, waiting to strike at even a hint of escape. Ed said nothing, except an occasional disbelieving claim of innocence. Mercer voiced intermittent comments about sports and the weather the kind of comments one might expect to hear between friends in a neighborhood bar. It was surreal.

Suddenly, from the lavatory at the rear of the room came a yell.

“Sarg! Come here. Bring the good doctor with you.”

Mercer motioned to Ed to rise and together they walked towards the bathroom. When they reached the room the cover of the toilet tank had been removed by one of the searchers.

“Look what I found in here” he said smiling a wide grin as he gestured at the toilet. Lying in the bottom of the tank was a small sealed plastic bag filled with a white substance.

“What’s this? The cosmetics department? Let’s take a look at that dusting powder” quipped Mercer to the finder who obligingly pulled up his sleeve and reached into the water to retrieve it.

Mercer took the package and placed it on the nearby table and proceeded to open its water tight seal. He pushed his stubby finger into the bag, pulled it out and put it in his mouth.

“Finger lickin’ good” he said in a snide tone.

Ed couldn’t believe his eyes. What was a half-pound bag of heroin doing in the toilet tank? Where did it come from?

“You have the right to remain silent” Hollar began.

“Christ, this is like a rerun of a TV detective movie” Ed thought.

It must be a bad dream. He was stunned; he stood speechless as Hollar droned on with his monotone soliloquy.

As he finished, Mercer immediately added, “Alright boys, now there’s some blood in the water. Let’s find the mother lode.”

The previous careful disassembly and reassembly of the cabinets and their contents was replaced by a demolition. Two of the men exited the room only to return with two wrecking bars. Soon they began

prying the plaster from the walls to search the cavities behind it. Then up came the floor boards so the spaces between the joists could be checked. Portions of the ceiling were removed to complete the inspection. In a matter of forty- five minutes, the interior of the building was all but demolished.

Ed watched as three years of sweat and struggle was laid to ruin. The search produced no additional results. As the final fragment of lathe was pulled free, Mercer looked at him with a penetrating stare.

“Where’s your car, Doc?” he said in a demanding tone.

Seeing the destruction around him, he knew the meaning behind the question. Ed said nothing.

“Obstructing justice! Hindering police investigation! Don’t make it worse than it already is Doc!” he taunted.

Ed remained silent. As he looked around, he felt a welling up of anger boiling in his guts. He couldn’t have responded if he wanted to. A word leaking out would be followed by a torrent of uncontrolled rage, as surely as a crack in a dam leads to a deluge, and he knew it. Hollar picked up Ed’s wallet from the table where he had placed it during the search. He leafed through its contents and then pulled out a vehicle registration card.

“This should be kept in your car Doc” he said as he waved it back and forth close to Ed’s face.

“It says here that you own a 1972 Chevy convertible, blue, two door, license plate Kay 723. I think I saw a 72 Chevy convertible on the way here.

Stan, how many of those do you think there are around today?” “Not many!” replied Mercer.

“Let’s go check some plates. Put on your coat Doc” he said. “See if you can help us play ‘find the right car’” he continued.

Before they moved towards the door, Ed’s escort handcuffed Ed’s hands behind his back. Mercer, Hollar, Ed and one of the other men walked out towards the street. Hollar was watching Ed’s eyes carefully from the moment they left the building. As they walked through the door, Ed spied the car about twenty-five feet down on the right just where he had left it that morning. Hollar saw his glance to the right and followed it. He studied the street in that direction carefully.

“Let’s take a look down this way” he said as he led them towards the vehicle.

When they reached the car, he stopped, put his foot on the rear bumper and reached into his shirt pocket. He pulled out a half smoked cigar and attempted to squeeze it back into its original, cylindrical shape. Then he placed it between his teeth and lit it. After a few heavy drags it sprang back to life.

“Is this it Doc?” he asked rhetorically.

“Give me the key” he added in the same breath.

Ed couldn't give him the key if he wanted to. It was in his front pocket and his hands were shackled behind his back.

Before he could even respond, Mercer reached into his pocket, pulled out a pen knife and sliced a long opening in the convertible top just above the door. He reached in and unlocked it.

"Sometimes uncooperative suspects make you do things you really don't want to do" he said slyly as he opened the door.

"Make sure there's no shit hidden in there" said Mercer.

With that Hollar began to slice open each roll of the leather seats, one after the other. The other cop tore up the carpets while Mercer kept a close eye on Ed.

"You dirty bastards" Ed screamed as the fury within him finally gushed to the surface like an erupting volcano. He lunged forward at Mercer attempting to butt him with his head, like an enraged bull. He struck him dead center, just beneath the rib cage. Mercer gasped and the cigar flew from his mouth like a cork from a pop gun. He turned and slumped forward over the hood trying to regain his breath. Ed viciously kicked at his unprotected posterior cursing at the top of his voice as he did so.

Hollar, upon hearing the commotion jumped from the car to subdue him. The other man also leapt from the car to help. In a few moments, Ed found himself face down on the sidewalk with Hollar's foot on the back of his neck.

Mercer had straightened up now and weakly addressed him in an angered voice.

"There's other people in this with you. Try some more shit like that and we'll get a warrant to search your girlfriend only we won't be as gentle as we are with you."

He walked over and picked up the still lit cigar from the street. Hollar had stood Ed up against the car.

"Do you understand me Hothead?" asked Mercer as he blew a cloud of smoke directly into Ed's face.

"Make sure the dash is clean" he shouted. Hollar walked back to the clinic and returned with the wrecking bar.

In minutes, the dash was lying on what was left of the front seats.

Ed was relatively calm now. He spent all his anger in the one violent burst and he was drained.

He knew Mercer meant business when he talked about Rita. He didn't want to get her involved with these guys; that was for sure. He watched powerlessly, as the destruction was completed.

"The car's clean" Hollar announced.

"I've got enough here I guess" said Mercer as he pulled the plastic bag from his pocket.

"Put the Doc in the car and get the boys."

Ed was guided towards an unmarked gray Chevy and pushed into the back seat. Mercer slid in next to him. In a few moments, Hollar and one of the other cops climbed into the front seat and the car headed downtown.

Chapter 5

They let Ed make a phone call between the finger printing and the booking. He didn't have much of a selection from which to choose. At this point, the only people he could trust were Rita and Charlie. Charlie didn't even want his name mentioned in the same room with the word drugs and for good reason. In spite of that Ed knew he would help if he called him. He didn't want Rita involved either but she wouldn't be under the same pressure as Charlie.

He remembered he and Rita had met a lawyer from the legal aid office down on Prince Street a few times regarding police brutality charges filed by one of his patients. The lawyer's name was Mike Woodall. He came to the clinic to investigate the charges. Ed's patient had claimed that he was beaten by the cops in a gambling raid. It turned out that he was beaten alright but by a guy to whom he owed six hundred bucks. The cops happened to raid the place just as he was being worked over in the back room and the cops really wound up saving his ass.

The guy who was doing the beating talked the guy he was beating into filing phony charges against the cops as a lever to get himself out of the gambling charge. In return he was going to let the six hundred go. When all this was revealed Mike dropped the police brutality charges.

During that incident he and Mike had talked quite a bit about social conscience and the needs of the community at those meetings. They found they had a common ground. From those conversations he felt Mike had a sense of morality as well as competency. Maybe he could do something to help him now?

He called Rita. He spoke to her under Mercer's watchful eye. He explained to her what had happened that he was charged with heroin procession and the clinic had been destroyed by the police search. Ed spoke in a rapid, nervous manner. The whole incident was so astounding that it was difficult expressing it in words. Rita listened in disbelief. She said little. He asked her to call Woodall and tell him the story and see if he would help.

That night was one of the longest he could remember. He was led down a long, windowless, corridor with dirty yellow walls. At the end was a door fitted with a small wire mesh glass window looking into the cell area. On the other side of the door stood the rows of cells each measuring about five by eight feet, containing two or three men. On the rear wall of each was a stainless steel toilet and sink.

His arrival was unheeded by the jail's residents. Some whispered to each other but most were uninterested. His cell was already occupied by two other men; a tall, thin black man with sunken eyes and a shorter Hispanic man. The latter spoke no English. Periodically, he walked to the door of the cell and yelled in Spanish, in a loud, high pitched voice.

Ed knew a little Espanola from high school and a little from his work with Puerto Ricans at the clinic. From what he could tell it was strictly Spanish profanity mixed with frustration. The black man was groggy and said almost nothing. He appeared to be either drunk or drugged. Ed didn't smell any booze so he assumed drugs.

From down the hall, came screams at intervals of every ten minutes, followed by a chorus of shouts for quiet.

The air had the smell of a five day old undershirt. He wasn't sure if that was the general odor of the whole jail or if one of his cellmates was the source.

He picked the bunk that was unoccupied and laid down. The paper thin mattress did little to cushion the hardness of the metal bed. His mind drifted towards the unbelievable events of the day. How could all of this have happened to him? Where did the heroin come from? It was obviously planted but by whom? Maybe the cops themselves put it there? But why?

Ed slept on and off that night, mostly off. He was awakened the next morning by the screams of his black cellmate. As he opened his eyes he saw him standing on the upper bunk in a crouched position gesturing fearfully at the floor. His cries made repeated references to imaginary creatures below. The guy had evidently come down off whatever he had taken and was in the DTs. After a few minutes guards entered the cell and attempted to quiet him. He flailed violently as they tried to remove him from his precarious perch. Shortly, two additional men arrived with a straight jacket and after several minutes of struggle, they successfully wrestled him into it. They proceeded to handcuff his one leg to the chain supporting the lower bunk. In a little while, a man came into the cell carrying a hypodermic needle and injected him with it. Within moments he ceased his shouting and fell into a drowsy calm. Later that morning he was taken from the cell.

It was early afternoon before anyone spoke to Ed.

The Hispanic man had stopped his ranting and spent most of his time lying on his bunk in silence as did Ed. Ed had attempted to talk to him a couple of times but it was futile. Ed didn't know enough Spanish and he knew no English.

Suddenly, a guard appeared at the cell door. "Bennett?" he said inquiringly.

"Yes" Ed replied.

"You've got visitors. Come with me" he said as he unlocked the door and slide it open.

He was led to a large room separated into two sections by a heavy wire screen from ceiling to floor. Chairs were placed on both sides of the room close to the screen. He saw Rita and Mike at the far side of the room.

They moved quickly towards each other and pulled up the metal chairs on opposite sides of the wire partition.

"How are you Ed?" Rita tearfully blurted.

"I'd be better if I was on your side of this thing" he replied, grasping the screen with one hand. A guard in the corner moved to them.

"Get your hands off the partition" he commanded in a stern voice while waving his baton at Ed. Ed tried to look as unaffected as possible.

"We went by the clinic or what's left of it. The only thing they forgot to do was break the windows and tear down the sign" said Rita.

"It's awful. I don't think we'll ever be able to open again, not there anyway" she added.

"I brought Mike. He said he would help."

Mike was dark haired, about thirty or so, with a full beard and deep-set blue eyes. He wore a neat blue suit, with extra wide lapels and a slight flare in the trouser leg. The shirt, with its long pointy collar and the wide tie completed the outfit. He carried a large, black briefcase with scuffed corners and a frayed handle. His wire rimmed glasses were hung halfway down the bridge of his crooked nose. He looked like a guest star in 'Mod Squad' the old nineteen sixties TV show.

"Man, they really did a job on you Buddy" he started.

"You must have been stompin' on some big toes to cause all this nastiness. Tell Uncle Mike the story."

"There isn't any story. The cops showed up yesterday at the clinic with a search warrant, looked around, pulled some heroin out of my toilet tank and then wrecked the place along with my car. Then they brought me here. That's it. Some story, huh?" replied Ed.

"Why did they search the place to begin with?" asked Mike.

"I don't know. They said they were looking for drugs."

"And they found them. Where did they come from?" interjected Mike.

"God knows" replied Ed. "I certainly didn't put them there that's for sure."

There was a long pause in the conversation as Mike looked straight into Ed's eyes.

"The whole thing's a setup" said Mike.

"I just wanted to hear it all from you. I saw the papers on the charge before we came in here. The judge that signed that search warrant would sign one for a strip search of Mother Theresa, if he was paid enough by the right people. He's under the control of a lot of high power money men in the state. He's let big time drug dealers off more than once. Meanwhile, the little guys I defend get it up the poop shoot every time. The man's been bought and paid for a hundred times over. That's what makes me

think you've been pokin' a stick at the wrong dog lately. The heroin's a plant by the cops that arrested you."

Then Mike stopped to think for a minute before he continued.

"Hollar and Mercer?" interjected Ed.

"Yeah, Hollar and Mercer. They're the hired hands down here. They do educational seminars so to speak. If somebody does what he's not supposed to, they teach him a lesson. Private tutoring if you know what I mean. That's their stock and trade.

They're controlled by the same people that call the shots for Blackman, the judge who wrote the warrant. The question is what did you do to invoke their wrath? They don't do this kinda stuff to people for double parkin'. It must be something pretty serious" Mike mused out loud.

"What about the heroin? Where did that come from?" asked Ed.

"Either the cops themselves brought it or they sent somebody to plant it beforehand. Maybe somebody posing as a patient could have done it. In any case it was put there so they could find it and then have an excuse to destroy the place to teach you a lesson "Mike replied.

"What happens next?" asked Ed.

"Well a lot probably depends on what you've done."

"I've done nothing" snapped Ed almost instantaneously.

"That might be what you think but you're involved in something that some important people don't like" Mike answered.

"Maybe I could just ask what the problem is" suggested Ed.

"Who are you going to ask? The President? The Governor? Write a letter to the editor of the New York Times? It's not that easy" chided Mike.

"What about the cops or Blackman?" asked Ed.

"They don't know. They just get instructions and do what they're told. It doesn't make any difference to them as long as they get paid. We're gonna have to figure this out on our own."

"What do I do in the meantime?" said Ed.

"You stay right here. Don't leave. Don't go on any trips" joked Mike. After a second, they all laughed, more for the relief than the humor.

"I don't think you'll even go to trial on this. The way they wrecked that clinic, gives you an out and whoever set the whole thing up knew that to begin with. They just wanted to make a real good point" said Mike.

“Does that mean I’ll be out soon?” asked Ed.

“Not necessarily soon, but you’ll be out. It all depends on their next move. No bail has been set. If they want to keep you here, they’ll delay that as long as possible and then put a big number on it. Of course, we’ll scream like hell and appeal it. That takes time and meantime you’ll be here. So you see it all depends on what they’re doing and how long they want you in here” replied Mike.

“Now let’s get back to what this is about” he added.

“That thing with Charlie’s friend at Caramore might have something to do with it.

You mentioned that when Lucky was poisoned” said Rita

Ed hesitated for a moment.

“That’s the only unusual kind of thing that happened to me before Lucky’s death. Maybe you’re right. Up until then everything was sailin’ right along and then all of a sudden-.”

He stopped and gazed down at the floor.

“Well, let’s hear it” said Mike.

He opened his brief case and took out a notepad and pen. “OK, shoot.”

Ed told him the entire story, from the first phone call from Charlie to his final trip to Caramore with Angie. As he spoke, Mike wrote continually only stopping him occasionally for clarifications.

“Is that all you know?” asked Mike as Ed’s story came to an end. Ed nodded.

“I think the first thing we should do is try to get you out of here. It will take some time, like I said, but we have to get started. Secondly, I’m going to see what I can find out about this situation up in New York” said Mike as he pushed his carefully written notes into the crowded briefcase. At that moment, a guard walked over towards Ed.

“That’s about it for today. You gotta go now” he said as he motioned to them.

Everyone rose, said their goodbyes and Ed was led back to his cell.

Five days passed. The Hispanic had been replaced twice over by assorted petty criminals. The first was in for assault in a bar room fight, the second a suspect in a gas station hold up. Both talked a lot but said little.

Ed found their common talent was an ingenious ability to substitute the word fuck for almost any of the eight parts of speech and an even greater versatility of intonations and inflections with its use. Although, not liking it, he began to find himself more at ease in the situation. Maybe it was Mike’s reassurance that he would be released or maybe he was just getting used to the place

The food seemed better than he initially thought and he found he could even sleep at night despite the continual chatter and noise. Even the stench had subsided; it was probably olfactory fatigue and his generalized conditioning he thought to himself.

Rita visited each day and although she brought much consolation, she had little news from Mike. The only thing he had said was the bail was posted at \$300,000 and he was appealing it. She was about to take a job at a small private hospital in order to survive and expressed little hope of putting the clinic back together. Some of the people in the neighborhood had visited him and others had helped Rita to salvage what she could from the ruins. Sam had lined up a small room in the basement of an abandoned building and the recovered equipment was stored there. He assured her it would be safe there and it probably would be if he said it would.

Sam never came to visit Ed. He told Rita it was like some people never going to funeral parlors, no matter how much they loved the deceased person. Having been in prison so many times himself, he had developed an acute aversion to the place.

Several of the local businesses had offered well intended but meager, donations to restart the clinic at a new location. A landlord had even volunteered a store front, rent free but Rita knew she wasn't strong enough to go it alone. She was tough but without Ed to lean on she knew it would be impossible.

On the sixth day, Mike came with Rita. Ed was eager to see him. At this point, even bad news would be preferable to no news.

"I'm still working on this" he began.

"I really couldn't find out too much about who put out the paper on you but I did look into your friend John House up at Caramore. He doesn't just work at Caramore, he's going to be the new owner in about ten months. Right now he's under contract to close the deal next October. The price is about sixty mill. He and two other guys are doing the financing, but he's the principal. There's probably some other minor partners too."

"What's that got to do with me?" asked Ed anxiously.

"Well, I really don't know, but here's some more information.

House was the largest individual bondholder in the construction of the Meadowlands Sports Complex. I heard that his total commitment was about fifteen million at the time. This was about seven or eight years ago. That means that right now he's worth about twenty-five or thirty million, with the interest. According to what I've been able to piece together, the reason House isn't closing until October is so he can sell off his holdings in those bonds a little at a time and accumulate the necessary cash. He can't just dump all that paper on the market at once or that would drive down the selling price of the bonds and he'd come up short. Now I'm not sure how all this fits, but there may be some connection between the ground keeper at the stadium and House's financial interests there. What the connection is, I couldn't even guess but now at least there's a fine thread. It's not much but it's something."

"I've told you everything I know" said Ed.

"I wish I had more pieces for the puzzle."

There was a temporary lull in the conversation. Each of them was engrossed in thought, trying to decide what could be done next. Ed broke the silence.

"Have you started your next job at that hospital yet?" he asked.

"Not yet" she responded.

"How would you like some clean country air?" he said.

"When I was a kid, my mother used to let me stay on my Uncle's farm in North Carolina for a few weeks every summer. I'm a good old country gal at heart" she replied jokingly.

She knew what Ed was up to.

He looked at her with an understanding gaze.

"Rita, I really don't know how dangerous this could be but at this point, it looks like anything goes" he began.

"If you don't want to do this, I understand."

"You mean get a job at Caramore" she interrupted.

"Well, if I could get a foot in the door up there I might be able to look over House's shoulder and get some more information. I don't think he would know me and you said he mentioned the big turnover in doctors they had, so it probably won't be too difficult to get the job" she added.

She was already beginning to outline a plan of operation.

"I'll need some references. Obviously, I can't give the Springfield Avenue Free Clinic, as my last place of employment, can I?"

She paused.

"I know. I'll call Len Martin. He runs a medical group over in Maplewood. I'll get him to give me a reference like I'd been working for him for the last couple of years. I'm pretty sure he'll do it. We got along pretty well in med school."

"Got along okay. You went out with him for about six months before I met you" added Ed.

Rita pretended she didn't hear it and continued.

"I'll have to come up with a reason for needing this reference. I don't want to tell him the whole story. The fewer people that know about all this, the better is the way I see it. I don't want to use my real

name either, that way it will be harder for them to trace me, if somebody begins to catch on to me. We'll have to think of a good story for Len" she concluded.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Rita?" asked Ed seriously.

"And miss a chance to play Sam Spade, are you kidding?" she snapped back playfully.

Ed was torn between her devotion to him and his deep fear for her safety. After his experiences of the past week, he knew, whoever was at the root of this was playing hard ball, all the way. As he left the visiting room that day, he felt a bittersweet mixture of ambiguity stirring within him. He didn't sleep very well that night. He could have been at the Hilton and it wouldn't have been any better. All night long, he debated with himself as to whether Rita should be allowed to do what they were planning. But then again, how could he stop her, even if he wanted to? She was as strong willed as he was that was for sure.

The next day, Rita visited again as usual. He was glad to see her of course, but he felt uneasy about what she might tell him.

"I called Len this morning. He asked about you. I told him I thought you were alright. He knew about this thing with the heroin bust. It was in the papers for two days straight. I never showed you and neither did Mike because we didn't want to make things seem worse than they already were at the time. My name wasn't mentioned in the paper at all, so he didn't know that we ran the clinic together. I pretended I hadn't seen you in months. I gave him the impression that I had spoken to you only occasionally and the phone I thought it would be better that way.

"What kind of story did you give him about your need for a reference?" asked Ed.

"I thought that one out last night. I told him that I had had a slight problem with cocaine and that I was in a rehab center for the past year. I said that my previous employer knew about my problem and I didn't want to use him as a reference because I didn't want my rehab revealed and I thought they might. I laid it on pretty thick."

"What did he say?" asked Ed.

"He seemed kinda shocked, about the coke. Him knowing me as he does, if I was he I guess I would have been shocked too!" she said.

"Did he go for it?"

"I'll find out tonight. He asked me out for dinner, for old time sake, he said. I think everything will be OK. Sometimes a little personal touch can do much more than a phone conversation, if you know what I mean" she said with a coy smile on her lips.

"I think he'll cooperate" she added.

"I hope you don't do too much cooperating" Ed replied.

"If he agrees to give me the reference I'll call tomorrow. If they have an immediate opening, I'll leave right away. I may not see you for a while. I'll come back when I can" she added quietly.

"Take care of yourself. Remember, you're not Wonder Woman, even if you do look like her" he said as their hands touched through the mesh.

She moved her head closer and pressed her lips through the open diamonds of the screening. As their lips were about to meet, a shout from the guard, shattered the moment.

"Keep back from the screen" came his shouted command.

Chapter 6

Rita didn't visit Ed the next day. Everything was working out as she had planned.

She had called Caramore the same day she saw Ed. She told them of an interest in post graduate work in psychiatry and her eagerness for experience in the field at a prestigious institution like Caramore. They in turn expressed the desire to interview her for a current opening and arrangements were made. The next day at two o'clock she would meet with the director of personnel. The only thing that stood in her way now was Martin's reference and that she was sure would be no problem. So far, it seemed much easier than she thought it would be.

The next morning she was on the way to Ellensville. She spent the entire three hour and twenty minute ride rehearsing the details of her fictitious employment. Len had given her the recommendation she wanted and it portrayed her as an outstanding physician in all respects. As long as she kept her stories straight, the rest of it should be simple she thought.

She arrived in Ellensville at twelve thirty and parked in front of the local paper store on the main street of town. Several doors down the street, she noticed a sign - "Wedgewood Cafeteria- Good Food" it read. She had at least an hour to spare. Caramore couldn't be more than ten minutes away. She walked to the cafeteria. It was a small, coffee shop kind of arrangement with several tables covered by neat yellow tablecloths and windows with matching yellow curtains. At the far end of the room was a counter, lined with six stools, behind which stood a man wearing a white shirt and pants. At one end of the counter sat a lone customer, a dark haired man appearing to be in his early thirties. He was dressed in gray slacks and a dark blue sport jacket. He looked up from the paper he was reading as Rita entered.

"Good afternoon" the man behind the counter said cheerfully. Rita returned his pleasant greeting and sat down.

She ordered a cup of coffee and a tuna sandwich. She looked randomly about the room as she waited for her meal to be prepared. Her careful gaze suddenly caught a glimpse of a familiar insignia on the

shirt pocket of the other customer. It was one of those pocket inserts, used to protect shirts from the ravages of uncapped pens and pencils. It bore large red letters spelling out the word Squibb.

"Excuse me" she began "Do you work at Caramore?"

He looked up, simultaneously, as though he might have been about to speak to her at the very instant she addressed him.

"Yes I do. How do you know? Do you work there too?" he asked.

"No, I noticed your pocket guard has the word Squibb on it, so I thought since Caramore is the largest hospital around here, you might work there" she explained.

"Excellent logic! Are you a detective?" he replied jokingly.

"No, not really. I'm Margaret Bickford. I'm applying for a physician's position at Caramore this afternoon."

"Oh, a new doctor, huh. I'm Larry Stein" he said.

"Are you on the medical staff up there?" she asked.

"I'm a pharmacist. I'm in charge of the pharmacy at the hospital" he replied.

"How long have you worked there?"

"About two years, now" he answered.

"What's it like?" she asked.

"This is the second institution I've been with. It's much better than the first one I was at. From what I'm told it's the best from both a patient and an employee standpoint. The pay is good and the hours are okay. If you really want the job, you shouldn't have too much trouble. There's a big turnover of young doctors on the staff. It's not because of any problems with the job but a lot of them just want some psychiatric experience and after they get it they move on to better things like private practice. Here they get the experience and a decent salary at the same time. The only thing that I find difficult about it is all the hush, hush stuff."

"What do you mean?" asked Rita.

"Well, there are a lot of rich and famous people with big problems at Caramore as patients. These people want total anonymity at all cost. Then you have reporters from every sleazy tabloid in the country constantly trying to find out who is there and why. We've had them disguise themselves as everything from doctors to garbage collectors. The result is you spend more time on security precautions and locking things up than doing your work. It tends to grind you down. But then again, I guess that's part of the job in a place like this.

Listen, when you go for the interview today mention my name to Ann. Ann Brost is the lady in personnel that will probably be talking to you. When you get the job, come down to the pharmacy and see me, building A-3, downstairs. Tell the guard to call me on the intercom and I'll okay it so he'll let you through. Now, don't forget Margaret" he said as he arose from the stool and folded the paper under his arm.

"I've got to go now. I just came down here on my lunch hour for a haircut and it's about time I get back. It's after one already" he paused for a moment and then added, "I hope I see you again, soon."

"I hope so, too. It all depends on how things go this afternoon" she replied as he walked towards the door.

Rita finished her lunch in a leisurely fashion.

She spoke to the counterwoman as she ate. He didn't add much to what she already knew about Caramore, but the conversation was pleasant and helped to pass the time.

It was one thirty-five when she left the cafeteria and headed to the hospital. After a brief interrogation at the gatehouse she was directed towards the administration building. Although the guard questioned her, the encounter seemed significantly less rigorous than that described by Ed.

At the administration building, she was guided to a small waiting room with an adjoining office at the rear of the building. After five minutes had past the office door opened and in the entrance stood a short, blonde woman.

"Doctor Bickford?" the woman addressed her in an inquiring tone.

"Yes" replied Rita.

"Hi, I'm Ann Brost, please come in."

Rita followed her into a comfortably furnished office and sat down on the sofa across from the desk. She handed the references Len had given her to Brost, who accepted them with a courteous smile. She could feel a pulsing in her throat as she struggled to maintain an air of external composure.

"What if I can't pull this off?" kept flashing through her mind as she watched Brost look through her credentials in silence.

"God damn it, let's get this over with" she thought. It was like opening night and the curtain was jammed. Brost reached up and removed her glasses as she placed the papers on her desk. She looked straight at Rita without saying a word as if she was waiting for her to speak.

Rita said nothing. She wasn't sure she could shout over her pounding heart beat even if she wanted to.

"Everything looks good here. I'll have to call Doctor Martin to confirm this of course. You don't mind, do you?" Brost asked.

"No, not at all" she forced out in a crackling voice. She immediately cleared her throat attempting to cover up the nervous tone.

From that point on, it got easier. By the time the interview ended, Rita's heart rate had almost reached normal. After a routine series of questions, mostly medical, Brost stood up behind the desk and extended her hand.

"I think you could begin tomorrow Doctor Bickford" she said. Rita arose and they shook hands.

"That would be fine" she replied.

Brost picked up the phone and called for an escort to show her to her apartment.

"After you're settled, call me, and I'll have someone show you the facilities. Tomorrow, report to Doctor Kelly in building A-5. He'll be your supervisor and he'll outline your duties."

The apartment was similar to what one might expect in a high quality condominium. It had a single bedroom, a spacious living room, a small dining area and an adequate kitchen. It was furnished in decorator fashion, complete with high pile wall to wall and floor to ceiling draperies. A large picture window at one end of the living room offered a bright view of the mountainous landscape. On the cocktail table was a bottle of champagne bearing a note, "Welcome aboard Doctor Bickford" signed by the Caramore Staff and Management.

On the kitchen table, a gaily decorated flower display had been placed. The man who had escorted her placed the suitcases in the bedroom and handed her a set of keys. After inquiring about any further needs, he quietly departed. Caramore was luxurious to say the least.

Rita spent the rest of the day being guided through the buildings that comprised Caramore. The tour was thorough. She took special note of building A-3, which was a top security location complete with guards at each corridor entrance. It was obvious that security was of the highest priority everywhere but especially at A-3. The escort continually emphasized the measures taken as being state of the art.

As she walked back to her apartment after the tour, she felt a little discouraged before she had even begun her mission. The methods used at Caramore were designed to thwart a professional, much less an amateur such as her.

Rita kicked off her shoes and laid on the bed.

She'd worry about unpacking the suitcases later. The tension of the day had taken its toll. It was about two hours before dinner. An hour of sleep would freshen her up for the next act. She closed her eyes and drifted into a deep, revitalizing sleep.

Suddenly, a sharp rapping startled her from the unconscious state. She sat up abruptly and looked about the room. The rapping continued.

"Margaret, its Larry Stein. Are you going to dinner?" she heard a muted voice coming from the hall.

She glanced at the alarm clock on the night stand. Six fifteen. She arose from the bed and stumbled into the small hallway to hear Larry's voice coming from the other side of the door.

"One minute" she shouted at the closed door as she walked to the bathroom and flicked on the light. She hurriedly ran a comb through her hair and looked in the mirror. She went to the door and opened it. There stood Larry.

"Hi, I checked with Ann Brost in personnel. I told you that you would get the job" he said with a touch of boast. "I thought I'd come by and see if you wanted some company for dinner tonight. It's kind of a drag to eat alone in a new place" he said with a pleasant smile.

"Come in Larry" she responded. "Give me a minute to put myself together and I'd be happy to eat with you. Thank you for being so considerate."

Larry sat in one of the easy chairs near the window.

"I really appreciate your coming by like this" said Rita as she looked through one of the suitcases for her make up kit.

Ten minutes later, they entered the professional staff dining hall together. The maître' de met them at the entrance.

"Mr. Stein and?" he said quizzically.

"Doctor Bickford" replied Larry.

"My name is Ralph" said the maître' de as he extended his hand to her.

"Doctor Kelly has requested that Doctor Bickford be seated with him tonight. Now that I know who you are will you please follow me?" he added with a smile.

Ralph led them towards the far corner of the dining room. The room had all the accouterments of an expensive restaurant, rather than a dining hall. It was complete with linen tablecloths and napkins, chandeliers, over stuffed captain's chairs and a general air of elegance. Doctor Kelly rose from his chair as they approached.

"Doctor Bickford, this is Doctor Kelly" announced Ralph.

"I'll send Mildred to take your order immediately" he added as he pulled the chairs back from the table to accommodate Rita and Larry.

Kelly reached over and shook hands with Rita.

"It's Frank, Frank Kelly" he said, "It's a pleasure to meet you Doctor Bickford."

"Margaret" she replied cordially.

Kelly was a middle aged, gray haired man, with a long gray mustache. He wore a well-tailored, blue pinstripe suit and cowboy boots. He had soft, blue eyes that smiled as he spoke.

"I see you've already met our resident alchemist" he said in a soft voice as he glanced towards Larry with a grin.

"Oh, we're old friends. We go back about twelve hours together" Larry said jokingly and proceeded to explain their encounter at the cafeteria earlier that afternoon.

The conversation was pleasant but a strain for Rita at times. She continually had to remind herself to be careful not to contradict anything she might have said previously. As the evening wore on however the task became easier. It began to seem like an impromptu play. She had been in several plays in high school and college. The difference was that this time the dress rehearsal and opening night were one and the same.

Kelly had a lively sense of wit and intertwined the discussion of her duties with anecdotes about well-known celebrities he had treated at Caramore. He had a talent for tactfully extracting humor from tragic incidents. He directed the alcoholic rehabilitation section. That's where Rita would be working.

Larry added a measure of charm to the evening as well. Between the two of them, she felt as at home as she possibly could, considering the situation.

Larry walked her back to her apartment that evening. It was becoming obvious that his attention was a bit more than that of a Welcome Waggoner. Rita found him attractive too. His charm was hard to overlook.

"Too bad things aren't different" she thought as she prepared herself for bed.

As she laid down that night, her mind moved from the pleasantries of the evening, to thoughts of Ed, the clinic and the purpose of her presence at Caramore.

Chapter 7

The next morning, Rita arrived at Building A-5, shortly after breakfast. She met Doctor Kelly and began her assignments. She was to collect routine daily physical data on patients residing on the first and second floor. She spent much of the morning getting to know her new patients. Kelly provided a brief introduction to each as they visited the rooms. As they walked, he described the use of the Scantron Sheets with which he was working.

"We code all data such as BP, heart rate, temperature and the like on the sheets which are then forwarded to the central computer for compiling and integration with existing data on the patient. Within minutes after the round we are provided with a summary printout on the condition and problem

areas for each. With this information, we can then return to those individuals who are experiencing difficulties and prescribe additional testing or treatment as necessary” he explained.

The system and the equipment were the finest. No technological advance was left unused.

Rita couldn’t help but compare it to the prehistoric conditions in which she had worked in Newark. Working at Caramore was a quantum leap from that. There a thermometer with digital read out was the major equipment purchase of the entire three years the clinic was open.

She completed the rounds with Kelly. He would continue to accompany her for the next several days until she became completely familiar with the operation. Although, many of the techniques were new to her, medicine is still the prerogative of the physician and Rita felt comfortable in the wealth of her medical knowledge. Much of what she saw that morning was familiar to her, in spite of her lack of hands on experience. She never was one to let a copy of The New England Journal of Medicine or the Journal of the American Medical Association slip by her without reading it cover to cover.

At lunch that afternoon, Kelly introduced her to Jack Robbins, the director of the computer service at Caramore. She would be with Jack for the remainder of the day. The following afternoon would be devoted to laboratory procedures at the clinic and finally the third day would include the pharmacy with Larry. As Kelly explained, “This scheduling is used with all new medical personnel at Caramore. It allows them to become acquainted with the total operation of the hospital and the people and services vital to its functioning.”

The Computer Services Center was in Building A-4. In it a large basement room housed a mainframe unit fed by the terminals throughout the complex. Four men, wearing white lab coats, scurried about carrying stacks of print out sheets and tape reels. Jack stood by his desk which was piled high with assorted sheets of paper. He was busily sifting through several of them as she entered his office.

“God damn program’s not running right again” he said as he looked up from behind a dense cloud of pipe smoke.

“Please close the door. The machine doesn’t like smoke. It’s got no vices except for screwin’ me up” he mumbled.

She closed the door which separated the small glass enclosed office from the main computer room.

“Please sit down. I’ll be with you in one second” he said as he puffed out another smoke cloud.

She sat silently while he continued to scrutinize the papers he held. In a few minutes he put them down, walked over to a nearby terminal and turned it on.

“Let me show you how this works” he said as he motioned her over towards the screen.

“First of all, in order to get into the data bank you’ll need a password” he began.

"It changes each day, your supervisor will tell you your word for the day when you meet with him in the morning. Everybody has his own word for the day. It will probably be a nonsense word like LZYX or KIJU. It will always be four letters. The machine's a pervert; it only uses four letter words" he said with a sheepish grin.

"Sometimes the words get pretty raunchy. They're generated by the computer each day as a random series of letters, so anything's possible. One department has a pool to see who will be the first one to get a particular word, usually an obscenity. Everybody throws in ten bucks a week and the winner takes the pot. Last time they told me the prize was up around three hundred dollars before somebody finally won.

Your word allows you to enter the files for your patients only. It records any unauthorized attempts to enter any files, other than yours. You should never disclose your password to anyone until the end of your shift, at which time your word becomes invalid and the computer will not accept it. The machine will not divulge your password under any circumstances, not even to me. The only record you will have will be the print out given to you by your supervisor each morning in a sealed envelope. To input your word, first press the control X key and then type your word. This way it never appears on the monitor and no one can ever see it" he said as he demonstrated on the keyboard.

All print out material must be accounted for each day and turned into your supervisor. The computer notes any print commands, so everything can be collected and none ever gets out. There are no photocopy machines in the building and no records are permitted to leave the premises in written or printed form. Are you with me so far?" he asked.

Rita hesitated for a minute. The security precautions were amazing. It was making a James Bond plot look almost childlike.

"Yes" she replied feebly.

"All this may look silly to you, but we are constantly being tested by professional investigators and reporters trying to get stories about famous people for some shoddy magazine or newspaper" he said with a scowl. He paused for a second.

"People come here for help, not harassment. They insist on the strictest of privacy for their personal lives. They're willing to pay for that and we do everything that can be done to give it to them" he said sternly.

"Once you've entered your correct password, the machine will greet you personally. That's your signal that you're logged on. Watch this."

He typed a series of letters, pressed the return key and the monitor responded with "Good afternoon, Jack Robbins – what may I do for you today?"

"See, now we're ready to access a file" said Jack enthusiastically. "None of the patients, here at Caramore are identified by name. The reason for that is obvious. Instead, each is assigned a number.

The number is based on the room and building occupied by that particular patient. For example, you'll be working in building A-5 on the first and second floor. If you wanted the records for the individual in room 100 in your building, you would type in A0015. Notice the building letter is inputted first, followed by the room number in reverse sequence and finally the building number. Let me show you."

Jack typed the number as he had described it in his explanation.

"Access denied" flashed on the monitor screen.

"Ah, you see the computer will not accept commands for data which is not authorize. My password doesn't allow me to access data for your patients" he said with a sense of pride.

"Now, let's try it with your word."

"I don't know my word" Rita exclaimed.

"Of course you don't but I do, so I can demonstrate the system to you. Doctor Kelly gave it to me at lunch, so I could show you how to use it."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out an envelope which he proceeded to tear open.

In it was a small slip of paper. On it was printed TYIW. He handed it to her.

"Here, try this" he said.

Rita typed the word into the terminal.

"Good afternoon Margaret Bickford. What may I do for you today?" it read.

"Now type in a request for the patient in room 100" prompted Robbins.

Rita obediently entered A0015 and immediately there appeared a complete history. All medical data, past and present was displayed for Mrs. Goodwin, patient number AI0015C13.

"I thought you said no names were ever used?" said Rita.

"That's true. No real names are ever used" replied Robbins.

"These names are pseudonyms. The computer arbitrarily assigns a name like Smith or Jones or something to each patient. Some people object to addressing individuals by numbers, even on records and so this is a way to make them feel more at ease. Some of the names are given by the patients themselves if they want to use a particular alias" he explained.

"What's this additional code- C13?" asked Rita.

"That represents the number of the current patient in that room as opposed to other patients who have occupied the same room previously. The computer automatically calls the number of the current patient. To access previous patients a specific input code is required" said Robbins.

"If you need data for a patient who is no longer hospitalized here, see your supervisor and he will get it for you. I doubt you'll ever need that kind of information though. Generally, they go back to their private physician and he gets the records directly from them. We only issue medical records directly to the patients themselves. That way information can't inadvertently fall into the hands of the wrong people, not through our fault anyway" he said assuredly.

"Now if you want data for someone else, press control N" suggested Jack.

Rita tried it and again the monitor asked for a patient number.

"The computer also keeps a record of each chart you've called up and when it was requested" he added.

As the afternoon progressed, Rita became increasingly aware of the sophistication of the system and its apparent invulnerability. Each day, every staff physician was required to access the records of each of his patients. Failure to do so was recorded in his supervisor's file so he could be alerted to the oversight. That way every patient's condition received a daily review by his attending doctor. New test results and diagnosis were highlighted on each record by flashing indicators, so as to keep each physician aware of up to the minute changes in patient status.

Jack instructed Rita to run through the records of her patients as she might do on a typical day.

"If you have any problems or questions, I'll be right out here. Just call me" he said as he pointed towards the main computer room.

She began to input the codes and as she did the corresponding records covered the monitor screen, one after the other. She wrote a series of notes pertaining to the unfamiliar signs, symbols and flashing markers that appeared periodically in some of the read outs.

After about an hour, she looked up and caught Jack's eye through the office glass. She motioned him to her with an apologetic wave.

"I'm glad you called me here. This gives me an excuse for a smoke" he said while he closed the door and reached for his pipe on the desk where he had left it.

"What's the problem?" he asked between puffs as he relit it.

"Well, I understand how to operate the terminal now but some of the coding is unclear" she replied and showed him the list of esoteric symbols she had copied.

"No problem" he said. He opened the drawer of a nearby file cabinet and withdrew a sheet listing various codes.

"This will help." he said and handed her the sheet.

"Keep it with you until you've memorized them all. I should have given this to you right in the beginning."

Rita took the sheet and began to recall the previously undecipherable records. Jack peered over her shoulder as she did so, continually offering unsolicited but valuable advice.

When she left the computer center that afternoon, she felt a bit of optimism beginning to develop. Although the security techniques Robbins had demonstrated were formidable, at least now she had some understanding of the system and how it worked. In understanding lies strength in the face of adversity and from the glimmer of knowledge she had obtained that day she felt confidence starting to grow.

The next step was to somehow get a look at Al Druse's records. With the sheet Jack had given her, it would be easy to interpret if she could only get to see it. As she walked back towards her apartment she pondered how she could get access to that file. From what she had seen, it wouldn't be easy but deep inside she had the feeling that it would be done.

That evening Rita drove to town. She had to know what was happening to Ed. She hadn't been able to contact Mike since she had left for Caramore. This was her first opportunity in two days. She had to find a pay phone.

She had seen one in the cafeteria where she had met Larry. It was still open when she got there. She entered the booth in the rear and nervously searched her handbag for the number. She dialed. It rang six times. She counted them. Finally, he answered.

"Mike, this is Rita."

"Rita, how are you?" he replied instinctively and then immediately in the same breath added "You're at a pay phone, right?"

"Yes" replied Rita

"Good – in the town, right?" he said.

"Yes" she again answered.

"Don't tell me your number just the name of the place where the booth is."

"The Wedgewood Cafeteria" she replied.

"Stay there and I'll be back to you in about five minutes" he said rapidly and hung up the phone.

Rita waited. Mike left his apartment and half walked, half ran to the candy store down the street. He called information for the number of the Wedgewood Cafeteria in Ellensville and then dialed the number. Rita answered instantly.

"I'm sorry I had to rush you off the phone, but I was worried about somebody taping me. I always see on TV where if you don't stay on the line too long, the call can't be traced. I don't know if that's really true but I thought we should get off quick anyway, just in case. We don't want anybody to know that you

were at Caramore or even near it, if we can help it. If they found out that you called from Ellensville they'd probably put two and two together and figure it out in a minute."

"I understand. How is Ed?" she replied in one breath.

"Still in the zoo, but I think it won't be long now" Mike answered.

"Are you sure?" she asked anxiously.

"Not sure, but from what I can gather, it'll be another two maybe three days.

Something's going to happen.

Exactly what, I don't know, but soon and they're waiting for it. After that, they'll let him go." He paused and there was silence from Rita on the other end of the line.

"Don't worry about Ed. He'll be okay. He's a survivor, you know that.

He's worried about you" Mike said consolingly.

"I'm alright. It looks like the set up here is almost impenetrable, but I'm getting to know the system a little better and I think there's a chance. I think I just need time. Right now, I'm just getting my foot in the door, so to speak" she replied confidently.

"Ed wants to be sure that you don't get hurt and so do I. If it comes to a point where it looks like trouble, bail out quick.

Even if there's just a bad smell in the air hit the road" Mike said.

"Did you get any more on House?" she asked.

"No. Just what I told you and Ed."

"Tell Ed I miss him" she added and then paused for a moment.

"I will" Mike said convincingly.

"I'm going to try to come home as soon as I can; I'm not sure when that will be. I'm supposed to take a couple of days off next week. I hope he'll be out by then" she added.

"Next time you call me, use the same phone booth and ask for Tony. I'll say he's not here, and then I'll come down to this pay phone and call you right back. I've got the number now so I know exactly where to call. I want you to call me as often as you can. I want to be able to be sure you're alright" Mike said.

"I don't know when I'll be able to call again, that depends on how things go but I'll always try to make it between seven and eight at night if I can. Are you generally in then?"

"I'll make it a point to be" he replied. There was a brief silence.

"I better get back now" she said.

"Be careful Rita" he said solemnly.

For the first time since this all began, Rita felt a little frightened. The concern in Mike's voice deadened the original sense of adventure and amplified the reality. How did she get involved and in what did she get involved? It wasn't too late to turn back she reminded herself. All she had to do was get in the car and drive away from it. This was really Ed's problem. "He's the one who got himself into this mess" she thought. He should have minded his own business. It wasn't her problem.

But then too, the clinic wasn't Ed's idea when she first suggested it to him but he didn't let her down. He jumped in and made it his business, for her sake and did a damn good job of it too.

"I guess it's my turn this time. I couldn't just walk away from him, even if I wanted to! My conscience wouldn't let me" she thought.

Suddenly, a sharp noise shattered her thoughts. A man waiting for the phone was rapping on the phone booth door.

Rita drove back to Caramore that evening pondering how she would obtain the information she needed.

The next day, Kelly again accompanied her on her rounds. It was business as usual.

She spent that afternoon being guided through the lab facilities in Building A-2. It seemed that no matter where she went at Caramore, no expense was spared. The best possible equipment and techniques were employed throughout the laboratory, as they were everywhere else.

The following day, Kelly allowed her to work pretty much on her own. She was beginning to fall into the routine. She found it childishly simple as compared to her tasks at the clinic in Newark. There were no beatings, stabbings or other violent emergencies to deal with here. The threatening sights and sounds of the ghetto were a distant memory for her after only the first few days at Caramore. Fascination with the technical and physical accommodations available to her here was overwhelming. They diminished the primitive conditions which she had left in every way.

The only thing that wasn't diminished was the sense of accomplishment she had experienced at the clinic. That feeling was well remembered. The appreciative looks on the people's faces there were burned indelibly into her memory.

The job at Caramore was a job, pleasant and well assisted but still only a job. At the clinic, there was no job, only a commitment. To Rita that had become apparent.

That afternoon, she arrived at Building A-1 about two o'clock. The security man at the entrance announced her presence to Larry through the intercom. She was directed to the lower level where the pharmacy was located. Again, she was confronted by a modern complex of facilities and furnishings. Everything was the best.

Larry met her at the door. "Welcome to Stein's Drug Store" he said smilingly. Then he proceeded to show her shelf after shelf of chemicals and compounds available for use at Caramore.

"This place has an inventory that is probably bigger than that of any drug store in the country" he boasted.

"The whole thing is operated by me and just two other pharmacists. The key to it is this" he continued as he pointed towards a computer terminal on his desk.

"This machine automatically checks and cross references medication combinations for every patient, cites individual patient allergies to certain drugs, keeps records on drug levels for each and prints out daily prescription requests. If you can count to one hundred, you can be a pharmacist with one of these babies. Here let me show you how it works" he suggested eagerly.

"Let's pick one of your patients. Which one do you want?" Rita hesitated for a minute.

"How about A9705?" she replied.

"A9705 it is" he said as he typed into the terminal.

Within a second, the screen was covered with medication data and history for Ann Brown, patient A9705T12, the current occupant of room 97 in Building A- 5.

"This terminal can access any patient in Caramore?" Rita asked.

"Sure, with my entry code" he replied.

"I'm responsible for proper medication of all patients in the facility and therefore I need the records of each. Actually, to be honest, I really don't need any of that kind of information very often but I'm still required to have access to it. The computer has reduced the job to pill counting, like I said. With all its internal checks and cross referencing, there's not much for us to do here.

Sometimes it's sort of discouraging, I mean to be reduced to a stockman after five years of training" he confided.

"The last time I did anything more than pill pushing was about two weeks ago and even that wasn't very challenging."

"What was that?" Rita asked in forced tone of interest.

"Well, Doctor House came with a special request for one of his private patients" he began.

Rita's interest was now no longer artificial at the mention of House's name.

"Who's Doctor House?" replied Rita. She decided to play dumb and see what was said.

"He's the head man here, didn't you know that?" asked Larry.

"I heard the name but I wasn't sure who he was" answered Rita.

Then she continued to question him.

"Private patient? I thought all patients at Caramore were private" she interrupted.

"That's true, but some are more private than others, you might say. House treats a very few people himself.

Like I said, he's the head man here. I've heard that he and a couple of big money people are going to buy this place in the fall or so rumor has it. From what I understand, they're all political big wigs from Jersey. House took over running the place about six months ago. I've been told that was part of the purchasing deal. I don't see him very often, nobody does. He met with the entire staff when he first took over and I never saw him again until about three or four weeks" Larry continued.

"So, what was his special request?" Rita asked with peaked interest.

"It seems that one of his patients had trouble with the size of the pills that were prescribed. They were too small. You know, some older people have arthritis and can't even pick up those real small pills, so he had me enlarge them. I don't know why he wanted them enlarged though; they were already almost a third of a gram. I wasn't about to argue of course, so I just did it. All I had to do was mix them with some extra inert ingredients and run it through the pill maker. It doesn't sound like much but compared to the pill counting routine here it was high tech pharmacy" said Larry.

"So he came down here himself just to get some pills enlarged? Couldn't he have just sent a memo?" she asked attempting to prompt more information from Larry.

"Well he wanted to do more than just get the pills enlarged. He wanted to do some compounding himself. I think that was his real reason for coming. The pills were just an excuse for getting into the pharmacy in the first place. I didn't ask him specifically what he was doing, even though it's not strictly legal for a non-pharmacist to do compounding. But he's the boss, so I looked the other way, if you know what I mean" answered Larry.

"Let's go for coffee" he suggested as he walked towards the door. "The coffee machine's down the hall" he added.

Rita reached over to the terminal and switched it off as she moved to follow him.

"Leave that on" he said.

"Oh well, too late, I'll turn it on again when we get back. I generally just leave it on all day. Logging in and entering the code every time you want to use it is a pain. It's much easier to just leave it on. Nobody here is going to fool with it. We all have the same access code" he said as they headed down the hall.

The rest of the day was consumed with idle conversation. Larry and she chatted on about everything from medical ethics to politics and the latest fashions. It was obvious, that he found her attractive and

she felt somewhat the same. In spite of that, Rita made every effort to find out everything she could from him. At the end of the afternoon, it was apparent to her that Larry was not only uninvolved, but unaware of any unusual events at Caramore. She felt good about that. She didn't like the idea of betraying the trust of someone she liked.

When she got back to her apartment that evening, she sat in a chair and tried to organize the pieces of what she had learned. If she could see Al Druse's medication chart, that might help to clear some things up. She couldn't just ask Larry to see that one particular set of records. What reason would she give? He's not even her patient. Rita sat looking out the window at the snow covered mountains as she thought. After several minutes, the idea came to her. She had about an hour before dinner. She reached into her purse and took out a pad of prescription forms and began to write.

Having completed the form, she walked to her car and drove to town.

She parked in front of Anson's Pharmacy on the street. It was an old shop, with a wooden sign and shutters on the windows. Mr. Anson, a man, with white hair, wore a hearing aid and spoke in a loud, deep voice uncharacteristic of his size.

He greeted her with an acknowledging smile. She handed the prescription to him and waited silently as he read it aloud to himself.

"Forty milligrams of furosemide, huh." He paused.

"You're a long way from home, Ms. Bickford" he said as he finished reading and looked up at her.

"I'm staying up the road" at the Blue Star Motel tonight and I've just discovered that I'm out of them" she replied.

"Please sit down and I'll take care of this in a minute or two" said Anson as he walked slowly back behind the counter towards his work station.

Rita knew there would be no problem getting this prescription filled. It was only a diuretic, no narcotic or psychoactive.

"I'll come back for them" said Rita.

She left the drug store and walked to the Wedgewood Cafeteria phone booth. She called Mike. No answer. It was five-thirty, a bit early she thought. That's probably why Mike wasn't in. There really wasn't any news to give to him but she thought she'd call anyway, just to see what was happening with Ed.

"Is there a bookstore in town?" she asked the counterwoman as she exited the phone booth.

"Just down the block and turn left. You can't miss it" he explained.

Rita followed his instructions and reached the store in short order. It was open, a small, brick building, with neatly manicured grounds and a statue of Horace Mann standing vigilantly at the door. It looked as

if it was the town library building at one time. For some reason, the statue seemed strange but she couldn't quite figure out why. Then it struck her, it was unmarked, no spray paint, no magic marker.

She entered the store and walked to the financial section. There was what she wanted.

She saw it immediately, "Ten Days to Understanding Wall Street." It had the brightest cover of the entire selection, a real eye catcher. She bought the book and returned to Anson's.

She picked up her prescription, stopped at the local supermarket and drove back to Caramore.

The next afternoon, she went back to A-3 carrying a brown paper bag and entered Larry's office.

"How are you doin'. This is a pleasant surprise" exclaimed Larry as he stood up from behind his newspaper covered desk.

"I brought you a present" Rita said cheerfully.

She opened the bag and withdrew a large can of V-8 vegetable juice, a can opener and two plastic cups.

"You were bitchin' about the coffee yesterday.

You were telling me how bad it was for you and how a juice machine would be a thousand times better for everybody, so here it is, V8" she announced.

Larry's eyes lit up. She wasn't sure if it was because of his fondness for the juice or her, but it didn't make any difference, his response was what counted.

"I'm glad to see you're concerned about my health, doctor" he said with a smile and began to refold the paper.

"Do you have any ice around here? This stuff is much better on ice" she said.

"I'll send somebody upstairs for some" he said as he walked to the door. "Harry, do me a favor, will you? Run upstairs and get me some ice" he shouted to one of his assistants out in the prep room.

Rita opened the can, quickly separated the two stacked cups she had brought and poured some of the red liquid into one. Some white powder in the bottom of one the cup floated up on top of the juice. Rita immediately used her finger as a stirring rod and just finished dispersing it into the juice as Larry turned from the doorway. She licked her finger and moved the almost filled cup over towards Larry's seat. She then proceeded to fill her own cup, carefully leaving space for an ice cube in each. Larry walked over, sat down and picked up the cup.

"This looks so good that I'm not going to wait" he said and then gulped down the entire cup with one swallow.

"You must have read my mind" he exclaimed appreciatively as he finished the juice.

“We used to drink this all the time in college” she said and refilled his cup. “Everybody was a health nut in those days” she added as she took her first sip.

Rita had carefully placed her purse on the desk. It was partially opened and protruding from it was “Ten Days to Understanding Wall Street” with the title conspicuously showing. She had seen Larry four times, initially at the Wedgewood, the first night at dinner, when she visited him in the pharmacy yesterday and now. Three of the four times, he was reading the newspaper, the Wall Street Journal. If she was to stay for an hour or two today as she planned, small talk might not make it. She didn’t want to give the appearance of hanging around waiting. She was hoping this would do the trick. Well, for \$10.95 it was worth a try anyway. If it didn’t work, she’d have to go with the small talk approach.

Suddenly, she saw Larry’s eyes glance at the bright cover, like a trout spying a flashing lure.

“Are you interested in the market?” he said as he reached for the book. “May I?” he asked.

She nodded and he withdrew it from her purse and opened it to the table of contents.

“I’ve been reading it now for about a week, honestly, I don’t quite understand some of it” she said coyly.

His response was immediate.

“What don’t you understand?” he replied.

She got up and walked around to the other side of the desk and put her head over his shoulder.

“Right there” she said as she pointed to “Chapter Five – Puts and Calls.”

Larry turned to Chapter Five and began a detailed explanation of the options market. Rita interjected questions periodically and the conversation flowed smoothly forward as she had planned.

An hour passed and Larry had drunk practically the entire can of V8. Rita had purposefully drunk but one cup so as to leave the remainder for him. He was still discussing the ins and outs of security trading and she continued to play the attentive student. Actually, she found Larry to be a good teacher and she became more engrossed than she had expected.

“It should be working any time now” she thought to herself.

Within several minutes, Larry stopped his dissertation, excused himself and left for the men’s room.

Rita glanced at her watch the instant Larry was out of sight. She knew the lavatory was at least two minutes away. She had noticed that on the way to the coffee machine with him yesterday.

She slid over in front of the idling terminal on the desk and imagined typing in the code, trying to determine how much time she would have alone with the monitor. Three minutes past and Larry hadn’t returned yet. That should give her more than enough time to get a good look at Al’s chart. She moved back to her original position, picked up the book and searched for an interesting question she could ask him when he returned.

Just as she located one Larry came around the corner, carrying a can of soda. Rita looked at the time, five minutes and thirty seconds exactly. Plenty of time, she thought.

"I brought this for you. You didn't seem to like the juice that much. I drank practically all of it." he said as he placed the opened soda can in front of her.

"I can't drink all that soda" she replied.

"You have half. Let me rinse out the cups" she said and took both of them to a nearby sink in the work area. She returned, poured half the soda into each cup and asked Larry the question she had readied.

He immediately resumed his discussion as enthusiastically as before. Within fifteen minutes, Larry again excused himself, this time with a brief comment about the unusual nature of such frequent urges.

The instant he passed out of sight, Rita moved to the terminal and began to punch in the letters of Al's code, A9033. She could feel her hands tremble a little as she typed. What if he didn't take the five minutes she had figured on? What if one of the others in the pharmacy came into the office?

She'd had an excuse in either case, a weak one but an excuse. She hoped she didn't have to find out if it was good enough. The monitor was facing away from the door and she could clear the screen as soon as she saw someone coming, so no one would know if anything was on it. Then, she would merely say she was familiarizing herself with the keyboard layout.

She nervously pressed the return and there it was patient number A9033. Rita quickly scanned the readout. No medical data was displayed, only a record of medications administered. A special notation read "Detailed Patient History Available by Preferred Access Only,"

She'd have to think about that later. Right now, her attention would have to be confined to the pharmacy records that were on the screen.

Every entry was the same: 300 milligrams of Methaqualone daily, except for two occasions where additional dosages were prescribed.

"Methaqualone!

That's Quaalude" she thought, heavy downers, especially at 300 milligrams a day.

Then at the bottom of the screen, another notation caught her eye, "Outpatient prescription (11/19) – 12 tabs, 300 milligrams Methaqualone - Deliver to Doctor House personally."

Today is 11/19- he must have been released today. Rita looked at her watch; she had at least three minutes left. She pulled a pen from her purse and quickly jotted down everything she could from the monitor. When she finished she cleared the screen.

She moved away from the machine and sat reading the notes she had just taken as Larry rounded the corner. She immediately folded the paper and slipped it into her pocket.

Rita spent another forty-five minutes at the pharmacy during which Larry excused himself two more times. Her plan had worked well; she could have gone through the records of ten patients. She felt a bit sorry for Larry. He was obviously embarrassed by the situation. She suggested to him that he was probably coming down with a cold to help relieve his chagrin.

As soon as she reached the apartment, that evening, Rita looked through the code sheets that Robbins had given her. "Preferred Access – data accessed by special entry codes only – data unavailable to general staff members" it read. She interpreted that to mean that only House could view Al's records. Then she began to reexamine the medication entries that she had copied.

"The 300 milligrams a day of Quaalude doesn't explain why Al was always unconscious when Ed and Angie visited him" she thought. That would cause sedation but not loss of consciousness. Then she looked at the dates when the extra Methaqualone was administered.

She looked up with a deep, thoughtful stare and then reached for the calendar in her wallet. Both of those dates were Saturdays and if she recalled accurately, the exact days that Ed had driven Angie to Caramore. She looked at the quantities prescribed. If she remembered her pharmacology correctly those amounts were more than sufficient to cause the effects that Ed described.

"Why would House keep Al continually sedated and then induce unconsciousness when visitors arrived?" she wondered. She looked back at her notes.

The outpatient prescription was consistent, but why such an exceptionally small number of tablets? That was only about a two or three day supply at the rate he was taking them. Quaalude isn't very expensive, and it surprised Rita that House didn't send at least a week's supply home with him. She considered that a minor point but curious.

That night, she called Mike from the Wedgewood and he returned the call in the usual, clandestine fashion.

"I got a look at some of Al's charts, today" she began. "The man's been pumped full of tranks ever since he got to Caramore. Tell Ed they've been feeding him 300 milligrams of Quaalude a day for the past two or three weeks. That's the only medication he's received.

"Here's something else. He's been released today." "That's interesting" replied Mike,

"I'll have to call his wife tomorrow and see if I can get to talk to him."

"If he takes the medicine that they're sending home with him don't expect much of a conversation" Rita answered sarcastically.

"I filed a petition asking that Ed be brought to trial or released" said Mike.

"What happened?" asked Rita.

“They will drop all charges and let him go if we agree not to charge the police with the destruction of the clinic. I thought this kind of thing would happen.

They’re not going to court with this. The evidence against Ed is too weak and the bad PR the cops would get about wrecking the clinic won’t be worth it for them” replied Mike.

“So when will he be out?”

“I haven’t talked to him about it yet. I will tomorrow. I hope he’s not stubborn and goes for the deal, but I’m not sure he will. He took the loss of the clinic harder than his being in jail. Every time I see him, he’s bitterer. I really don’t know if he’ll go for it. He might not be able to just walk away, without seeing any chance of revenge.”

“What if he doesn’t cooperate?” asked Rita.

“Well, they’ve got a dozen nickel bag junkies waiting in the wings who’ll swear Ed sold them everything from heroin to atomic secrets. All they have to do is put a little pressure on these creeps and they’ll spit out whatever they’re told. I’m sure that they don’t want to get involved with that kind of play but they’ll do what they have to, in order to come out clean.

They just want Ed to have learned his lesson, go home, be a good boy and keep his nose out of other people’s business.”

When the conversation ended, she hung up the phone and silently prayed that Ed wouldn’t sacrifice his freedom for principle. She did feel some ambiguity however, in that the clinic had meant as much to her as it did to him. She felt an outrage and a desire for retribution too, but she knew that often vengeance must stand in line behind practicality.

Rita told Mike that she had decided to stay on at Caramore, in spite of Al’s release. She had obtained only limited information so far, but she felt that being there provided the opportunity to possibly learn more. Leaving would remove any chance of lifting the curtain of secrecy that surrounded Al Druse and the incidents of the past few weeks.

As she drove back from town that evening her mind was filled with thoughts of Ed and the moral dilemma he now faced. She knew his anguish and felt bottomless empathy for him.

Suddenly, she caught a glimpse of a familiar looking car in her rear view mirror. She thought she had noticed that same car parked across the street from the Wedgewood. She also recalled having seen it riding behind her on the way to town earlier that evening. She could make out its silhouette several hundred feet in the distance, but couldn’t identify its driver in the dim twilight.

She slowed down, hoping to get a better look.

The car behind her slowed and maintained its distance. She increased speed and it appeared to do likewise.

She began to feel her pulse quicken and her driving became more and more erratic. Her gaze in the rear view mirror was almost constant now:

Several times, she barely made the sharp, hairpin turns in the winding, narrow roadway. As the sun continued to set, the vehicle's outline was replaced by its headlights, clearly marking its ominous presence.

Finally, she saw the iron archway of Caramore and careened into its entrance. She pulled to within thirty feet of the gatehouse and parked the car at the side of the road.

She was safe now. She could easily summon help if necessary. She watched the rear view mirror hoping to get a better look at the car as it passed the gate.

Her heart beat began to fall back towards normal and the rush of adrenalin started to subside as she waited.

About three minutes passed and then a small, dark car turned into the entrance. She could feel her stomach begin to knot again as the dashboard of her car was lighted by its headlamps. It stopped for a moment, then backed out on to the main road, and drove off. She didn't see much. The sudden shock of seeing the car pull into the entrance behind her distracted her to the point where she couldn't concentrate and the glare of its headlights would have prevented her from seeing, even if she had remained calm.

Chapter 8

"You mean those sons a bitches wrecked three of years of my life, screwed a whole community out of decent medical care and stuck me in this shit house for two weeks and now they want me to just walk away with no hard feelings? Are you kiddin'?" exploded Ed.

"No, I'm not kiddin'. It's hard feelings or doing hard time. Try to forget the whole thing as best you can and walk. I know the choices are lousy but they're the only ones we've got, right now" replied Mike.

Ed stared at him through the heavy wire mesh of the jail's visiting room. "I've got a choice of trying to stay alive in here or living with my conscience out there, huh?"

"You've got it. We both know the smart choice. If you try to push these guys, you've had it. They'll be sending your social security checks to this address. I've seen people, with good connections and plenty of money behind them gets screwed over by this bunch. My advice is not to let the cell door hit you in the ass on the way out" answered Mike.

"I've got to think this over" Ed growled.

"Are you nuts?" exclaimed Mike as he pulled some papers from his tattered briefcase.

“Either you’re signing this waiver or I’m signing it for you” Mike snapped his reply.

Ed looked at Mike briefly, and then reluctantly accepted the paper and pen through the opening in the grating. He held them for a minute and then signed the document in an instant much like a swimmer plunging into a chilly pool so as to get the unpleasantness over with as quickly as possible. He handed it back in silence with his eyes cast downward.

“Sometimes, we do what we have to do, not always what feels good” consoled Mike.

“You should be out of here tomorrow afternoon, at the latest” he added.

That day, Ed walked back to his cell for the last time -he hoped. While he walked, he felt a deep disappointment in himself but the prospect of his impending release helped to deaden the sting of his self-inflicted sadness. He did what he had to do, of that he was sure. He was equally sure that it would be some time before he could fully convince himself of that fact.

The next afternoon, Ed was escorted to a room on the upper floor of the building. There, his clothing and personal effects were returned to him, each neatly packaged in brown paper bags marked with his name and number. He quickly changed his clothes, signed an items receipt and was then led to the large, central room at the entrance of the police station where he had first been taken the day of his arrest.

Mike stood near the door, wearing a wide smile.

“Where’s the new suit and the ten bucks you’re supposed to get when they let you out of stir?” he joked with a Cagney accent.

“The only choices they had were leisure suits or Neru jackets and I didn’t like either” Ed replied with a chuckle.

“Let’s go for a drink, if you don’t mind being seen with an excon” Ed added with a grin.

With that they headed towards the street and Mike’s waiting car. He drove to a small bar just outside of Newark.

“How’s Rita?” asked Ed as they sat in the dimly lit tavern.

“I’ve been so consumed with my own problems, the past couple of days that I haven’t even asked about her. I guess I’ve been a little too concerned about myself lately” he confessed.

“She’s fine. I spoke to her, the day before yesterday” replied Mike. “She had some very interesting information. I purposely didn’t mention anything to you though. I wanted to concentrate on getting you into the right frame of mind so you wouldn’t do something stupid, like not signing those papers. You had me scared for a minute Buddy.”

“What did she say?” Ed asked eagerly.

Mike proceeded to tell him about Al's medication, his recent discharge and Rita's decision to remain at Caramore.

"Quaaludes, huh. I wonder why?" Ed mused aloud.

"That's your department, Doc. You tell me" Mike interjected.

"Now that Al's home, maybe I can find out" Ed replied.

"I told Rita that I would call him but I got so tied up with you that. I never did" Mike confessed.

"I'm going to call Angie tonight" said Ed.

Mike looked at him sternly.

"Ed, before you do, let me give you some god damn good advice- free of charge. I think we can be pretty sure that all the pokin' around you've done is what got your ass in a jam in the first place. As a matter of fact I've picked up little bits and pieces while you were in the can that was what convinced me that you're sticking your nose in this thing with Druse is precisely what did it.

Why? I don't know but that's beside the point. When I went to talk about your release one of the things that was mentioned right away, was your patient load."

"What do you mean my patient load?" interrupted Ed with a frown.

"Well, they said that you should confine your practice to local people and not be traveling a hundred miles to New York State to get a new patient. That's kinda subtle but I'm sure you get the idea, don't you?

I've got a couple of cops at the station, who help me out with inside information now and then. I got one of their kids into law school and the other one's mother on the top of a nursing home list. They both have treated me right ever since.

Anyway, the story I get from them is, next time you're out of line, will be the last time. They also assured me that the people behind that threat can and will make good on it.

Before you jump on the phone maybe you should give the whole thing some more thought. I'm not telling you what to do, that's got to be up to you, but I just want you to think all this all over first" Mike explained.

Ed slowly lowered his glass and folded his hands on the table, in front of him.

He stared at them for several moments and then looked up and spoke.

"You know, Mike, I never told anybody but I've known all along that Druse was the trouble. The morning after the first time I took his wife up to Caramore, I got a phone call. The guy on the other end said 'Druse is bad medicine Doc. Stay out of it' and he hung up. That's all he said. I didn't take it as seriously

as I should have I guess; it seemed too melodramatic - movie stuff. I kinda wrote it off as a crank call of sorts. I didn't think things would get as out of hand as they have. I never told Rita about the call because I didn't want to upset her and as I said, I didn't really take it seriously.

When Lucky was poisoned I should have realized that whoever was behind this wasn't just playing around. Then, when I wound up in jail I couldn't tell anybody because I felt so stupid for not paying attention in the first place.

If I would have known that it was going to cost me the clinic I never would have even ridden over to St. Anne's that night with Charlie" Ed confided.

He paused and swallowed hard.

"Now, it's too late, the clinics gone. If I just turn away, I've not only lost the clinic but I've also lost any chance of getting even with the bastards who destroyed it. On top of that, I'll be deserting a guy that's gettin' screwed leaving him with nobody to help him. You tell me what you would do Mike'?"

"I don't know" Mike replied, "You've got to make that decision."

"I think the decision is made for me. I've got to make that call" Ed replied with a sigh.

Mike was troubled by that, but he knew better than to try and change Ed's mind. His decision was rooted in emotional and moral concerns and lacked all practical considerations. Individuals driven by those kinds of forces rarely respond to logic. With that knowledge Mike simply replied with an understanding, silent nod

Although, he was fully committed to the task that awaited him, Ed felt recurring pangs of self-doubt. He knew the consequences of his acts could be grave and each time he summoned the courage to go to the phone, menacing images sapped his strength. As the afternoon wore on, his courage grew, aided by greater and greater volumes of beer. By the time Mike drove him home, he felt confident in his decision and ready to begin its undertaking. Mike wondered if the resolve would be as firm when Ed awoke the next morning. He hoped not.

Ed opened his apartment door and entered unsteadily. The place smelled stale. The plants in the living room had succumbed to the two week drought and slumped flaccidly over the edges of their pots. The dishes in the kitchen sink looked as if they had grown blue, white and green whiskers. He timidly cracked open the refrigerator door and was met by the foul odor of sour milk. He pushed it closed again and walked into the bedroom. Nothing looked disturbed. Everything was pretty much as he remembered leaving it the morning of the arrest.

Suddenly, his head began to spin and a queasy feeling started. Maybe it was the stuffiness or the sour stench from the kitchen. He opened the bedroom window. The next instant, he found himself scurrying towards the bathroom. It wasn't stale air; it was the dozen glasses of beer which spontaneously surged from his convulsing stomach just as he reached the toilet.

Twenty minutes later, he was lying, fully clothed; face up, on the bed in a deep, unconscious sleep.

The clock read six fifteen A.M. Sunlight flowed through the windows and reflected from the white bed linen in all directions giving the room an incandescent glow Ed wasn't sure if it was the brightness of the room or the terrible pounding in the back of his skull that awoke him. He sat at the edge of the bed and tried to collect his thoughts. Slowly, the events of the previous day began to surface, led by his resolution to contact Al. He wasn't sure if the fear that overwhelmed him yesterday had been washed away by the booze or merely dulled by the pain of his hangover but somehow he no longer felt intimidated.

He got into the shower and emerged feeling better. A hot cup of black coffee would brush away the final few cobwebs. He walked to the kitchen just in time to hear a familiar thump at the front door, as he passed it. He stopped, opened it and retrieved the morning newspaper. It was a long time since he'd seen one.

Those which had been delivered during his absence had probably been claimed by the old lady down the hall. She had the habit of claiming them even when he wasn't absent if he happened to be a bit late in picking it up. He had caught her a couple of times, red handed but he chalked it up to senility and said nothing. What could he say to a ninety year old woman anyway?

Ed carried it to the kitchen table and spread it open while the coffee began to heat. He read over the front page and moved on to the sports. He scanned an article about the Giants looking for Charlie's name. They won, but his name wasn't mentioned. He read the entertainment and editorial sections.

The aroma of fresh brewed coffee filled the room and overpowering the lingering staleness. Ed looked up, spied the glowing indicator light on the pot and closed the paper. As he arose from the table, his eye caught the last page as it lay exposed on the table - the obituaries.

"Albert Druse, Dead at 33" it read.

He couldn't believe it! He picked up the paper in both hands and sank back into his chair in slow motion. He read it word by word in a trance like manner.

The article was brief and uninformative failing even to mention his place of employment or recent hospitalization. Ed put the paper down and sat motionless. After a minute or so, he looked down at the paper once more.

"Funeral Services at Santago Home for Services, 300 Howe Avenue, Jersey City, 10 A.M., Friday, Internment at Mount Carmel Cemetery, Jersey City" it read.

"That's today" thought Ed. He glanced at the clock; it was seven thirty. He went to the phone and called Mike.

"Mike, did you read the paper today. The obits?"

"Man, I'm not outta bed yet" Mike groaned.

"This will wake you up- Al's dead." The phone went silent. Then Mike responded.

"What are you gonna do now?" he said in a wide awake voice.

"I'm going to the funeral. It's the least I can do. I didn't give him too much help when he was alive" Ed said sadly.

"What the hell could you have done? It isn't your fault the guy's dead. I hope you're not gonna start carrying that around with you. You didn't even get a chance to talk to him. I'd say you did more for him than most people would have even considered doing" Mike fired back.

"I promised his wife I would help her. Some help" he replied sarcastically. "I'm going to have a tough time facing her but I've got to go!" Ed replied.

Mike recognized Ed's sympathy expressing itself as self-recrimination and said no more. He also recognized that Ed was now again drawn in as deeply as ever. Ed was back into the situation from which Mike had worked so hard to untangle him and this time he wasn't sure that he could be as successful as he was the last time.

"Mike, I need a car to get there."

"You want to borrow mine?" Mike anticipated his request.

"Ten dollars a day and ten cents a mile and you buy the gas. Do you want the collision wavier?" he jested in reply.

"I'll bring it over about nine o'clock okay?"

"That will be fine" said Ed gratefully.

Mike wasn't very religious, but he mustered all the conviction he could and whispered a silent prayer as he hung up the phone. He had developed deep affection for Ed and although he respected and understood his motivation. He feared for what he considered to be Ed's poor judgment.

Mike arrived promptly at nine. Ed dropped him off at the Legal Aid Office and headed towards the Santago Home for Services.

He found it after a few stops at local gas stations for directions. The building was a large, white structure with several tall columns at the entrance and a black wrought iron picket fence surrounding it. He pulled through the gates and parked in the back. He hurried walked to the front door. He looked at his watch - ten minutes to ten. With that, his pace quickened. He wanted to see what Al looked like and if the service was about to begin, the coffin might be closed. He hoped his watch wasn't slow. He should have called the funeral home for directions instead of relying on the imperfect powers of description that seems to be the common characteristic of every gas station attendant with whom he spoke.

He entered the vestibule and scanned the directory - "Albert Druse, Blue Room, Center Entrance."

As he entered the Blue Room he saw Angie standing beside the still form in the casket. He stopped, swallowed and walked up to her. She looked up at him, with long dark smudges of smeared mascara, streaming from her tear swollen eyes.

“Doctor Bennett- look!” Her speech faltered as she motioned towards Al’s motionless corpse. Ed took her hand, squeezed it, but said nothing.

He looked at the body. Al looked even older than at Caramore. His hair was almost completely gone and his eye brows and lashes were sparse. His face was drawn and the backs of his hands were bony and bore purplish discoloration similar to age spots.

The funeral director approached them as they stood silently.

“We’re ready to begin the service, now” he said in a quiet, almost singing tone and escorted them towards the seats. With that the curtain in front of the casket was drawn.

Ed followed Angie to her place at the front with the other seated relatives and then found a seat for himself towards the rear. The curtain reopened shortly, exposing the closed, gray box which stood in stark contrast to the sprays of flowers that surrounded it.

The minister, a tall, thin man with black hair and wearing a black suit, moved in front of the coffin and began his oration. Within twenty minutes, his declaration of faith and the afterlife concluded. He walked over to Angie and those in the front row, to offer his condolences. Everyone arose and at the request of the undertaker went to their cars for the ride to the cemetery.

It was only about half an hour away but the twisting, turning route through the city streets, made it seem twice as long. As he followed the winding funeral procession, Ed’s mind was clouded with thoughts of Al’s cold, lifeless face. A mix of sorrow and puzzlement surrounded that image and he felt uncomfortable with both.

They passed through the cemetery gates into the lush, green, tree filled landscape, which provided a sharp contrast to the dirty, concrete of the city. It was a warm, autumn day and the sun was shining brightly. The trees were beginning to drop their leaves but still retained sufficient numbers to void the thoughts of the winter to come. Had it not been for the tombstones, it could have been a picnic ground. It was the most pleasant place in the city, reserved for the most unpleasant of tasks.

The paradox struck Ed squarely as he pulled to the side of the roadway behind the cars ahead of him. As he exited the car he noticed two squirrels seeming to play hide and seek as they gaily scrambled from tombstone to tombstone adding to the surrealism of the moment.

Everyone waited, while the coffin was carried to the grave site and placed over it. Then, at the instruction of the funeral director, all proceeded to the grave.

The minister stood at the head of the coffin and resumed his dissertation on God’s will and the ephemeral nature of existence.

Ed glanced about as the minister's drone continued. Over to the left, about twenty feet away, three men, in work clothes, stood leaning against a pickup truck, marked 'Mount Carmel Cemetery'. Ed noted their presence, ominously aware of the finality of the act which they were about to perform. He found himself staring at them unable to alter his gaze as if he was entranced. Several times, he successfully moved his line of vision, back towards the casket and those surrounding it only to have his eyes drawn back to the grave diggers again. It was if a powerful, uncontrollable magnet was responsible for his stare at them.

Suddenly, he noticed something about the one on the end, near the cab of the truck. His shoes! He was wearing wing tips, not work shoes but brightly polished wing tips.

"What the hell is a grave digger doing wearing shoes like that?" Ed thought. The other two men were shod in mud encrusted work boots. As he watched, the one with the shoes opened the door to the truck and climbed in. Ed could just about see his outline behind the reflective glare of the window glass. He appeared to be holding something in front of his face.

Ed walked around behind some of the other mourners, in an effort to change his angle of vision. Then, all at once a passing cloud cut off the filtering sunlight and he could see clearly into the truck. It was a camera. The guy was taking pictures.

Immediately, Ed turned away, just as a vampire might turn away from a cross and inched to a position where his back was towards the truck. It was probably too late but there was no sense in posing. When final words had been said, everyone turned and walked towards the waiting cars. Ed did likewise, but quickly glanced over his shoulder.

Two of the three men were walking towards the grave, the third man, the one with the camera, was nowhere to be seen.

"Doctor Bennett, please come over to the house with the others" Angie implored him and reached out to grasp his hand. Ed hadn't expected the invitation, but it would be poor manners to refuse. He wanted to speak to her anyway and this would provide that opportunity.

"Thank you" he replied immediately and followed the line of cars back to Selma Street.

A group of twenty or so people crowded into the living and dining rooms of Angie's small home. Angie's sister, Marie and her husband, acted as host and hostess in Angie's behalf. A table of sandwiches and drinks was set up in the kitchen and people moved back and forth between it and the other two rooms.

Ed felt a bit out of place; he not being a relative. Most of those present were relatives or close friends. Angie made it a point to introduce him to the majority of them and told each how kind he had been to her and Al. She remained exceptionally composed in light of the circumstances. She was probably too drained to be anything other than tranquil Ed reasoned.

In about an hour, people started to leave and soon the group thinned to a half dozen hanger-oners. Ed remained. He wanted to talk to Angie but hadn't had the chance. He stood in the kitchen, by the coffee

urn, almost listening to one of Al's cousins incessantly ramble on about his recent success in the dog food business. After ten minutes or so, nature mercifully called the man away, to a challenge worthy of his intellectual abilities. As he left the kitchen, Angie entered.

"Doctor Bennett" she began apologetically.

He interrupted her with "Ed, please."

"I'm sorry, I forgot, Ed,

About two weeks ago, before Al died, a man named Mike called and told me that you couldn't take me up to see Al like we had planned. He never said why and then I didn't see or hear from you, until today."

Mike must have been so upset by the occurrences of that day that he didn't even explain the situation to her. Maybe it was best that he didn't. She certainly wouldn't have understood at the time with only the benefit of a two minute telephone explanation.

Then she continued nervously.

"I know you're a busy man and I'm not trying to be pushy, but.."

Ed smiled and interrupted, so as to spare her obvious embarrassments.

"Where the hell was I, right?" he interrupted.

She smiled weakly.

Then Angie listened in amazement as he explained the happenings of the previous two weeks. Several times, the cousin poked his head through the door opening, obviously hoping to resume his tale of the dog food trade. Somehow sensing their need for privacy however, he remained with the others in the living room.

"What did Al die from?" Ed asked in a less than delicate manner after concluding his story.

"The report said a heart attack" replied Angie.

"Did he ever have heart problems before this?" "No" she replied.

"How was he when he came home from Caramore?"

"The same as at the hospital! He slept most of the time. He didn't say much, he was always too sleepy" Angie answered.

"How many days was he home before the heart attack?"

"Two."

"Who did you call when he had the heart attack?" Ed continued.

"The emergency squad and they took him to St. Anne's. I knew he was gone when they got here, though" she answered.

"Do you have the death certificate?"

"No" she replied.

"How do you know he died from a heart attack then?" Ed asked.

"Doctor House told me."

"House!" Ed exclaimed in a loud, surprised voice. "How did he know? Did you call him?"

"No, he called me a little while after they took Al to the hospital" she answered.

"He's a very nice man" she continued, "He even came here to see me and said how sorry he was, about Al."

"Came here! To the house?" Ed said in amazement.

"Yes. He came the night Al passed away. He said he was sorry and he liked Al and he wanted to be sure that I knew how he felt."

"You mean it was strictly a sympathy call?" replied Ed.

"Well, almost. He picked up Al's medicine too- the pills that were left."

"He took the pills? Did he say why?" Ed asked again with heightened curiosity. a

"He said that Al had a rare disease and the pills were a special medicine that he was working on and that they were very hard to make. That's why he wanted the ones Al didn't use back."

"Can you get a copy of the death certificate tomorrow?" Ed asked.

"Where do I get it?" she replied.

"Call the funeral home; they'll get it for you."

"I'm supposed to pick up some papers from them later today. Maybe it's one of them" she replied as her eyes began to well up with tears.

Ed could see that the discussion was beginning to wear on her.

"Is Al's cousin really making big barks, I mean bucks in dog food or is it only chicken feed?" he said jokingly, trying to break the strain.

"I don't know, but he's been monkeying around with pet food for a long time, now" she quickly retorted with a weak smile.

The cousin stuck his head through the door for the fourth time, just as Angie turned and started towards it. Ed glanced at his watch and abruptly followed her extending his hand and bidding each of the remaining guests, including the disappointed looking dog food king, a goodbye.

Chapter 9

Ed left the house and went to his car. He sat there for a minute. The guy with the camera at the graveyard was on his mind.

"It must have been somebody hired to see who was at the funeral. I'm pretty sure that he got me. I was staring right into the lens before I realized what was going on. That means, that somebody's probably thinking up more nasty shit for me right now" he thought soberly.

He started the car and drove back to his apartment. He hoped that he wasn't too late; that no one was already waiting there.

He carefully surveyed the parked cars along the street as he pulled up to the curb in the front of the building. Then, cautiously, he left the car and entered the lobby, unlocked the main door and walked up the three flights to his apartment. He felt his stomach starting to quiver as he slowly inserted his key into the lock and turned it. The door swung open slowly under his gradual push revealing a vacant hallway. He entered reluctantly, not sure what to expect.

He looked into each of the three rooms, one by one. No one was there. Then, he went into the bedroom and took some papers from the upper desk drawer, stuffed some clothes into a suitcase, gave the place one last look and exited the apartment as warily as he had entered.

He was a bit less anxious now. The task was almost over. He moved down the stairs to the lobby and peered out at Mike's car. Everything looked exactly as it had been when he entered, not even one of the parked cars had moved. He quickly opened the door and walked briskly to the car, got in and drove off. He breathed a deep sigh of relief, as he did.

He went directly to the Downtown Savings and Loan and parked in its lot. He sat in the car and pulled the papers from his pocket that he had taken from the desk drawer. Among them was his bank book. He opened it. Seven thousand, three hundred and thirty-six dollars, it was his life savings.

"Money for a rainy day -it's not raining, it's a monsoon" he thought to himself and chuckled.

He went into the bank and withdrew the entire amount.

It was two-thirty when he arrived at Mike's office. He had stopped and filled the tank on the way. That was the least he could do and besides, he did keep the car a little longer than he had anticipated.

"Well, how did it go?" asked Mike without looking up from the papers on his desk.

"That depends on what you mean" Ed responded. "It was pretty god damn depressing stuff."

He went on to explain about the camera wielding cemetery worker and House's visit to Angie. By the time he finished, Mike was listening intently to each and every detail of the bizarre occurrences.

"From what you've told me, I'd say your ass is back in the fire" he remarked.

"I can't say that you didn't warn me" Ed replied with a resigned tone, "But, I still can't say that I'm sorry about what I'm doing. If you would have gone to that funeral and seen Angie and known, deep down inside of you, that there's someone out there to blame for the whole thing, you'd do the same as I'm doing."

"Maybe you're right but I just hope you're not really sorry before it's all over" Mike added.

"Do me one more favor" asked Ed, "Give me a ride over to Frelinghusen Avenue."

"I don't think it would be too smart for me to stay in my apartment" Ed said, as they rode passed the dilapidated store fronts and burned out buildings of downtown Newark.

"That's one of the first intelligent things you've done in weeks" commented Mike sarcastically.

"I cashed in all my chips at the bank, this afternoon and I've got my suitcase in the trunk. I'm gonna find another place to stay for a while. As soon as I do, I'll let you know where."

"You can stay at my place" volunteered Mike.

"Now who's being stupid? That's one of the first places somebody would look for me.

All I want you to do is either go over yourself or send somebody to get my mail and look everything over" Ed replied. He then dug into his pocket to obtain his keys. He detached two of them from the ring and handed them to Mike.

"Here's the keys - I've got another set."

Suddenly, he pointed out the window. "Pull over here" Ed shouted.

A hand lettered sign, in chrome yellow spray paint read "Used Cars – Ridin' Beats Walkin' Come on in and do Some Talkin'." It hung over a small, paper littered lot, filled with an assortment of cars ten years old and older.

A windowless building not much bigger than an outhouse, stood in the center, with its rusty metal roof and deteriorated, fiberboard siding. Smoke streamed from a crooked, galvanized stove pipe that protruded through one of its sidewalls.

Ed left the car, walked to the house and knocked on its unsteady door. It opened instantaneously to reveal an obese black man, wearing overalls and a dirty red ski hat.

"Doc Ed, how you been?" he bellowed in a horse deep voice. He squeezed himself through the narrow doorway of the shack and stumbled down the make shift, cinder block steps. He waddled towards Ed with an out stretched hand.

"I heard there's a lot of nasty shit been happenin' to ya, Doc" he continued.

"What did you hear Harold?" Ed replied.

He was sure that Harold had heard everything there was to know. News of that kind travels at the speed of light down here and Big Harold probably knew the whole story before Ed got his first jailhouse meal. He listened patiently as Harold related all of that which he had heard. He recited each detail of Ed's arrest and incarceration in a slow drawling, commiserating voice.

Ed knew Harold almost from the time he started the clinic. He had saved his girlfriend's baby, when the kid got pneumonia and since then, Harold viewed him as a minor deity. Ed tried to explain to him several times that the miracle was in the penicillin but evidently he had found it easier to pay homage to a person, rather than to a vial of white, milky liquid. Eventually, Ed relented and accepted his accolades without further comment.

As Big Harold's rehash of Ed's encounter with the police ended, Ed spoke. "I need some wheels. What have you got that runs pretty good and won't cost me my bank book?"

"Doc, I got a real braggin' wagon for ya. Price can't be beat, nowhere. Cost ya nothin'."

Ed wouldn't take anything from him for free, that was for sure but he wasn't going to argue that point now. He followed Harold between the rows of parked cars in a zigzag path, watching him twist and squeeze through one space after another; puffing loudly as he did. Finally, they reached a dull, red eighty-three Ford sedan. It had dents and a little rust here and there but so did every other car in the lot and most of them were much worse.

"This one's the best I got" and he pointed to the front wheels of the car. "Them's brand new recaps on the front and good tires on the back. Let me get ya the key" and he reached into his pocket and pulled out a ring of about fifty keys, many of them for cars long since gone. He thumbed through the ring until he found the right one and then handed it to Ed.

He opened the door, got behind the wheel and turned the engine over. "You gotta pump that pedal. This sucker ain't been cranked for over two weeks" Harold advised.

Ed followed his instructions and the car sprang to life. The initial tick, tick, tick of the engine subsided after a minute or two and it quieted to a low, healthy rumble. He shut off the motor.

"I'll take it, how much?"

"Nothin', man like I told ya nothin'" snapped Harold indignantly.

The haggling back and forth began with Ed's refusal to take the car without some payment. It ended with Harold's reluctant acceptance of three hundred dollars.

"I need some plates for it. Do you have any old ones lying around?" Ed asked.

"Lemme see I most likely got somethin'" replied Harold and he waddled back towards the shanty.

Mike, who was standing beside Ed, began to walk towards his own car. "I'll see you, Ed. I'm not supposed to see this kinda stuff" he said over his shoulder with a grin.

"I'll get back to you as soon as I get settled" said Ed as Mike started his car.

Ed took his suitcase from the trunk and walked back to his newly purchased vehicle.

Harold emerged, holding a set of mud spattered, license plates and a screwdriver. He slowly made his way to the Ford, bent over as best he could and attached the plates.

"That'll do it Doc" he said in an out of breath gasp.

Ed thanked him and drove away towards downtown.

He pulled up to the curb, in front of an old, red brick building. Allbright Hotel, read an unlit neon sign hanging over its entrance. He walked to the desk, behind which a thin, elderly man sat in a tattered easy chair. He looked up from the newspaper he held, but remained seated as Ed approached.

"Seventy-five, that's all I got" he said before Ed could utter a word.

"Seventy-five?" Ed repeated.

"Yeah, seventy-five, sixty-five by the week or fifty-five a month! Wanna see it?" the man instantaneously continued.

"Marvin, come here" he shouted through the wrinkled curtain covering the door behind the desk before Ed could even reply.

A skinny black kid immediately appeared in the doorway.

"Show this man one fifteen" the clerk commanded. Ed followed the kid silently down a narrow corridor, passed the wood panel doors which lined its crack laden walls. The dim hall lights made the old red carpet look even more worn than it was. Several pieces of missing plaster on the ceiling added to the look of deterioration.

The kid stopped at one fifteen, unlocked and opened the door. A faint trace of mildew odor emanated from the room as Ed entered. It was about ten by fifteen with a single bed at its center, covered by a faded blue quilt. A dresser was placed between two large windows overlooking a narrow alley, with an adjacent brick wall for scenery. Matching night tables were pushed against the bed on either side and the bare floor was covered by three small throw rugs.

Ed could see the bathroom in the mirror behind the dresser. It had an old fashion, cast iron bathtub, the kind with legs, and a sink on a long, porcelain pedestal. He walked over to the bed and pulled back the cover to expose the clean, white sheets. The place seemed pretty clean in spite of its obvious wear and tear.

"Looks okay" he said.

He followed the boy back to the desk and paid a month in advance. Then he got his suitcase from the car. He put it in the room but didn't bother unpacking; instead he walked to the bank on the corner. It had one of those money machines, the kind that was open all the time. That would be fine. Machines never ask for I.D. as long as you've got your plastic card. He opened an account for George Plumber with sixty-five hundred dollars.

The next morning, Ed awakened with a start. For a moment he wasn't sure where he was. Then, he remembered and relaxed back against the head board.

He couldn't be sure of the time. The sun rarely struck the wall in the alley facing the windows and the room was always poorly illuminated no matter what time it was. He reached for the watch on the night stand - eight ten it read.

He wanted to call Angie this morning. The coffee shop down the street had a pay phone. He'd have breakfast there and make the call. He showered and dressed.

The desk clerk was seated exactly as he had been the night before. His manikin like pose remained undisturbed as Ed passed through the lobby. He walked the short distance to the shop, entered, placed his order and went to the phone booth while it was being readied.

"Hello, Angie, this is Ed- Ed Bennett" he began.

"I got the papers from the funeral home, Doctor Bennett" she replied intuitively.

"The certificate was one of them. I've got it right here, in front of me."

"What is the cause of death listed on it?" he asked.

"Myocardial infarction" she recited in a slow, labored, phonetic voice.

"That's a heart attack" Ed translated.

"What's the doctor's name at the bottom?" he asked.

"A. K. Thompson, MD" she read carefully.

Ed tried once again to comfort her before the conversation ended. He knew that time, not words, would be needed to heal the deep wound Al's death had inflected on her. He hoped his words however, could ward off the infectious depression that often attacks those bereaved. He spread his soothing, verbal ointment, as best he could.

He hung up the phone with one hand and simultaneously reached into his pocket with the other, for more coins. He called information and then dialed Saint Anne's. No A.K. Thompson was employed there, not now anyway. He was a part timer in the emergency room who had worked but a few weeks and had then quit three days ago. That was the day after Al died.

Ed left the booth and went to the counter to be greeted by a plate of cold bacon and eggs. He was on the phone longer than he had planned. He ate the cold food without complaint, stopping periodically and gazing with trance like stares, trying over and over again to piece it all together.

He'd have to go to Saint Anne's he decided as he rose from the half eaten meal. Maybe some answers could be found there. Although, he knew that realistically, the odds were against it, he'd go anyway. He was running out of choices. He was beginning to feel like a rat trapped in a maze. He was being occasionally tantalized by crumbs of truth and then, suddenly, finding himself at the end of a blind passage. Escape from the labyrinth was beginning to seem impossible but he remained emotionally imprisoned by it, fully committed to its resolution in spite of the consequences.

He drove to Saint Anne's; his head was spinning with ambiguous thoughts. What to do next and the fate that might await him flooded his mind. As he parked the car, he strained to rid himself of the self-doubt which was gnawing at him.

"You can't chicken out now. It's too late for that" pounded through his brain.

Then, his thoughts turned to the clinic and Al's still, white face and he drew strength from the rage that began to re-ignite within him.

Within seconds he snapped open the car door and walked briskly towards the emergency room entrance. He stopped for a moment before he reached the door, took out his wallet and fumbled through the collection of business cards he had accumulated. He was never sure why he'd saved them but now he was glad he had. There was the one he wanted. He put it in his shirt pocket and proceeded to the desk.

"My name is John Volpe and I'm with Country Medical Associates, Incorporated" he began.

"We are interested in hiring a Doctor A.K. Thompson at our facility and he listed Saint Anne's emergency unit as his last place of employment. We, of course, are required to run a routine investigation of previous employers on anyone who applies to our group. We generally like to talk directly to the people that worked with him. I wonder if you might be kind enough to give us some elementary information about Doctor Thompson" he said convincingly and handed the card from his shirt pocket to the woman behind the desk.

She accepted the card and looked at it carefully. Ed purposely used the card of a medical group some fifty miles away. He knew the odds on her recognizing either the group or the name on the card were low but he still felt a bit apprehensive as she examined it.

"He was only here for about two or three weeks, part time evenings, I think" she said as she looked up. "I really don't know much about him."

"Is there anyone here who worked with him?" Ed asked.

The woman paused for a moment then picked up the telephone. "Doctor Answorth, please come to the emergency room desk, Doctor Answorth" echoed the PA. She repeated the message a second time.

"He should be here, shortly. I'm sure he worked with Doctor Thompson at least once or twice."

Ed waited patiently. In a few minutes, a short, heavy set man, wearing a white lab coat, with a stethoscope about his neck, rounded the corner.

"Doctor Answorth, this is Mr. Volpe. He's from the Country Medical Associates. Doctor Thompson has applied for a position with his group and he's here on a routine reference check" the woman behind the desk announced. Answorth extended his hand with a smile.

"I don't know what I can tell you. I only worked with the man, maybe three or four times. He wasn't here that long."

"Could you tell me something about your impressions of his performance when you did work with him?"

Ed took a pen and small note pad from his pocket so as to give the interview an official appearance.

"He seemed highly qualified, as a matter of fact, much better than the average. He was an older guy, had a lot of experience behind him" replied Answorth.

"Did he ever mention any previous employments?"

"Don't you have that information on his application?" questioned Answorth.

"Sure, we do, but we want to be able to cross reference some of it, if you know what I mean" replied Ed with a smile. Answorth accepted the logic without argument.

"He talked about a private practice he had had and about working at a private upstate New York hospital. He'd been around. I really couldn't figure out why he was part timing in a place like this to be honest with you. He talked like he was used to a lot of money and he wasn't going to make that here. He could have made a lot more somewhere else.

The guy really knew his stuff" said Answorth ow.

"How come he left?" asked Ed.

"That's a good question. He only worked here for two or three weeks. During the last two days he worked two shifts, days and evenings. He even went around and asked guys if they wanted time off and if they said 'yes', he took their shifts. The man was so tired after the third day; he was falling asleep on his feet.

Then one day, I came in and he was gone. He quit, just like that” replied Answorth with a snap of his fingers.

“What day did he leave?”

“It was only a few days ago, last Monday, I guess “he paused “Yeah It was Monday.”

Ed continued to question him about other incidentals in order to give the whole thing a realistic look. Actually, he had already heard enough. The way he figured it, Thompson took the job at Saint Anne’s so as to be there when Al came to the emergency room. He must have known that he would and just about when but how did he know? Answorth said he started working two shifts, three days before the Monday he quit. That was the day Druse came home from Caramore. He worked both shifts for those three days to be sure he didn’t miss him.

Somehow, the whole thing was planned, of that Ed was sure.

He left the ER convinced that Al’s death was surely not due to natural causes, although, exactly what had happened, he couldn’t be positive. An attempt to make it look natural had obviously been made and Thompson was a major part of it.

He sat in his car, deciding what to do next. He knew the only one that might be able to help was Angie. Maybe there was something she had forgotten. He hesitated to call her again. Al had just been buried and Ed was reluctant to burden her with the prodding and probing that would be needed to get at the truth.

After minutes of self-agonizing, he decided he must speak to her. She would understand; she’d have too.

He made the call. His apprehension evaporated with the congeniality of her greeting. She readily agreed to his suggestion that they sit down and hash through all the details of the past few days. She knew that it was the only chance they had of making some sense of what had happened.

She was as eager as he was to find out what sinister force had torn her husband from her. Angie had always been taught that there was a reason for everything and not knowing the reason for Al’s death gnawed at her and allowed her little peace. She felt the knowledge would somehow make her loss more bearable.

Ed knocked on the front door. It opened almost immediately. Angie ushered him through the living room and dining room to the kitchen.

“Come in here” she said as he followed her.

“I’ve got all this stuff on the table and I don’t want the cat to knock it off. He’s always jumpin’ up on the table. I can’t keep him off” she added with a note of disgust.

The kitchen table was covered with dozens of snap shots.

"I was just lookin' over pictures of Al. It's funny, because they make me feel bad and good at the same time. Do you know what I mean?" she said with a tearful eye.

Ed nodded understandingly.

"These are all pictures of Al and the guys he worked with and a lot of the players. I bet I got a picture of Al with almost every player that ever played on the team since he started there" she added boastfully.

Ed moved over to the table and began to look at the pictures. "Who took all these?" he asked.

"Pete, Al's friend Pete. He was a real camera nut. He'd take a picture of anything just to take a picture. He used to even take pictures of clouds. He was real good at taking them too.

He bought all the good cameras and lenses, all the expensive stuff. Al said he won a couple of prizes even, you know, those photographic contests they run in magazines, sometimes."

Ed studied the photographs as Angie spoke at length of Pete's picture taking skills.

Suddenly, he interrupted her.

"Most of these are awfully dark. Some of them are even hard to see. If he spent all his money on equipment like you said and he really knew what he was doing then how come they're all over exposed?"

She paused for a minute to think.

"He always complained about that. Al said he tried a dozen different developers and all different kinds of film. He even took one of his expensive cameras back to the store where he bought it and they checked it out and there was nothing wrong with it. But, he still kept getting those bad pictures" replied Angie.

Ed continued to look over the photographs.

"Some of these look okay" he remarked as he picked out the dozen or so bright ones.

"It must be that you brighten the pictures" Ed joked and he pointed to her in each of the most vivid snapshots of the group.

Then his smile collapsed into a serious stare.

"This is funny. All the pictures taken at the stadium, the ones with the guys he worked with and the players are the dark ones. Where were the pictures of you taken?"

"Some here and some over at Pete's house and a couple down at the beach" she answered.

"None at the stadium?" he thought out loud.

"Do you have Pete's phone number?" asked Ed. "Maybe I could talk to him about this."

"It's in here." she said as she leafed through a small address book which she had taken from a nearby drawer.

"Here it is" she repeated as she wrote it down on a slip of paper and handed it to him. He looked at it, folded it and slipped it into his pocket.

"Angie, let me ask about Al's medicine when he came home. What kind of pills did he take?" he asked.

"I don't know what they were. Doctor House said they were special medicine, like I told you, that's all I know. They were about this big and yellow" and she held up her fingers showing a circle about the size of a large aspirin tablet.

"How often did he take them?"

"One at nine o'clock, one at one o'clock and one at five" she replied.

"Oh, you mean three times a day" Ed corrected her.

"Maybe that's the same but Doctor House said the pill had to be taken exactly at those times. He made sure I understood that. He even wrote it down so I wouldn't forget. He said timing was very important for this medicine to work" she said and went to a kitchen drawer to find the note. She returned and handed a sheet of paper to Ed with the times written on it.

"Here's the note he gave me" she declared. It read just as she had said.

"You said that House came for the pills that weren't used after Al died. How many were there?"

"Only two were left" she replied.

"Only two? How many pills did Al come home with?"

"Twelve" she answered.

"Twelve. Is that all? Did he give you a prescription for more?" Ed questioned.

"Doctor House said he would send more before we got low, down to two or so."

"Did he send any?"

"No" she replied.

Ed wasn't sure, but he thought that at long last, maybe he had found a clue that would begin bringing this all together. He'd have to sit down and really think it all over, but at least this time, he had an idea, a direction in which to channel his thinking.

As he drove away from Angie's, he felt more confident than he had at any time since it all began. He headed back towards the Allbright. He drove instinctively through the back streets, down passed the vacant factories and burned out buildings of the once prosperous city. He moved the pieces of

information through his mind, as he rode, twisting and turning each, in the hope that he might successfully interlock one with another. He felt encouraged by the few small clusters of logic that began to appear from the disorder. All he had to do now was assemble them into the larger picture from which they had come.

Suddenly, he was startled out of his semi-hypnotic state by a gyrating thump and a sharp lurch forward. His car sprang three feet passed the sign at which he was stopped and into the intersection under the impact from the rear. Dazed, he looked into the mirror, to see the front of a large, black car looming behind him.

With the shock of the collision over, he began to regain his senses and stepped out of the car. The other vehicle was operated by a round faced man, with dark hair and heavy, black eyebrows. He stuck his head out of his window and yelled.

"Pullover there and let's see what the hell's happened here."

He waved towards a vacant lot off to the right, about twenty yards down a side street. Ed stepped back into his car and drove toward the spot. The other car followed. His first impulse was he'd better come up with a story quick. He had no registration, no insurance and the old license plates Harold had put on the car. Then he realized it wasn't much of an accident and it was the other guy's fault anyway so he probably would be just as happy as not to forget the whole thing.

No problem. The cops wouldn't be involved. By the time he reached the lot he had convinced himself that everything was under control.

He calmly got out of his car walked to its rear and began to look over the damage. The bumper had a small crease and a little black paint was imbedded in a dent about the size of a quarter on the deck lid. Ed didn't care about the damage but he wanted to give the impression of normal concern. He heard the slam of the door of the other car and the footsteps of its driver approaching him.

He continued to run his hand back and forth over the dent without looking up, hoping to give the illusion of true concern.

The footsteps stopped and then what felt like a blunt stick was thrust into the middle of his spine.

"What's a doctor doin' drivin' a piece of shit like this?" the voice said. "You don't even have no MD plates on it you schmuck!"

Ed started to turn.

"Don't turn around. This ain't my dick in your back. It's a forty-five, so just walk over to my car like a good boy."

Ed straightened up and carefully walked towards the black car. A second man, who must have ducked down at the scene of the accident, now appeared in the passenger's seat. He got out of the car and opened the trunk.

“You’re ridin’ in the baggage compartment on this flight” the man chuckled and nudged him forward with the barrel of the unseen gun.

“Get in!”

Ed reluctantly obeyed and the bright, sunlit sky disappeared with a resounding thud, as the trunk lid was slammed shut.

Chapter 10

Rita wasn’t eager to make the trip to town, not after the last time. Ever since that night, she felt watched and spent increasing amounts of time looking over her shoulder and through the cracks of the blinds. She wasn’t quite sure if her response was reasonable or unjustified paranoia but she couldn’t control it in either case. Sometimes she told herself it was an isolated incident, maybe just a crackpot townie. Other times the real possibility of her true identity having been discovered haunted her thoughts.

She hadn’t called Mike for three days now, partially because there was little to add to what she had already told him and partially because of her own fear. If she continued to procrastinate, he might begin to think something had happened to her, she thought. She’d have to call him in spite of her anxiety.

Rita left Caramore around six-thirty that evening and drove to town. Her eyes darted incessantly from the rear view mirror to the road ahead and back again over and over as she rode. The drive seemed twice as long as usual and she found herself increasingly uneasy as the trip progressed. By the time she reached the Wedgewood she was close to a state of complete panic.

She stopped the car and sat there looking carefully about for several minutes. No sign of the car that had followed her the last time. She was sure she would have recognized it, of that she had no doubt. Leaving the car, she half walked, half ran to the cafeteria, glancing side to side as she did so. If no one followed her this time, she would write the whole thing off as her vivid imagination.

She entered the phone booth and nervously began to fumble for change while she continuously peered out through the fingerprint smudged glass towards the front door of the restaurant. It was almost as if she was awaiting the inevitable arrival of someone or something. She hurriedly dialed the phone. It started to ring. Once, twice, ten times and still no answer. She looked at her watch. It was a little early. Mike probably wasn’t in yet. A cup of coffee would kill ten minutes and then she’d try again. She opened the booth door, exited, turned and looked at its interior, checking that no change had inadvertently dropped out of her wallet. Sure that none had, she turned again and started towards the counter.

As her eyes looked upwards, away from the phone booth floor, there he was.

Her first impulse was to run, to lunge for the door, to look for a rear exit but the shock of his sudden presence tetanized every muscle in her body. Her heart began to race and she struggled to squeeze out a quivering “Hello” while attempting to regain her composure. It was the surprise of seeing him here that had stunned her. She felt like a kid caught shoplifting, even though she knew his appearance could very well be mere coincidence it was still startling.

“Hello, Rita” he replied to her shaky greeting in a clear, deliberate voice.

He knew her name. She could feel the butterflies in her stomach morph into bats and the blood vessels in her temples begin to pulse. She was trapped. Confession or new attempts at deceit were the only choices.

“Rita Ray. That’s your real name isn’t it?” he asked in a strong declarative tone.

She said nothing.

“You don’t have to answer. It is” he asserted.

“I’ve got a friend who’s a cop in Bayonne and he ran the license plate number of your car through Trenton. After he found the owner to be Rita Ray then he checked on her driver’s license description. Either you’re her or you’ve got a twin sister.”

She remained silent.

“What sleazy magazine do you work for and who exactly are you trying to cannibalize this time? You people like to kick somebody when they’re down. You call yourselves reporters. You got to be kiddin’. I think you’re nothing but a bunch of ghouls pickin’ on the corpses of people whose souls are dead from drugs or booze.

They come here to Caramore to be resurrected and you want to pick their bones clean before they can get up off their backs.

What’s even worse is that I really liked you and you just tried to use me to help get your god damn story.”

She couldn’t stand by mutely and allow herself to be maligned any longer. Having regained her composure she abruptly interrupted his tirade.

“I’m not a reporter, Larry. And I don’t work for any magazine, sleazy or otherwise” she interjected angrily.

“Then what the hell are you doing sneaking around here like super spy? The only ones that do that kind of shit, as far as I know are the movie mag people” he retorted sharply in a loud voice.

As he spoke, her eyes caught a glimpse of a dark sports car parked at the curb directly in front of the building. It wasn’t there when she arrived, of that she was sure. Then it struck her.

"Is that your car?" she demanded and pointed out through the cafeteria window at it.

Surprised by the sudden sternness of her tone, he responded almost by reflex.

"Yes!"

"Sneaking around. You son of a bitch. Look who's talking. You followed me back to the hospital the other night and scared me out of my wits. If that's not sneaking, what the hell is it? I wonder how many other times you've followed me. Do you peek in my windows when I'm in the bathroom?" she fired back in a loud voice.

Then instinctively, they both turned to see the counterman and his two customers intently listening to their conversation. She turned back to Larry and added in a quieter voice.

"Look, I'm not here for any of the reasons that you think."

"Then why are you here?" he replied more calmly.

"Let's sit down and I'll tell you the whole story" she said and with that she led him towards one of the small tables in the corner of the room.

They ordered coffee and Rita began her long, detailed explanation of the events that brought her to Caramore. She decided to lay everything out with him. Her original impression of Larry was that of an honest, sincere guy who could be trusted and she had been given no reason to change that opinion. Now that she thought about it, her initial fright on encountering him was probably due more to embarrassment and surprise, than warranted fear.

As she spoke, she could see his skepticism begin to fade. After she finished, he leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath.

"Now that I've told you mine, let's hear yours.

Why are you following me around and checking my car registration?" she asked pointedly.

He hesitated and then spoke in a slow tone. "To be honest Rita, I like you a lot, a real lot." Then he paused convincingly.

"I've had some disappointing experiences in the past and I wanted to be sure that I wasn't heading for another one. Maybe I'm too suspicious but I've got reasons for being that way" he replied with irresistible sincerity.

Then after a long moment, and sensing a need for further explanation, he continued.

"I met a girl at the last place I worked. We got along great. We had what I thought was a really good relationship going. Then one day, out of the clear blue, all of a sudden, I found myself scheming with her to steal some morphine out of the pharmacy. Luckily, I stopped and asked myself - What the hell am I

doin? - Just before I went through with it. She was giving me a line of bullshit about her invalid grandmother and the acute state of pain she was in, and I was sucking it all up like ice cream.

Later I found out that she had a boyfriend and he was a heavy drug user.

She was setting me up to be his supplier. That hit me like a ton of bricks when I realized what was going on.

Maybe that will explain my paranoia. I felt that getting all the information I could about you before I let myself get involved would help prevent me from making another mistake. It sounds crazy, I know, but it's all true" he added concluding a story that was obviously difficult for him to tell.

He continued "Then too, the day you came to visit at the pharmacy, after you left I found the computer terminal had been shut off. I never shut that off until the end of the day when I leave. I figured that you must have been fooling around with it while I was gone and I wondered why?"

"Why didn't you just ask me?" replied Rita.

He continued without answering her question.

"Besides, you didn't impress me as the country type. Somebody with your ability and background could get a better job in New York City so why would you come all the way out here in the woods?

I guess it was all just instinct but I knew something was very wrong."

Rita reached over and grasped his hand.

"Larry everything I've told you is true, swear to God, and I'm sure that what you've told me is true. I wouldn't have lied to you in the first place if I hadn't thought it was absolutely necessary. I wanted to trust you and somehow I knew I could but I was afraid. You do believe that, don't you?"

He nodded his head.

His belief might have arisen from the facts she presented or it could have come from the strong feelings he held for her and his desire to believe. It made no difference, he did believe what she had told him and she in turn trusted him.

"Now that you know the whole story, will you help me?" she implored. He hesitated for a second and then looked into her deep brown eyes.

"What do you want me to do?" he answered in a soft, agreeable voice.

She didn't reply right away. She just accepted his consent.

Suddenly Rita glanced up at the clock behind the counter; forty five minutes had passed.

"Let me call Mike before it's too late" she said and left the table. Larry remained seated as she went to the phone.

After ten minutes, she came out of the booth and walked to the table. Larry could see from the look on her face that something was wrong.

"Al's dead. He was home only for two days and he's dead" she said as she sat down somberly.

"He died from a heart attack. The medication he was taking had nothing to do with a heart problem. If he had that kind of condition how come he wasn't being treated for it?" she said more or less thinking out loud.

"A lot of people are killed by their first attack. You know that. They have no history of the disease at all and then, bang, they're gone. Maybe it was one of those" Larry replied, attempting to provide some plausible explanation for a seemingly implausible circumstance.

"Maybe" Rita answered with raised eyebrows and a dismissing tone. "Can you get any medical data on Al out of the computer besides the pharmacy charts I mean?"

"You know he was one of House's patients. Those files need special codes. I doubt I can get into them, but I'll try" he replied.

They left the Wedgewood and drove back separately. Rita felt better now than at any time since coming to Caramore. She felt less guilty. She never did like deceiving people, especially those she cared about like Larry. That was over now and it was as if a dark cloud had been swept away. She had a good feeling, deep within her now that she had shared her secrets with him.

She entered the solitude of her apartment and the warm feeling began to slowly evaporate in the cold loneliness. She sat for a while and reached for the phone, grasped the receiver but failed to lift it. Then, slowly she raised it to her ear and held it there frozen in place. She wanted to dial but couldn't.

"If you want to make a call, please hang up and dial again" said the recorded message.

She put the phone back in its cradle, held it there and continued to debate with herself. As she was about to pick it up again, a knock sounded at the door. She walked to the door and looked out through the peek hole to see Larry pressing his nose against the lens. Rita never did believe in telepath, but it was hard to deny it this time. She hurriedly unlocked the door and he fell through in comic fashion.

The delight of seeing him cracked the dam of emotions within her and without a word she threw her arms gleefully about his neck as he entered. He was momentarily startled by the welcome but quickly responded with a powerful passionate embrace which she returned eagerly.

The warm glow that had been faltering returned to an even greater brightness and Rita felt safe and secure for the first time since Caramore. As the evening went on, they ignited a spark that roared to full brilliance in early morning light.

Chapter 11

He cracked open his eyelids. His vision barely pierced the darkness that surrounded him. His eye caught the only illumination, a faint blur of light issuing from a small slit off to the right. He lay perfectly still and struggled to open them fully. It was like trying to push back the doors of a bank vault and his lids moved ever so slowly.

Then he began to recall, through a haze memory, the events just past. He remembered the accident and being forced into the trunk of the black car by its driver. He reached for his watch and pressed the back light button. It was nearly eight o'clock. He'd been here for almost eight hours now.

He remembered riding for at least an hour after he was first pushed into the trunk.

He remembered hearing the muted conversation of the driver and his companion through the rear seat as they drove and he recalled most of it.

"This guy supposed to do some high divin'" the driver said.

"We can't very well pull off that kinda stunt in broad daylight" replied the companion.

"Of course not, you schmuck. He'll keep until tonight. He aint goin' nowhere unless he's got a can opener in his pocket" snapped the driver.

"Kind of a shame. A smart guy like that and he's so friggin' dumb to get his ass into this."

"Well, maybe he aint so god damn smart then after all" the other replied.

For a minute Ed lost sight of the situation and he listened objectively to the conversation. Maybe he was stupid. He should have known Angie's house would be watched. He had taken every precaution and then, suddenly, in his eagerness he had thrown all caution to the wind. His talk with Answorth had propelled him blindly, headlong and without fore thought. He severely chastised himself now for his foolishness but it was too late. From what he was hearing, it was all too obvious that this blunder would probably cost him his life.

He felt the car begin to slow down and the sound of adjacent motors vibrated the sides of his sheet metal tomb as it came to a stop. In several moments, the engines roared and the car started forward again. They must have stopped for a light and judging from the sounds around him it must be a busy highway that they were on, he reasoned.

"This traffic shit gotta go. I want to get this thing parked and get me a beer. At this rate I'm gonna die of thirst first, man."

Now, he was sure they were on a busy street at least. He estimated their speed to be about thirty or forty. It was probably a city street.

As the vehicle again coasted towards a stop, Ed maneuvered his feet into the position he could and began to kick at the quarter panel of the car. The noise resounded throughout the trunk and he poked

his fingers into his ears as he struck at the inner wall as violently as he could. Maybe someone would hear it. It was his only chance.

Suddenly, he felt the car jump forward and turn sharply right. The force of the turn jammed his head hard against the wall of the compartment but he continued to kick as best he could.

"This fuckin' bum is full of tricks. I'll fix his ass when we get down this road."

"Don't kill us before we get there. Slow down" the passenger yelled.

Soon, he found himself bouncing violently.

"Slow it down. This road aint worth a shit" the passenger screamed again.

It began to slow but the bumping, gyrating motion continued for several hundred feet until they came to a stop.

He didn't hear any traffic noise now. Then he heard the two car doors opened and then slam shut. A few seconds later the trunk lid opened. Ed looked blindly into the bright sunlight and attempted to sit up only to be thrown back to the floor of the compartment by one of the men.

"I shoulda done this in the first place. Here hold this sucker down for a minute. He's a little too lively to suit me" the other man said as he reached into his pocket.

"This'll fix 'em" he continued.

Ed had begun to regain his vision, just in time to see the glint of a hypodermic needle as it was thrust into his shoulder. He felt its sting and the driver spoke.

"There, that'll take care of him till tonight anyway" and with that the lid sealed in the darkness once more as it was pounded shut.

"If I had my way, I'd finish all this right now, but orders are orders" he heard the driver say as the car door shut.

Within seconds his head started to reel. He could vaguely recall the engine restarting and then oblivion.

Now, eight hours later, he lay silent, awaiting the unknown. Escape was impossible and there was little else he could do.

His waiting was short lived. He heard voices and then the sound of a garage door opening. The voices were familiar. He could faintly hear their conversation.

"You take his car and follow me."

"They must have gone back and picked up my car" Ed thought.

"You got the four bucks change for the bridge? I don't want you fallin' behind me. We gotta do this quick and we can't be stopped but a second, so stay right on my ass. As soon as I stop you jump out, open the trunk and over he goes. Then you jump in with me and off we go. Leave his car runnin'. It looks better that way.

Here take the key to my trunk, or even better, I'll just leave it in the lock. That way you can open it in a second." There was a silence for a moment.

"God damn thing doesn't want to come off the ring. There it is, okay."

"Before we take off let's give the good doctor his last dose of medicine. I don't think he's gonna be a problem after that last shot but get ready when I open it up just in case."

Ed wasn't sure what to do. Fighting off the two of them, while lying on his back was impossible but not doing anything was tacitly signing his own death warrant.

Then he felt what seemed to be the car's lug wrench over near the fender well. It was. He readied himself as best he could.

The lid swung open. He laid perfectly still, feigning unconsciousness. His heart pounded so hard he feared it might give him away.

"This guy's still out cold" he heard the driver say.

"The boy's not use to good quality smack, I guess" replied the other sarcastically.

"Well, we better pump him up again anyway. We want it to look good. Gimme the stuff."

Ed separated his tightly closed eyelids a hair's breath. It was almost dark but he could just make out the shadowy silhouettes of the men standing over him in the dim twilight.

"I can't see what the hell I'm doing here. Get me the flashlight outta the glove compartment" commanded Bull. With that the one turned and walked towards the front of the vehicle. Ed heard the sound of the door being opened and upon hearing it, he sprang from the trunk like a mad man swinging his weapon indiscriminately at the form in front of him.

"Bull!" the man blurted to the other man at the top of his lungs as the wrench's impact struck him squarely in the rib cage. He stumbled backwards, clutching his chest. Ed leaped out of the trunk swinging wildly as his victim slumped to all fours before him.

Suddenly, a blow from behind sent Ed face-first into the gravel just outside the entrance of the garage. He felt a burly arm tighten around his throat as he attempted to get back to his feet. The next instant, another arm struck him solidly between his legs from behind and he was airborne. He saw the ceiling of the garage spin by and he landed with a thud back in the trunk of the car. Bull's foot finished the job, driving him tightly against the spare tire. The lid again slammed closed.

"The son of a bitch almost killed me. I think he broke my fuckin' ribs" groaned the man Ed had attacked with the wrench.

"I'd do the bastard in right now, if I had my way" he added with a groan.

"That was pretty stupid. We should have been a little smarter. At least he didn't get away."

"Are you okay to finish this shit off?" asked Bull.

"Yeah, I'm alright. All I gotta do is drive and I can handle that" answered the driver.

"Okay let's do it right this time. Get the light and help me find the works." The car doors opened and closed again. Ed continued to hear their conversation coming from just outside the trunk.

"Shine it over there where I went down."

A silence followed.

"There it is. Looks like most of the juice is gone but I think there's still enough."

"Let's see."

"Yeah, it'll be enough to calm him down so you can handle him. That's all we need. Open it up."

Then one of them yelled through the deck lid.

"Listen Doc, we're gonna open up again. I got a gun pointed right at your head this time. If you blink your eyes I'll blow your friggin' head right off, I swear to Christ, I will."

The lid opened slowly. Ed remained motionless and he felt the bite of the hypodermic pierce his upper arm again.

Within seconds, he began to feel drowsy, as the drug took effect. The man got into the car and started the engine. He heard another car start. He could tell it was his from the low rumble of the motor.

He remained almost conscious, suspended between sleep and wakefulness. The car backed out of the garage and started forward. He lay calmly in a trance- like stupor as the car sped towards his appointment with death.

He could hear the thumps in the concrete roadway tick by, like the seconds of a clock counting time. For some reason he found the sound strangely soothing, with its regular, beating monotony like the cadence of an executioner's drum. Deep within, panic gripped him tightly but the drug made it impossible for him to be alarmed. He had a feeling of surreal detachment.

It was hard for him to tell how long they had been riding before the car stopped. Then, he heard the ring of a toll collection bell and the car moved. They were arriving at their destination.

Now the terror began to fight its way through the drug induced veil of tranquility as the reality of what was to happen pierced his intoxication.

He tried desperately to shake free from its incapacitating hold but it was impossible. Lifting his head from the floor seemed to require superhuman strength. He knew that when the lid opened he would be powerless to resist.

All of the cynicism about religion that he had harbored for most of his thirty three years now evaporated in these last few seconds and he began to recite the several simple prayers he remembered from childhood.

The car slowed to a stop. He heard the other car stop behind him, the door slam, the sound of running feet and then the deck lid flew open. He was confronted by the large, burly image outlined by the shadow cast before the blue, greenish bridge lights. The man reached in, grabbed Ed's upper arm and snapped him from the trunk in one rapid motion. The next thing he knew, he was riding high atop the man's shoulders and moving towards the black void at the bridge's edge.

Then, he heard a loud explosion of crunching metal and shattering glass.

Suddenly, he was in free fall. He closed his eyes and braced himself as best he could for the impending impact with the water.

He struck a hard, unyielding surface but the rush of pain was mild compared to that which he had anticipated. As he lay there, stunned, he found, to his surprise, that he wasn't dead or even seriously injured. The ice cold water he expected wasn't there either.

He cautiously opened his eyes, fearful of what he might see. The drug was beginning to lift and he saw a green and white car, catapulted up against the guard rail which had a gaping hole torn in it, several hundred feet beyond. The wheels of the vehicle were spinning at high speed and just touching the pavement, with the full weight of the car resting on the railing. Billows of smoke issued from the tires and a loud, unceasing squeal shook the air. The door was sprung open and a motionless body was on the roadway several yards away.

Ed struggled to his feet and stumbled to the prone form. He never really got a good look at the men who abducted him but he was sure that this wasn't one of them. He was too thin. They were both much larger.

He looked up. There was no sign of the black car anywhere. Then, he spied his car, standing in the road about thirty feet away. He staggered to it. The motor was still running. He reached in through the open window and shut it off.

He noticed the hole in the railing once again and made his way towards it. As he approached the edge of the bridge, he saw heavy, black skid marks leading to the opening.

He stood unsteadily and peered down. Far below, a torrent of raging water swept rapidly downstream and he began to realize what had happened.

By now several cars had stopped and the drivers were attempting to revive the man in the street. The wail of sirens echoed faintly in the distance and dim flashing, red lights could be seen moving on the highway leading to the bridge.

Within minutes, two police cars, an ambulance and a wrecker had arrived.

The other man was loaded into the ambulance. The “on the spot” diagnosis of his condition was minor abrasions, lacerations and acute intoxication. Evidently, he had lost control of his car and swerved sharply at the sight of the two cars parked in the roadway, missing the first and striking the second one broadside. Upon impact, the black car was driven through the railing and plunged into the river below. The fate of its driver and his companion were unknown. The search for the vehicle and its occupants would begin in the morning, according to the cops. It was now two A.M. and little could be accomplished until then, they reasoned.

Ed was now seated in the back of one of the cop cars. He was pretty well recuperated from his stupor and he decided it would be best to avoid the interrogation that would result from telling the truth. He remembered his last encounter with the police, Mercer, Holler and company. He was sure silence would be best.

He played the part of a passerby who was the first one at the scene and described what he believed had happened. His explanation must have been satisfactory and apparently agreed with those of the other passing motorists because after a brief statement, he was released.

As he returned to his car, he had the feeling of divine intervention acting in his behalf. How else could this miracle of his fortuitous rescue be explained?

He started the engine and drove away, basking in the light of the special favor he felt surrounding him.

He headed back towards Newark, resolved to be more careful and convinced that his mission was now sanctified by the higher power. He drove down the darkened streets and began to feel fatigued from the trauma of the day's events. He'd go back to the hotel and get some sleep. Tomorrow he'd plan his next move.

He sat at a stop light waiting for it to signal him onward. His eyes began to close and his head started to fall forward towards the steering wheel.

At that moment a powerful arm thrust about his neck from the rear seat and pulled him sharply back with its choking grip. The suddenness of the attack sent a surge of adrenalin through his body that instantaneously wrenched him from his drowsiness. He flailed about violently attempting to break the vise like strangle hold. He felt himself being pulled over the seat to the rear of the car. He gasped, helplessly for breath but within seconds the dim street lights began to fade and he fell into limp unconsciousness.

Chapter 12

Mike hadn't heard from him for almost two days now. That was strange. The last time he was with him was at Big Harold's and Ed said he would call as soon as he was settled. Two days were certainly enough time to get settled when you're carrying only two suitcases thought Mike.

He hadn't talked to Rita in a couple of days either. The last time he spoke to her she had told him about Larry. From what she had said, he felt that at least now she had some protection and he was a bit less apprehensive about her than Ed.

Mike wasn't known for his patience. He was the action type. He had to do something, even if he knew it would accomplish little. The very act of doing it made him feel better. He wanted to always feel that things were under his control even if they weren't. He realized that often his actions were in vain but instincts die hard and frequently he found himself tilting at windmills in spite of these realizations. It was a nervous habit, one he swore many times that he would break.

Ed and Mike were similar in that respect. Maybe that's why they got along. Both had the belief that somehow they could control fate, change the future by their own efforts and make things right. Ed, however, was often consumed intellectually and emotionally by the idea and never willingly submitted to defeat. Mike, on the other hand, recognized the foolishness of some of his efforts and at times, begrudgingly relinquished the struggle to the hands of the Almighty.

Ed was totally committed in every challenge he accepted and allowed little or nothing to dissuade him if he felt the cause to be just. He had done most everything of consequence in his life with the same zeal, immersing himself with every moral and mortal fiber in the task.

His work at the clinic demonstrated this tendency to a complete commitment. Many times he spent fifteen or twenty, hours straight caring for those who couldn't reward him with even a dime. It was the sense of doing that which was right, that he accepted gladly as payment. Rita had once described him as a "moral druggie."

He was addicted to the feeling of doing what he felt to be morally just. The addiction grew within him and he fed it daily with his experiences at the clinic. By this time injustice had become a threat to his psychic strength. He began to view himself as a preserver of man's concern for his fellow man. He accepted every opportunity to drive a stake through the heart of inequity with uncompromising fervor. Mike knew Ed's mentality well. He shared it too, but a lesser extent, but still enough to understand. He had seen it grow in Ed even more uncontrollably over the Druse incident, starting from a tiny seed of concern and becoming an overpowering force, pushing Ed blindly towards an elusive and possibly fatal resolution. It was for that very reason that he feared so greatly for Ed's safety.

Too many times those exact same emotions had led Mike himself to unsuspected misery. Luckily, he had learned by those mistakes before serious harm had come to him. He wasn't sure Ed could do the same. He knew that Ed was emotionally entangled beyond escape at this point and clearly he couldn't save him from himself but he felt an obligation to try.

For the past days, he'd tried to control himself but he couldn't wait any longer. He'd call Angie.

She was the only one who might know what had happened to Ed. As he dialed the number he hoped that his fears were unfounded and it was strictly an oversight on Ed's part. He was fully aware of the danger to which Ed had subjected himself and he candidly expected the worst.

"Angie, this is Mike Mitchell, Ed Bennett's friend. I spoke to you once before when Ed had those problems a couple of weeks ago" he began.

"Oh yes, I remember" she replied.

"Have you seen him lately?" Mike asked.

"I saw him yesterday. He was here."

"Was that the last time?" asked Mike.

"Yes."

"Did he say where he was staying or what he was going to do next?" questioned Mike.

She paused for a moment trying to recall the conversation of the previous day.

"He did say he wanted to see a friend of Al's named Pete but he didn't say anything about where he was living."

"Pete who?"

"Pete Jerace. He wanted to talk to him about some pictures I showed him when he was here. He was a friend of Al's who worked with him at the stadium" Angie answered.

"What about the pictures?"

"Doctor Bennett thought it was funny that some of them were real dark.

That's all he said. I didn't understand why that bothered him so much but it did. I gave him Pete's number but he hasn't called there yet" she replied.

"How do you know he hasn't?" asked Mike.

"Well, I called Rose, Pete's wife, this morning to see if he had and to find out what happened. I was curious about why he was so concerned about the pictures too. He didn't call yet. It's just as well that he

didn't though. Pete's not home anyway. He's sick, like Al was. He's up at Caramore. They didn't come to Al's funeral and I wondered about that. Now I guess I know why" she added.

"Rose, she's all upset especially since she found out that Al just died. She's been so busy with Pete, like I was with Al that she only found out yesterday in an old newspaper. What could I say to her?" said Angie in a quivering voice.

Then she stopped for a minute to regain her composure. "I wanted to tell Doctor Bennett what happened.

She's not home that much, now that Pete's up at the hospital and maybe he's tried to call her and not been able to reach her. I wanted to tell him. I don't know his number so I couldn't call. Maybe you can tell him for me" she continued.

"How long has Pete been at Caramore? Did she say?" asked Mike eagerly.

"One week, she said."

"Did she tell you anything else?"

"Everything sounds like what happened to Al.

Even the room he's in is almost the same one Al was in. It's right next door - 311. Al was in 309."

"Give me Pete's number" asked Mike.

After a minute or so, she read the number to him along with Pete's address.

"If anything else comes up or you hear from Ed call me" said Mike.

He recited his phone number to Angie as the conversation ended with more questions unanswered than before it had begun.

Chapter 13

Larry was eager to meet Rita for dinner that evening. He waited impatiently at his table for her arrival. After about ten minutes, she appeared at the entrance of the dining room. Ralph quickly escorted her to Larry's table.

He greeted her and they sat down.

"Rita, something's going on again, like before" he began in an almost inaudible voice.

"I really shouldn't tell you about it here but I've got to."

He spoke in a monotone, with his face buried in the menu without even glancing up at her.

"What do you mean?" she whispered curiously.

"Today, House came to the pharmacy again. He used the pill maker again and did some compounding. I tried to see exactly what he was doing but I didn't want to look obvious. He asked me to enlarge some of the same pills he'd been feeding to Druse, the Quaaludes. The whole thing is exactly like what happened before" he continued in the same muted tone.

"You couldn't tell what compounds he was using? Not even an idea?" asked Rita.

"Well I tried to watch as inconspicuously as I could and all I could see is that it was somewhere over by the Cs and Ds."

"What do you mean?"

"The compounds are shelved alphabetically and it looked like he took one of the bottles from the C or D section. The other bottle was just an inert carrier" answered Larry.

"The next question is who's the patient?" said Rita.

"I can tell by the patient code that he's in building A5, room 311 but that's about it" replied Larry.

"That's right next to Al Druse's room" Rita exclaimed.

"I accessed the records with the patient number House gave me as soon as he left but it was a closed file like all of House's personal patients. Only selected data input is allowed, no output data" replied Larry, anticipating her next question.

"There's really very little that we can do. We don't even know if this is related to the Druse case. It's all only circumstantial at best. The only thing we can do is wait and see what happens. Sort of keep our ears to the ground" he continued.

The conversation moved towards the more mundane as dinner was served.

They both knew that this wasn't the time or place for trying to analyze the situation further. Larry had recognized the inappropriate timing even before he had begun to speak but he couldn't contain himself. He had to tell her and he did. Now that it was done, he felt relieved enough to enjoy the dinner.

With the meal finished, they arose and started towards the dining room door. From a table off in the corner, a large heavy set man stood up simultaneously and walked directly to intercept their path.

"Doctor Bickford" he announced in a gruff voice, "Doctor House has asked me to accompany you to his office. He'd like to speak with you."

Rita was stunned not only by the unexpected nature of the request but also by his threatening aura. Although well dressed and superficially courteous, he radiated an air of intimidation that demanded obedience. After a brief moment of hesitation she replied.

“Now? Certainly!” she stammered mechanically with a glazed stare.

He stepped aside and gestured her through the door into the hallway, then purposefully moved to block Larry’s attempt to follow her.

“I’m sorry but Doctor House wants to speak to her privately. No offense” he added in an imperative tone.

Larry reluctantly complied and remained motionless as Rita and her escort walked down the hallway towards the building’s exit.

They walked quietly. Rita said nothing and neither did her companion. The clatter of their footsteps echoed back and forth through the silence of the corridor as they approached the elevator in D building. The man stepped into the elevator car as the door opened and pressed a button. Then, extending his burly hand, he blocked the door from closing. Rita entered and the man spoke tersely.

“Top floor - It’s the only stop” and then he stepped out of the car as the door began to close.

Rita knew the location of House’s penthouse. She had never been there but it had been pointed out to her several times. Although she knew it was only four floors up the ride seemed eternal. Her mind raced helter-skelter to find a reason for this meeting, other than the one she knew and feared the most.

If her suspicions were correct, there was only one person who could have betrayed her and that thought distressed her even more than her impending visit with House. She tried to remember the look on Larry’s face when they were first confronted. Although it was but a few moments ago the surprise of the encounter had washed her memory clean. She quickly decided that its recall wouldn’t serve any purpose anyway. She didn’t want to believe that Larry did this to her and any images she had would probably be distorted by that belief. She wasn’t sure if she should be mad or sad at the prospect of Larry’s betrayal.

She could feel a cold wetness under her arms as the elevator began to slow. She knew her face was beginning to pallor and she slapped herself several times hoping to renew its color. As the car door started to open she took a deep breath to calm herself as best she could.

A tall thin man sporting a goatee appeared in the opening as the door withdrew into its sheathe. Rita immediately recognized him.

“Doctor Bickford. How are you?” he said in a mildly impudent tone.

“How do you like it here at Caramore?” he added before she had a chance to reply.

“What do you think of our facilities?” he interjected again without waiting for her reply to the initial questions.

It was apparent from his manner that he wanted to give the meeting the expected social amenities but was eager to dispense with them as quickly as possible.

Rita hesitated and when his stream of interrogatives slowed, she answered all his questions at once in a mannerly but brief response.

House led her to a large, luxuriously furnished room at the end of a short hallway. He offered her a drink which she declined. He began to speak as he prepared his own.

“Why are you working here at Caramore, Doctor Bickford?”

He paused and then quickly added, “May I call you by your first name? Rita isn’t it? No, I’m sorry, Margaret - Right!”

“Somehow you look like a Rita. Do you know how some people just look like they should have a certain name? You look like a Rita. I bet a lot of people have made that same mistake” he said with his heavy dark eyebrows raised.

Rita didn’t respond. He had made his point clearly. He continued as if he really didn’t expect a reply.

“Let me tell you a little bit about Caramore.

You know, I don’t like to brag but I think I’m entitled to, a little. Our facilities here are outstanding. I took this place from being a two bit health spa to what it is today. When I first came here it was a place people came to fake rehab because the boss or their wife or somebody else was on them. They came here to make it look good. They just came here and pretended to take the cure and get everybody off their backs for a while. Nobody ever got real help. Now, we’ve got one of the highest cure rates in the country.

I’ve done my best to insure the finest in up to the minute equipment and an excellent staff. The results have been the best possible in patient care. It wasn’t easy. I put my blood, sweat and every cent I have into this place and turned a thistle into a rose blossom.”

Then he turned towards her and looked directly into her eyes.

“What do you think? Don’t you think I’ve got a right to be proud?”

“Yes” she replied weakly.

“You don’t sound very convinced” he said sternly.

“I am” she responded in a more emphatic tone.

Apparently convinced of her sincerity, he continued, “It’s unfortunate that all medical facilities can’t have the proper kind of situation. Some don’t even have the barest of essentials and they’re generally the ones who could use it the most. A lot of those inner city clinics for example are on the fringes of nineteenth century medicine.”

I’d say doctors in those are wasting their time. It’s a shame.

How can you expect to accomplish anything in such primitive conditions” he said in a condescending tone.

Then he paused, awaiting her reply.

He had whimsically dismissed all her years of commitment to the clinic as a ‘waste of time ‘and it stabbed at her guts. She wanted respect for her efforts, not pity. Her anger was so great that it prevented her from finding the words of rebuttal and she continued to remain silent.

Receiving no reply, House continued, “I’ve often wondered about how much more effective one of those store front clinics could be with a little money. I bet they could do a real damn good job. Kind of turn things around, like I did here.”

“I’m sure they could” Rita answered sarcastically.

“Sometimes I think I’d like to sponsor one of them. Just as an experiment, you know, for my own curiosity, just give them a bunch of money and watch them go.

How much do you think it would take to set up something like that?” he continued, not even acknowledging her less than genuine tone.

“I really don’t know” replied Rita coolly.

“I was thinking in the area of maybe a hundred thousand. Ten thousand to start. That would probably do the trick, don’t you think?”

“You know” he continued, “I’m a firm believer that every cloud has a silver lining. You have to look for the good in things. You have to look at the overall picture and decide what’s best.

A lot of people let vague principles and old fashion ideas about right and wrong cloud over the big picture. They sacrifice the good things that come out of a situation because they set themselves up as God and sit in judgment without all the facts. They don’t know why things are done or how things happen, they just classify things as good or bad.

Did you ever watch those nature shows on TV?”

Rita nodded her head.

“The insects have the right idea. They willingly sacrifice themselves for the good of the colony. Sometimes they even form chains with their bodies to save the queen when she’s in peril. She insures their continuing as a species and they’ll do anything they have to, to keep her from perishing even destroy themselves.

Do you know how long insects have inhabited the earth, Doctor Bickford?”

“Not exactly” she replied.

“Since before the dinosaurs and the reason is because they put survival at the top of the list, not vague moralities” he answered with authority.

“Do you think man will last that long?” He paused and briefly sipped his drink. Rita didn’t answer.

She could see the look of an evangelist on his face as he struggled to deliver the full impact of his every word. His tone of voice made his message a peculiar combination of confession, catharsis and conviction all intertwined into one. His eyes flashed intermittently and at times appeared glazed as if a religious fervor was consuming him.

“What I’m getting at is that its people like us, people who hold the weapons in the battle for survival who must lead the rest and sometimes there are lesser individuals who must be sacrificed. Nobody wants it to be that way but that’s the way it is, nature’s way. Those who can benefit the colony must be preserved. I didn’t make it so and neither did you. It’s just a fact of life, God’s will if you like.”

At this point, much to her surprise, Rita found herself beginning to have some difficulty deciding whether these were the ravings of a lunatic or the words of an inspired philosopher.

Was the persuasiveness of his delivery, the words themselves or the possibility of reopening the clinic that gave his message its credence?

She knew the clinic would save needless suffering for many. For a few moments her thoughts drifted and she imagined it with the things that had been so sorely lacking. A faint smile came to her lips.

Then, in the next minute she chastised herself for even considering House’s subtly worded proposition. How could she accept the offerings of a madman who would classify another human being as an insect whose only purpose was to “die for” the good of the order?

But then again, isn’t that basic Darwinianism - survival of the many at the expense of the individual, she reasoned.

Al Druse was dead. Nothing could change that and she wasn’t even sure that House had anything to do with it. A new clinic might even be a fitting tribute to his memory. It could be named after him she mused. Apprehending his killer, if indeed he was murdered, wouldn’t memorialize him in the slightest, she thought.

How could she even think this way? It wasn’t right to trade a man’s life for her own personal concerns in spite of the fact that many could profit by the exchange.

Al wasn’t an ant, he was a man. But then again, she wasn’t trading anyone’s life. He wasn’t going to be resurrected no matter what she decided and besides she was only surmising that House was referring to him.

“I hope I haven’t bored you, Margaret.”

House’s voice seemed to thunder its way into her stream of twisting, turning thoughts.

“Oh, not at all” she replied somewhat startled by the interruption.

As the evening wore on, House’s pace began to slow. Rita attempted to engage him on topics of medical practice and general operating procedures at the institution, the kinds of things that would help to remove the tension from the atmosphere.

Once she realized that he wasn’t about to openly confront her, as she had feared he might, she became more relaxed. Instead of direct confrontation, he had apparently chosen to lay a game of innuendo and inference. He seemed quite sure that she was fully aware of his suggestions and appeared willing to give her time to consider the options he had presented so subtly. He made no mention of alternatives to his proposals and she was just as glad he didn’t.

As the time passed, she began to find him more engaging and the sinister aura she had first encountered began to dissipate. The conversation flowed more easily in spite of the obvious overtones.

One of the things that struck her so sharply was the impression of a man who was committed to healing and who would go to any extreme to serve that commitment. He was obsessed with the need to fulfill his calling. In that way he reminded her of Ed.

“I’ve enjoyed our get together this evening Margaret and I’m sure we’ll have the opportunity to do it again soon” House said pointedly, as they walked towards the elevator.

“If you want to speak to me at any time just call my secretary. Please don’t wait too long. I’ve got people to account to just like everybody else and sometimes they lack my patience and understanding. They prefer less sophisticated methods, if you know what I mean. Basically, they have bad manners” he continued.

As the door closed on the elevator car, Rita’s mind again became a clutter of conflict. She walked, almost mechanically back towards her room, her head pounding under the strain.

If she rejected House’s offer what would happen next? And if she accepted House’s offer what were the terms?

As she entered the long hallway leading to her apartment, she saw a dark form seated on the floor, back against the wall, in front of her doorway. He was slumped forward in a siesta like pose. She walked more slowly now, trying to get a better look at his partially concealed face. As she approached more closely he suddenly lifted his head and spoke.

“Thank God. I wasn’t sure what was going to happen. I didn’t know what else to do so I came here to wait for you. A little longer and I was going to call the cops. I wasn’t quite sure what I was going to tell them but I couldn’t think of anything else to do.”

Larry stood up from his crouched position as he spoke.

“You scared the hell out of me. I didn’t know it was you all bunched up like that” she replied in a relieved voice.

"It's not your fault. I'm so jumpy now that a leaf hitting the ground could shake me" she added apologetically.

Larry reached toward her and put his arm around her waist.

"Let me open the door" she said and slowly pulled away from his gentle grasp.

"I hope you don't think I had anything to do with this" he said as she unlocked the door.

"It did enter my mind" Rita replied briskly.

"How else?" she added hoping with all her might for an even slightly plausible explanation.

"Look Rita" he answered as they entered the apartment, "I just happen to know a cop in Jersey and I found out about you. That means a guy like House with the contacts he's probably got could find out what you ate for supper on the third Saturday in June of 1975."

He paused.

"I'm disappointed that it ever entered your mind" he said softly. Rita stood silently for a moment. Then she turned towards him.

"It would have entered your mind too. I didn't say I thought it was true, did I? I just wanted to hear you tell me it wasn't."

With that they embraced each other with a long; passionate kiss. For the first time since the evening began Rita felt safe. Her mental turmoil subsided in the warmth of the moment and she was temporarily freed from the menacing reality that surrounded her.

Chapter 14

His senses were greeted by a foul, musty odor as he slowly regained consciousness. It was a combination of urine and dampness that mingled together to produce the overpowering, heavy, stale air surrounding him. Ed squinted into the darkness trying to recall the events that put him into this dungeon.

Then he felt a hard lump in his throat as he tried to swallow and his memory came rushing back. He slowly reached towards his neck. The stinging sensation his touch produced reminded him of the last gasping moments just before he blacked out.

As he opened his eyes more widely, he could see a faint shimmer of light striking an opposite wall. It appeared as a dim bluish green thread, like the color of that cast by a street lamp.

He struggled to raise himself from the cold, dirty floor. Unable to do so, he crawled towards the wall to gain its support. Finally, erecting himself into a sitting position, he sat with his back against the wall and legs out spread. The thin ray of light now streamed across his chest and he could see its source as the crack between two boards covering a small window opening at the top of the adjacent wall. Its meager illumination now allowed him to see a bit more clearly. His cell appeared to be a small basement storage bin, the kind used by tenants in old apartment buildings.

At the far side of the bin was the dim outline of a doorway. Seeing it, Ed immediately propped his shoulder against the wall and attempted to slide himself up it into a standing position. Using the wall as support he moved slowly towards the door.

Upon reaching it, he turned the loose, rusty knob and the door opened several inches and then came to an abrupt stop. He reached through the narrow space and felt the heavy chain securing it.

With that, he began to stumble about the room searching for a tool with which to pry the chain loose. He groped mindlessly back and forth across the narrow confines of the bin.

Suddenly, through the silence, he heard the sound of footsteps and muffled voices. He stood stone still, trying to decide where they were coming from and what they were saying. They appeared to come from the window side of the bin and he moved closer to that wall.

He waited. Now he could faintly hear the voices just outside the window.

“Man, you gonna drink that whole motherfuckin’ bottle?” one drawled in a song like tone.

“What you mean by that? It’s my bottle, aint it?” ” another voice replied in a similar sing-song fashion.

“Shit- I gave in a buck to it” shouted the first voice.

Now the voices became louder and the footsteps slowed.

Then Ed saw the pencil of light on the wall flash. It flashed again as its stream was again momentarily interrupted by a passerby.

From the sound and the light he knew they must be just outside the window and he yelled up towards the tiny boarded opening with all the strength he had left.

“Hey! Hey you!”

The noise outside stopped.

Then he heard a reply coming through the boards. “What’s you want down there, you junkie jive ass?”

“I’m not a junkie: I’m trapped down here. Get some help. Please!” Ed screamed frantically.

“This boy say he’s trapped down there. What you think Spider?”

“I say he’s trapped OK on some smack like all those needle jabbers in there.

The boy's trapped cause he's probably fresh outta shit"

"No Ed protested as loudly as he could. I'm locked in. Help me get out and I'll pay you."

"You gonna pay us?" the voice came back mockingly.

"What's you doin'? Diggin' a gold mine in that cellar and you're gonna give us some?" and they both laughed loudly.

"I say piss on the fool. Let's go, man."

The sound of footsteps resumed and mingled with the departing hoots and jeers as both slowly faded into the distance. Ed sank to the floor. As he laid there in trance like exhaustion he passed alternately between states of consciousness and unconsciousness.

After a time, he was aroused by the sound of two approaching voices again but this time they were coming from the other side of the chained door. Again, he felt his pulse beginning to race at the thought of escape. Maybe they'd come back after all!

Then as they became louder he could hear their conversation and his hopes faded into panic.

"Now, you gotta do this right like I told ya.

I'll give you the key and he's all yours. I don't even wanna see the mother fucker after what happened to Bull. That sucker's bad luck.

That car hittin' us like it did was a one in a million shot. I couldn't believe it. They'll find Bull, that poor son of a bitch, in some fish's belly. If I had my way I'd just shoot the bastard or even better just forget the whole thing but the man says do it and do it his way and don't fuck up. So he's all yours."

"Why they wanna do in this dude so bad, anyway? Who is he?"

"He's a guy who's stickin' his nose in the wrong rat holes. That's all I know and it's all you gotta know. You don't wanna be puttin' your nose in the wrong hole now do ya?" replied one of them in a threatening tone.

"Don't be a smart ass or you'll be doin' your own shit here" came the sharp rebuttal.

"I'm just tryin' to keep ya outta trouble, if ya know what I mean" said the first man this time in a pacifying voice.

The footsteps stopped outside the door and a jingle of keys pierced the momentarily silence. Ed sat motionless. He could see the intermittent flashes of light dancing through the cracks in the door frame as they fumbled to unlock the chain.

"There it is. Now, have ya got it straight?"

Here's the stuff. One shot of this and it's good night for keeps. It's a dynamite stick. Leave the works in him. Makes it look better."

"Shoulda done it this way in the first place instead of screwin' around with that fake suicide shit. But that's the way they wanted it. It's supposed to make the dude look like a real turkey so everybody thinks he's a fuck up and nobody believes any of his shit, ya know what I mean? This has gotta be good enough now. Like I said before I don't even wanna look at this guy again."

"When do I see ya for the rest of the cash?"

"Tomorrow, like I told ya. I gotta get mine first."

"If I don't see ya tomorrow, I'm gonna be doin' one more job free" the voice replied menacingly.

"I'm getting' outta of here. The friggin' guy's a jinx" came the unruffled reply as the loosened chain slammed against the door.

With that the muffled conversation ended and the sound of receding footsteps began.

After a brief silence, the handle of the door turned. Slowly it opened and the glare of a flashlight beam filled the dark void of the bin. It sprayed the dirty wall and floor with its blinding illumination as it moved back and forth in the black door opening.

Ed instinctively raised his hands to cover his eyes as the light moved over him. Then it started towards him. He could feel his stomach tighten into a hard wrenching knot. He was powerless to move. Fear gripped him from head to foot.

Suddenly, the approaching beam stopped barely three feet in front of him. A low gravelly voice spoke in a slow muted whisper.

"Doc, don't say nothin'. Just listen and do what I tell ya."

It was a vaguely familiar voice. For a moment, Ed had thought one of the voices was familiar when he first heard them outside the bin but he wasn't sure. He had attributed it to wishful thinking. But now he was sure.

"Don't do nothin'. Just stay here. I'll be comin' right back. I gotta be sure everything is on the okay."

With that the light swept back across the doorway as the figure silently turned and moved towards it. Ed could see a large, burly silhouette in the reflected light as the man disappeared into the darkness.

He could feel an exhausted calm spread over him. He was safe, at least for the moment. The relief was so overwhelming that it sapped all the strength from him and he was still on the dirt floor of the cell. His fatigue was so great that even the wide open door failed to tempt his exit.

He lay motionless, awaiting the promised return of the anonymous savior. Again, the sound of approaching voices echoed down the hallway.

"I just gotta see that it's done"

"Don't ya trust me?" replied the gravelly voice with a sense of indignation.

"I'm the man whose gotta get it done. If things don't go down right again, it's my ass. I gotta be sure this time" was the reply.

The light again filled the room and showered over Ed's still form. Now, his heart began to pound as the brightness penetrated through his closed eyelids.

"Looks okay."

"Wanna go kiss him and see if he's breathin'?"

"Don't give me none of your shit. I'm just doin' my job like you."

With that, the room again darkened and the voices receded and Ed again slid into unconsciousness. Scarcely five minutes passed and he was awakened by the biting aroma of cigar smoke piercing the damp mildew of the room. He slowly opened his eyes to see a large form crouched over him. The flashlight beam was shining away from his face and his eyes began to adjust to the dim light. He could just see the glowing tip of a cigar clenched in the stranger's teeth. He strained through the shadows to see the face hovering over him. Then, a large, black hand grasped his upper arm and in the next second he felt himself being picked from the floor like a sack of potatoes.

In an instant he was flung over a broad, rock hard shoulder and carried from the dark, foul smelling prison. When he again opened his eyes, he found himself slumped in the front seat of a moving car. As he rolled his head over, the passing street lights lit the driver's face.

A sudden joy of recognition surged over him and brought him to full consciousness in seconds. He struggled to straighten himself in the seat as the driver glanced over to him.

"How you doin' there, Doc? You sure know how to get your ass in some nasty places. You're lucky your old brother Sam came on by or you'd be a couple of C notes in the undertaker's pocket about now."

Ed tried to speak but he could only produce a coarse whisper.

"How, in God's name did you find me?" he choked out.

"Find you? You found me, man" Sam began.

"The guy that wanted ya stiffed was a cash and carry man. Him and his partner was in that business for years. They musta done twenty jobs, I know 'bout. Some of my business partners used them a couple of times back in the sixties when there was trouble over who was supposed to sell what and where. They helped straighten the problems up real fast.

They was good boys. Real pros. Knew their stuff. Not so good for 'em this time though" said Sam in his slow, gravelly, sing-song tone.

He spoke with a faint touch of remorse and respect as if referring to the passing of a craftsman and the loss of his fine art.

“His buddy, Bull didn’t make it. That crazy accident on the bridge made him fish bait and scared hell outta Migs. After that happened, Migs, he thought you was a jinx. I guess I woulda too, if it was me. It was just real good luck that saved your ass, Doc. You’d better do some fine prayin’ tonight, I’d say.”

Sam paused and looked over towards Ed for a moment, almost awaiting a confirming response. When none came, he looked back to the road and continued.

“Migs, he’s spooked. He don’t want no part of you after that, but he’s gotta do the job. He’s got his orders and he’s gotta do it or he’d wind up like Bull – fish bait. So he looks for somebody to do the job for him.

I’m sittin’ down at Jingo’s and one of my boys I take care of, comes on in and say’s Migs is down at one of the shoot ‘em ups and he got some white boy he wants stiffed and he’s gonna pay real good. He wants me to get him a man to do it.

When I go down to see what the job is and why he don’t just do it himself, he tells me the story about the guy bein’ a doc and that big money wants him stiffed.

After what happened to the clinic and all the other shit goin’ around the street about you, I kinda put it together and I told him I wanted to see the mark. When I see it’s you, I says to him I’d do it.

You’re one lucky son of a bitch, Doc.

Migs, he’s gonna be a pissed off dude when he finds out you aint there but he’s not gonna fuck with Sam, that’s to be sure.

He knows better than that. Besides, I aint took no money anyway” Sam finished authoritatively.

“How’s he going to know you didn’t do it?” asked Ed.

“He gave a neighborhood kid a saw buck to call the cops and tell ‘em that a white guy was dead with a needle hangin’ outta his arm. That way everybody that is supposed to know will know he did his job and he gets paid.

I guess he’s gonna be pretty disappointed this time!”

“Why didn’t they just kill me? They had me in that car trunk for hours” Ed asked in a hoarse, inquisitive whisper.

“That’s what I says to Migs when he tells me the story. I said ‘how come you don’t just go down by the river and shoot the mother fucker in the head?’

He says he’s supposed to make it look like you done yourself in. That’s what him and Bull were gonna do, give ya a throw off the bridge.

Then after all the shit with Bull goin' over the side like he did, Migs wasn't up to all that fancy shit so he says the smack trip gotta do it."

The conversation lulled for a time as Sam continued to drive. "Where are you going?" Ed asked weakly.

"We're goin' to my place and get you fixed up.

You aint lookin' so good" and with that Sam pressed down a bit harder on the accelerator.

Chapter 15

Ed awoke several hours later, in a small, well-kept room. The shades were drawn and the drapes pulled tightly together. A night light was burning dimly on the dresser in the corner. A crack of sunlight crept through a narrow space between the drapes and the window frame and struck the far wall. The illuminated dial of the clock on the night stand read ten-thirty.

Ed began to sit up as the door opened revealing a tall, slender woman standing in the entrance.

"This is a switch. The patient's a doctor" she announced in a sparkling tone.

Ed ran a perplexed gaze from the top of her shiny, free flowing hair, down across her, beautiful face, over her slim, rounded body to her long graceful legs. She was in her early twenties with a look of soft elegance about her. She stood with an inviting smile on her lips awaiting his response.

"Let me make it easier for you" she interjected upon seeing his bewilderment. "My name's Melinda. I'm Sam's daughter."

Then Ed remembered. Sam used to talk about his little girl all the time. She wasn't his real child that is by blood, but a kid he'd picked up out of the street after her mother ODed on heroin. He only talked about that once. If it hadn't been for that one time, Ed thought the kid was his own flesh and blood by the way he spoke of her.

She had graduated from high school and junior college, the kinds of things he never got the chance to do and that made him real proud. He always told Ed he didn't want a kid as dumb as he was.

"I'm Ed Bennett" he stammered.

"Yes, I know. Sam's told me about you many times" she answered as she walked towards the window and opened the shades.

"What has he told you?" Ed replied.

"The best!" she answered.

Ed's train of thought began to wander as he perused her shapely, brown form outlined against the window light. The penetrating rays pierced her blouse and skirt providing a vivid silhouette against the

brightness. Suddenly, he found himself staring and struggled to snap his attention back from its brief fantasy.

"How did I wind up here?" he asked.

"Sam brought you home last night. You were out of it. I undressed you and put you to bed to sleep it off. When I asked him what had happened all he said was you'd explain it when you woke up. He doesn't talk much, you know."

She paused.

"You will, won't you?"

"As much as I can" answered Ed and with that he began to relate to her the events of the past several weeks.

She sat attentively at the edge of the bed beside him as he laid out the pieces of the puzzle that tormented him. As he spoke, the fire that had driven him to the edge of peril again rekindled and by the time he finished, his eyes were once more a glow with emotion.

"Now, all I need is a phone and a little help.

Do you know where I can get either one?" he concluded.

"I know where you can get both" Melinda replied and with that she left the room.

She returned in a moment carrying the phone he requested and plugged it into a nearby wall.

"There's the phone and here I am. You've got two out of two. Now, generally wishes come in threes so if you've got a third one just let me know" she said coyly.

Ed hesitated, smiled and picked up the phone.

"I want you to call this number and ask for Mike. Tell him you want to meet him at Finnegan's Wake. It's a bar. He knows where it is. Tell him you have a case for him and you have to see him but you can't come to his office. Be persuasive. I'm sure you know how."

He repeated the number to her.

"What if he doesn't go for it?"

"I bet you'll know how to fix that"" Ed replied as he handed her the phone.

She dialed. Mike answered and within several minutes she had made the necessary arrangements.

"Five o'clock. That gives me plenty of time.

Will you make another call for me Melinda?" he asked.

“Why stop now?” she replied.

“I want to call a guy named Charlie. I don’t even know if he’s home now. He might be on the road. We’ll see.

Tell him you have an old friend of his who’s in town and wants to see him.

Say you’re his secretary. He’ll ask who the friend is and you tell him it’s a surprise.

Make the time for tonight, about seven o’clock at the same place - Finnegan’s. If he can’t make it tonight, try for tomorrow night.”

Ed dictated the number and Melinda called. The phone rang several times and Charlie finally answered.

Again, Melinda danced through the conversation and within minutes the second meeting was set.

“Melinda” you’re beautiful” exclaimed Ed with a broad smile as she hung up the phone. He grasped her by her shoulder and planted a firm, exuberant kiss on her lips.

As he momentarily recoiled from his impetuous move they both stopped and stared into each other’s eyes. For that instant their emotions merged together as one and each spontaneously felt deep, penetrating warmth.

Chapter 16

A cold, penetrating drizzle met Ed as he opened the car door. “I’ll call you when I ‘m done here.”

“Probably in a couple of hours” he said as he stepped out.

“Good Luck” Melinda replied as he closed the door.

The crowd at Finnegan’s was thin. A few regulars sat at the bar. They looked up with the interest granted to all new faces as he entered. All but one of ten tables was empty. Mike was late but that really wasn’t unusual.

Ed ordered a beer and carried it to a table at the back of the room, off towards the far corner. Within minutes Mike arrived.

He stood momentarily in the doorway, looking about the place, searching for Melinda.

Ed was about to call to him but hesitated. Mike looked different.

His unfamiliar dress caught Ed by surprised and temporarily struck him mute.

The double breasted, bell bottomed suit was gone as were his wire rimmed glasses and his shoulder length hair had been transformed into a short, stylish coiffure.

For a minute, Ed wasn't quite sure if it really was Mike.

Mike's gaze slowly moved from face to face and soon peered through the dimly lit room toward Ed's table. Ed regained his composure and called to him as he squinted in his direction.

"Ed?" he responded as he moved to the back of the room.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you" Ed answered.

Melinda's a friend of mine. I had her call" he added in a quick, voluntary explanation.

"I was worried about bugs."

Mike pulled up a chair and sat down slowly still looking perplexed.

"What's with the new threads, Mike?"

For a minute, I wasn't sure it was you."

"New image! Too many girls telling me I remind them of their Dad's high school yearbook. Kinda got me feeling down.

I was thinking about it for a long time but I finally got myself up to doing it just a day or two ago. What do you think?" Mike asked.

"A metamorphosis. A caterpillar to a butterfly" Ed replied with an uncertain smile.

"Three hundred bucks worth" Mike added sardonically.

"I need your help" interjected Ed in a more sobering tone.

"Were the hell have you been? I dropped you off to buy a car from that Big Harold guy and you disappear from the face of the earth.

I tried calling that shit house you moved into. I even went down there a couple of times and nobody knows anything. What's the story?" exclaimed Mike.

"I met some old friends and they wanted me to go for a moonlight swim with them" Ed answered, sarcastically.

"It's a long story and I'm not really up to it now.

How is Rita?" he added in the same breath with obvious concern in his voice.

"I heard from her the day before yesterday and she's okay. It's hard to get to talk to her because she can't call very often. She's got to be careful. She left a message on the answering machine that said she was alright but something pretty serious was happening."

"What's that?" Ed asked eagerly.

"She said she couldn't explain it on the machine. She said she'd call back tomorrow. "

"Are you sure she's okay?" asked Ed anxiously.

"She sounded more upset than afraid. Like she was confused about something but I think she's alright" Mike said convincingly.

Reassured, Ed continued.

"I need a contact with a newspaper. Somebody I can trust. I remember your telling me about a friend of yours who worked for the Herald News. Do you still see that guy?"

"Once in a while he calls me or comes down to the office when I've got some news on a drug bust. Not often but now and then."

"What's he like? Can you trust him?" queried Ed.

"He's not my best pal but he seems okay. Whenever I give him something he gets right on it. I've told him some things that were pretty touchy stuff confidentially and I never had any shit come back at me, so I guess he's alright."

"Give me his number. I think I've got more than a drug bust for him."

"What do you mean?" responded Mike, unable to hide his curiosity.

"I really don't want to say anything for certain until I'm sure but I think Al Druse was killed and I think I know why but I've got to be sure. I need a contact, just in case all my hunches are right. That's why I need your newspaper friend" Ed explained.

"If that's the way you want it, I guess it's gotta be that way" Mike replied in a disappointed voice.

He knew better than to badger Ed. In spite of his skilled methods of interrogation, he was sure that his efforts would be in vain. Ed had a reputation for being closed mouthed when the times demanded it and Mike saw no reason for that to be changed now.

He reached into his pocket for a pen, scribbled a name and number on a napkin and handed it to Ed who stuffed it into his shirt pocket.

"Who's Melinda?" asked Mike as he attempted to change the topic.

Ed responded eagerly and the tense conversation eased into more pleasant, flowing tones.

Mike left after an hour or so. Ed had enjoyed the time spent with Mike but somehow he sensed an underlying stress in his voice. It wasn't the kind of thing he could put his finger on but it was there.

He took the napkin from his pocket and opened it.

"Bill Charles, 987-765-9089" he read silently and closed it again. Something in Mike's mannerism made him feel uncertain.

"Should I call this guy?" he asked himself as he stared straight ahead momentarily.

"Ah, shit I've known Mike for years. Straight as a poker" he thought. "Besides, this guy is the only game in town for me now" he mused. He reopened the napkin.

"Bill Charles is it I guess" he said to himself softly.

The clock read seven P.M. now. Charlie should be here within a half hour. Ed had purposely left a lot of lag time between the two meetings. He didn't want Mike and Charlie to hear what he had to say to the other. The more he thought about it the more satisfied he was with his decision.

Soon the door opened and a large figure appeared in the entrance. He couldn't make out the face but it had to be Charlie. No one else was likely to fill a three by seven foot opening that completely.

"Ed?" thundered the voice of the figure.

"What are you doing here?" he bellowed as he moved unevenly towards the table.

As he came into view, Ed saw the reason for his wobbling gate. He wielded the crutches from beneath each arm with obvious disdain as he swung himself in Ed's direction.

"I come here to see a broad and I get you?" he said jokingly.

Ed explained briefly.

"Why the sticks, Charlie? The old knee shot again?" he added.

"Yeah, looks like it's all over this time. This is why I'm not in Miami with the team. I was supposed to go, I guess, but I just can't take sittin' there watchin'. It eats me up so much that the coach said I could stay home. I think he knows that I'm done anyway" said Charlie soberly.

"You never know" said Ed in an attempt at consolation. "You've had this problem before and it worked out alright."

"This time's different. Another operation won't do it. It's gone. I'm just looking to save the leg much less play again" said Charlie in a resigned voice.

"Can you get me into the stadium?" asked Ed in an abrupt change of topic.

"What do you mean, 'get you in'. I can get you tickets anytime you want" he replied.

"No, I don't mean for a game I mean like at a time when I can look around a little on my own."

"Look around for what?"

"I'm not really sure. I really can't explain. You gotta trust me" answered Ed.

Charlie paused for a moment.

"I guess I can. I know the security men won't bother you if you're with me. I can't see where there would be any problem.

But I still don't know why you wanna go" said Charlie with reluctance.

"Just go along with me. Remember that night you took me down to Saint Anne's Hospital with you to see your friend? I didn't ask you any questions. I just went along like you asked. Remember?"

Charlie nodded.

"That's where this all started. Now, I want you to go along with me on this one."

Charlie hesitated again for a moment.

"When do you want to go?"

"How about tomorrow afternoon? Is that a good time?" replied Ed immediately.

"It will be quiet. Won't be too many people around then. You said you don't want anybody botherin' you" remarked Charlie.

He thought for a second.

"Sounds okay- tomorrow then. We'll meet at the Queen's Diner and you can drive from there, alright?" asked Ed.

"Sure. Tomorrow at let's say four o'clock?" Charlie answered.

"Good!" confirmed Ed.

Melinda picked him up right on time. As they rode homeward, he could hardly contain his exuberance at the prospect of finally bringing all of this to a conclusion. His mind raced back and forth in eager anticipation of tomorrow's events. Mentally, he had already been at the stadium and back a thousand times. It was going to be hard for him to sleep tonight, of that he was sure.

The early morning sun streamed in through the crack in the drawn shades and gradually illuminated the entire room. Ed's eyes opened slowly. Melinda's soft, round buttock pressed firmly against him as she awakened and stretched. His thoughts flashed back as he responsively placed his hand over her large warm breast and kissed the nape of her neck tenderly. His fear of a sleepless night had been unfounded, of that, she had made sure.

As the sun's rays became more penetrating and his wakefulness more complete, his thoughts moved towards the day's task.

He'd go down to the school and get what he needed as soon as it opened that was about eight o'clock. Doctor Marvin would probably be there by then. He was always in his office by then.

"Melinda" he whispered softly. "I've got to go downtown."

She turned and encircled him with her long, graceful arms and legs pulling her close as possible to him in a silent reply. He glanced at the clock on the dresser. Six o'clock. Doc Marvin wouldn't be there until eight. He pressed himself towards her in an ardent response.

They pulled into a parking lot in the rear of a drab, aging, brick building at the center of the city. Leaching out from beneath the layers of once colorful spray painted graffiti read the inscription- "Marvin Lane Hall of Science."

Melinda waited in the car while Ed entered the building. He walked quickly to the second floor - room 208. Through the window in the door of the room he saw Doc Marvin seated at his desk, partially obscured by the mountains of papers that grew up from its surface and surrounded him. Nothing had changed. For a moment, Ed felt as if he was viewing one of the physical constants of the universe about which Marvin had taught him.

He tapped lightly at the window. Lane looked up over the tops of his glasses for an instant and simultaneously motioned him in without even noticing the identity of his caller.

"Doctor Lane" Ed announced as he cracked open the door.

"Yes" he replied automatically, without glancing upward.

"It's Ed Bennett. Do you remember me?"

With that, Lane immediately dropped his pen, slowly removed his glasses and looked at Ed with perplexity.

His gray, green eyes squinted slightly as he looked hard at his visitor and then a broad smile erupted under his white beard. He ran his long, thin fingers back through his thinning gray hair and tilted his chair back on its rear legs.

"Jesus Christ" he exclaimed with obvious surprise.

"Last time I saw you, you were packing for medical school."

"Now, what brings you here Doctor Bennett? It is doctor, I hope" he added in an interrogatory tone.

"Yes, it is" replied Ed.

“Too bad! I was sorry to see you leave our graduate program here. You could have made a fine physicist” responded Lane, kind of half musing out loud to himself, as he had a habit of doing.

Now you’re wasting your time burning warts off old ladies’ asses” he added attempting at comic sarcasm.

Ed smiled faintly. The old man’s desk hadn’t changed and neither had he, not one iota. It was a subtle game he played with everyone -cynical invitations to debate an issue, any issue, just for the hell of it.

Ed knew better than to take the bait and glossed over the remark saying nothing.

Lane, realizing his gauntlet had passed unheeded, smiled and continued the conversation.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?” he said, in another effort to determine the reason for Ed’s presence.

“I need your help, Doc.”

“I remember you always told me that if science was not for the ultimate good of man, God would never have given him so powerful a tool. I want to use that tool, now.”

“What do you have in mind?” asked Lane.

“I want to borrow a Geiger Counter” Ed replied.

“What the hell for? Do you plan on going prospecting?

I’d say you could get rich a lot easier digging with a scalpel rather than a shovel” goaded Lane.

“Well, I am going prospecting in a way. If everything is as I think it is, I’ll be digging up a lot of valuable ground. It’s probably worth more than a uranium mine.”

The conversation paused for a moment.

“Well, I don’t know what this is all about and I guess I’m not supposed to know. I suppose I can trust you. I don’t remember catching you stealing any test tubes when you were here” he said with a smirk as he arose from his chair and reached into his pocket. He withdrew a large key ring and led Ed down the corridor towards the storage room.

Chapter 17

Ed arrived at the diner early, about quarter to four and sat patiently sipping a cup of black coffee, eyeing each person through the window as they entered.

Before long, a new, black Porsche pulled into the parking space adjacent to his window and the driver tooted the horn with two long blasts. He strained to identify him through the reflections from the dark, tinted windshield. The driver blew the horn again and then Charlie's massive head poked out through the car's side window.

"When did you get this? Ed greeted him as he opened the passenger's door.

"I blew the horn because it's a pain in the ass to get in and out of here with these sticks" Charlie began. "Monday - I got it Monday. Nice huh?" he said and began backing the car out in jackrabbit fashion.

He slammed it into first gear and shot out into the heavy stream of highway traffic.

"Last week, at this time I was really down. My playing days are done and I knew it. I was on my way to being a has-been. All that talk in the paper about knee surgery putting me back on the field was a lot of bullshit and everybody knew it and so did I. I'm just hoping I'm gonna walk alright after it's over.

Man, I was feelin' pretty down. So I decided to cheer myself up a little and this is it. Now, all of a sudden, things are looking a little better for me. Every cloud has a silver lining.

Last night, just when I'm at the bottom, my agent calls me about a possible broadcasting job.

Pregame stuff! It's beautiful. I find out tomorrow. The money's great and I don't have to leave the game. I just move upstairs to the broadcast booth. I don't know which I like better, the money or the chance to stay in the game. So now this has changed from an antidepressant to a celebration" he said as he soundly patted the dash of the car.

"That sounds great" replied Ed enthusiastically. "They couldn't have picked a better guy."

"Now, what are we coming down here for and what's in there?" asked Charlie pointing to the cardboard box Ed held on the floor, between his feet.

Ed hesitated for a moment and then answered.

"It's a Geiger Counter. I'll tell you the whole story just as soon as I'm sure I have something to tell. Give me a little time" he asked.

"Geiger Counter?" repeated Charlie out loud to himself.

They arrived at the stadium gate. Charlie rolled the window down and yelled "How ya doin' John?"

The guard waved acknowledgingly.

"Just fine Mr. Rhodes" was the reply and Charlie stepped down on the accelerator.

They parked the car and walked the long walk towards the inner recesses of the stadium, Ed with the box under one arm and Charlie swinging himself rhythmically on the crutches. They moved down to the edge of the playing field where Charlie folded down one of the seats.

“Here we are! I’d sure like to know what the hell you’re doing here with a Geiger Counter but I guess I’ll have to just wait and see, won’t I?” he said as he sat down.

“Do whatever you’re going to do. I’m going to sit right here and get some sun” and with that he leaned back in the seat, clasped his large burley hands behind his head and looked skyward, feigning disinterest.

Ed stood motionless for an instant, not exactly sure what to do next. Even though he had been here hundreds of times in his mind now he was unsure.

Charlie looked over at him.

“Don’t be shy. Nobody’s here. You can poke around anywhere you want. If anybody does come, just send them over to me. I’ll be right here” he said.

With that, Ed placed the box on one of the seats next to Charlie, removed the instrument from it and walked towards the field.

He switched it on and allowed the probe to hang freely just above the ground where he walked. The sporadic clicking caused by background radiation began. Every ten seconds or so the machine responded with a faint crackle and then fell silent for the intervening time.

Ed walked in measured steps as he proceeded towards the far goal line, covering the field in crisscross fashion. Several times, he noticed Charlie looking intently in his direction from his distant vantage point. Each time, he immediately resumed his skyward pose as soon as he saw Ed look back towards him.

Suddenly, the intermittent cadence of the counter was interrupted by a burst of static. As he walked further, the bursts became ever louder and more frequent. Soon, the device shrieked with an incessant chatter of crackling and popping.

Ed eyed the meter as it rose higher and higher to the upper ranges of the scale. He walked back and forth over the area, carefully watching the needle as he moved, stopping periodically to record its readings. Several times, he reached down and scooped some soil into one of the small plastic bags he had brought with him. He worked in a robot-like trance, overwhelmed by the realization of his discovery.

His examination completed, he walked back to Charlie who remained semi-reclined, with head back and eyes closed continuing to appear uninterested.

He lowered an adjacent seat and slumped into it. Charlie struggled to sit upright.

“Well, what did you find?” he asked unable to effectively conceal the intense curiosity in his voice.

“Man, this is hard to believe” replied Ed in a stammer.

“What?” snapped Charlie.

"This place is hotter than hell. The god damn needle was about jumping off this thing!" he added in a stunted monotone as he slapped the instrument soundly.

"That means radiation? Right? From what?" queried Charlie.

"The ground. The ground's loaded" answered Ed.

They both sat there in silence for several minutes as the reality of the situation penetrated. Ed had prepared himself for this but suspicion and truth don't bear the same intensity. He was finding that out now. It hit him like a solid blow to the midsection, momentarily paralyzing him both physically and psychologically. As for Charlie, he was stunned mute by the utter magnitude of Ed's disclosure. Finally, he gained the composure to speak.

"What the hell does this mean?"

"I don't know for sure but I've got an idea" began Ed.

"The whole thing's a land fill. When I was a kid this was all a giant dump. You could dump anything you wanted here. I remember coming down here with my Uncle Carl. He ran a furniture moving business and a lot of times he had left over storage cartons or old cardboard or wrapping papers and he'd dump them here.

He always brought me along to help him pull all the shit out of the truck. There was a little shack at the end of this long dirt road and a guy would come out and Uncle Carl would give him three bucks and that was it. We'd go dump the stuff. The guy never looked in the truck. Nobody ever checked anything. All he wanted to know was three bucks.

You could have dumped your grandmother's body here. Nobody cared. And my uncle, he wasn't the only one dumping. I remember not being able to see out of the windows of the truck because of the dust in the air when all the trucks where going in and out of here. There were plenty of others too."

Ed paused and looked out over the stadium.

"I've read about missing nuclear wastes. They claim a lot of it was lost in the fifties and sixties. Organized crime was supposed to be involved in dumping it illegally. Maybe some of it was dumped right here and has leached to the surface after all these years?"

He paused again.

"I wonder if we just found some of it?" he added.

"How in God's name did you ever think of this?" asked Charlie.

"What made you come down here with this thing in the first place?" he said pointing to the Geiger Counter.

"You did" answered Ed tersely.

“Me? I don’t know shit about nuclear waste. All I know is football” Charlie protested.

“When you took me to see your friend Al Druse, the groundskeeper here, that’s when it all started. You started it.

“What do you mean by that?”

“When we first went to see him at Saint Anne’s, something didn’t seem right to me. I’ve seen a lot of sick and dying people in my day and this time things just didn’t add up. I couldn’t put my finger on it right away but then I realized what it was. He looked like a guy getting radiation treatments and yet he didn’t have cancer. I guess the hair loss was one of the first things I noticed but there were others too.

That made me wonder, wonder a lot. Why would he look like that? I couldn’t figure it out.

After Al died, I went to his house to give his wife my condolences. I had taken her to see him in the hospital several times and I got to know her pretty well, so I thought it was the right thing to do.

When I was there she happened to show me some old pictures of Al that she had. Pictures of Al and the guys he worked with at the stadium. I noticed that a lot of them were faded. Washed out looking.

Did you ever see a radiation dosage badge? The kind workers in nuclear plants wear?”

“No” replied Charlie.

“It’s a piece of photographic film covered with paper. When the radiation hits it, the film gets exposed through the paper. The more exposure, the greater the dose of radioactivity you’ve received” Ed explained.

“So you figured that the film in the camera was like the badge?” interjected Charlie.

“Well, it seemed logical and when I put it together with Al’s appearance, it all fit. The whole idea was so far out though. I really had a hard time believing it myself but if there was a better explanation, I couldn’t think of it.”

“How come Al got sick and nobody else did?” asked Charlie.

“He must have had a lot more exposure. Besides some people are just naturally more affected than others. He might have been one of them.”

“He worked here longer than anybody else on the crew” said Charlie. Then he thought for a minute.

“He must have been here almost since the place opened.

Al and Pete did most of the field work. They kinda specialized in taking care of the grass and making sure it was always just right. They worked on it a pretty good part of the year. They did other jobs to, but that was their main job” added Charlie.

“That sure would give them a high exposure” affirmed Ed.

"Far out or not I guess you were right" said Charlie with a sigh.

"But, what I can't figure out is why all the rough stuff with me started right away?" continued Ed.

"I mean like wrecking the clinic and the drug plant? If that wouldn't have happened, I probably wouldn't have given the whole thing that much thought. I probably would have forgotten about it but after all that, I knew I was involved in something whether I wanted to be or not."

"Whoever did it must have thought you showed too much interest and it must have scared them. They probably figured a little muscle would turn you off fast. Preventive medicine, so to speak" answered Charlie.

"I wish they would have been right" Ed sighed.

"I still can't quite figure who's behind all the heavy action that's being laid on me, though. And what's this guy House got to do with it. Where does he tie in?"

The conversation paused for a moment.

"What are you going to do now?" asked Charlie anxiously.

"I'm not sure" Ed replied solemnly.

Chapter 18

The elevator climbed slowly to the fifth floor. Ed thoughts spun around, over and over. He was sure now that Druse's death had been coldly orchestrated to conceal the true nature of his illness.

His treatment at Caramore, a hospital a hundred miles away and the vague, noncommittal diagnosis offered by House all pointed to it clearly. The death certificate, signed by the phantom Doctor Thompson made it all the more convincing. Finally, the subsequent attacks on his life confirmed the veracity of his suspicions.

Al had been the unknowing victim of an intricate cover-up and his wife, Angie had been purposefully and cleverly manipulated into the role of a tacit accomplice by her unwitting cooperation with House. In spite of his certainty, he was unable to decide on the actual perpetrator. It was obvious that the scheme emanated from high places. His treatment by the police and his attempted murder both made that clear but exactly who was ultimately responsible eluded him.

He rubbed the toes of his shoes against the backs of his pant legs, one at a time, straightened his tie and ran his fingers back through his hair, as the elevator came to a stop. The door opened and he walked to the double doors at the end of the hallway marked Herald-News Publishing.

"I'm here to see Mr. Charles" he announced to the receptionist. "He's expecting me. I spoke with him this morning."

After a brief phone call she replied "He'll be right with you in a minute."

Ed sat, fidgeting nervously and pretended to read a magazine as he waited. Within minutes, the door at the far side of the room opened and a short, broad, middle aged man emerged. He wore a wrinkled white shirt with a loosened tie dangling about his thick neck. His baggy pants almost completely covered his shoes so that only the pointy tips peeked out like turtle heads, protruding from their shells. A thin ring of dark brown hair encircled his shiny, bald head.

"Mr. Bennett?" he rumbled in a low tone as he puffed on the short cigarette stub hanging from the left side of his mouth.

"You're here to see me? I'm Bill Charles."

Ed arose, introduced himself and followed Charles to his small, cluttered office.

"What can I do for you?" he questioned as he fell into the old, wooden chair situated behind his desk.

After an initial hesitation, Ed began his long, adventurous story. Charles listened keenly, stopping him occasionally with probing questions or leading statements in the manner of a gruff, cross-examining attorney.

Frequently, he jotted down a word or two on the long, yellow pad that was lying in front of him. The rest of the time, he spent rolling his pencil between his short, stubby fingers, displaying little emotion as Ed's tale unfolded.

"So you're telling me that if I go down to that stadium with a Geiger Counter, I'm gonna think I'm at Three Mile Island? And the whole thing's being covered up by somebody that wants it all kept quiet at any cost but you don't know who that is?" summarized Charles succinctly, when Ed had finished.

"That's about it. That and the fact that one guy's dead already as a result" he added.

Charles sat silently and continued to twiddle his pencil. Then, he stopped and looked up at Ed.

"Mike tells you're on the level. You're not crazy or a bullshiter. Everything you told me is probably true but I've got to do some checking on my own. I can't just go and print a story like this without some confirmation. I'm sure you understand that. Besides, I've got to talk to the boss before I do anything. This isn't exactly a 'local gas station robbery' kinda story. You know what I mean" said Charles, looking him straight in the eye as if to detect any faint hint of waiver.

"Give me a number where I can get back to you" he concluded.

"I'll call you" answered Ed firmly.

"It's not that I don't trust you, but I've got to be careful. I'm sure you can appreciate that after what I've just told you. I'll call you, say tomorrow, in the morning" he reiterated.

With that, he left Charles' office and headed back to Sam's place uncertain as to the outcome of the meeting but still sure it had been his only choice. If this didn't work out his next move was unclear.

"How could it not work out?" he chided himself.

This is the kind of stuff that could sell more newspapers than Watergate.

Nobody died in Watergate. How could any paper walk away from a gold mine like that?

As he thought, he became increasingly confident that the whole thing might finally be drawing to a close for him and the idea helped to soothe his jangled nerves. He'd sleep better tonight with the feeling that, at last he might have enlisted the support of a potent ally such as Charles.

The morning hours dragged by at snail's pace. Ed had arisen early, awakened by the gnawing anxiety which had become part of his daily life. He had watched the clock tick by the past three hours in painfully slow fashion.

Now, it was eight-thirty and he reached for the phone lying on the table in front of him.

"Charles should be at work by now" he thought as he dialed the number.

His heart started to race as the phone rang. A sense of dread spread over him at the prospect of rejection. He consciously wrestled his thoughts to the positive in an effort to regain his composure.

After several rings, Charles' gravelly voice answered.

"Herald-News. Charles speaking" came the greeting.

"Ed Bennett" Ed choked out only to be interrupted immediately.

"Mr. Bennett, listen, I talked to the boss about your story. He says we're not interested."

Then, after a brief pause, he added in an admonishing voice "As a matter of fact, he says that if you were smart, you wouldn't be so interested either."

It took Ed several moments to recover from the initial shock of Charles rebuff.

Then, he replied. "Not interested! You've got to be kidding. How the hell could you not be interested?"

He felt his stomach begin to roll and the heat of blood rushing into his face. "The whole god damn stadium's loaded with radioactivity. Thousands of people go there every week. And you're not interested! What the hell is going on?" he blurted into the telephone in a burst of anger.

"Maybe you don't understand the situation here" responded Charles in a slow, stern tone.

“Let me explain some of the facts of life to you, my boy” he continued in a disparaging voice.

“Here it is! Let’s start with a lesson in Common Sense 101.

The stadium was built with money raised by selling bonds municipal bonds to be precise. They’re the tax free kind, in case you don’t know. Now who do you think buys them?

I’ll give you one hint. It’s not people who are broke or just making ends meet.

It’s not the average guy in the street. Its big money guys! High priced doctors, lawyers and politicians.

By the way, your friend House is one of them, a big one. He’s got plenty of money tied up there and he’s made a lot of money on the deal. He bought when the project first started and rates were sky high, back in the sixties. Those bonds gotta be worth a fortune now.

From what I gather, he’s just about ready to unload them now .He’s gonna by that hospital he runs and the bonds are gonna do it for him.

Now, let’s pretend that something goes wrong and the stadium all of a sudden doesn’t work out. Something like what you told me about.

Where’s all the money to pay off all those bonds gonna come from? What’s gonna happen to all those big investors like House, for example?”

Charles continued without awaiting the obvious answer to his questioning.

“Now, do you think that if they know about something that’s going to jeopardize their investment they’re going to just sit on their asses and let it all go down the drain? Are you getting my point?

Let me add it all up for you. If this paper or any paper helps that kinda thing happen and all those bonds collapse a lot of people aren’t gonna take too kindly to us.

There’ll be more cops, inspectors and examiners down here than flies on a turd. We’ll be cited for violations that aren’t laws yet. We won’t be able to remember what a delivery truck with four good tires looks like.

Now, do you understand what I’m trying to tell you? The boss knows some of these guys. He’s a good judge of character and he says most of them don’t have any.

They’re strictly into M and M, money and muscle. If money won’t work muscle will and if that don’t work they’ve got one final solution for the problem.

They must have decided that money probably wouldn’t work on you so they started right off with muscle.

Too bad for them and you, it didn’t work either.”

There was a brief silence and then the tone of Charles’ voice mellowed.

"Look, you might be able to find some paper to print this story but it won't be easy to find fools that big. Do yourself a favor and forget it kid."

Ed's anger was diminished by Charles' sincerity.

"What am I supposed to do? Just pretend everything's okay?" Ed asked in a meek reply.

"If I were you, I'd prescribe an amnesia pill for myself and go to California for a long vacation. I'd even consider taking up residency" Charles said snidely.

"What about one of the national news magazines or a paper like the Times? They'd go for it I'm sure" replied Ed in protest and hoping for Charles' agreement.

"Did you ever read anything about Kennedy while he was in office? The stuff he was doing. The women and all that? Do you think those magazines you're talking about didn't know about it at the time?"

Then Charles answered his own question in the same breath.

"Sure they did. But you didn't hear a god damn thing about it then. The reason was, the right people made sure it wasn't printed and the thing with NASA and the space shuttle. Look at all the shitty workmanship and all the other stuff. Why didn't we hear about it before the accident? Do you think nobody at Newsweek knew about that?"

Again Charles answered his own questions in his usual, rough but direct manner.

"You gotta be friggin' kidding. Of course they knew but nobody was gonna tell, that is, until the whole thing blew up in their face."

"What about the EPA?" asked Ed.

Charles paused and then replied.

"We're not talkin' about a few dozen houses at Love Canal here. This is the big league. It could be hundreds of millions - maybe billions. It depends on how wide spread this shit is. This is politics in high places. It ain't gonna work. The EPA was created by politicians. You don't think the kid will turn on its old man, do you? It's too bad but that's the way it works. If certain people want it kept quiet, it stays quiet" he repeated ominously.

Charles' logic was apparently indisputable and Ed's loss for words drew the conversation to an abrupt halt. As he replaced the receiver in its holder, he began a long, deep self-agonizing.

Maybe it was none of his business. Who had appointed him to oversee the public welfare? Was his own altruistic conscience manipulating him into the fool's role?

Deep inside, he knew that he couldn't win. If he walked away as Charles had advised, he couldn't leave his conscience behind. If he continued his apparently fruitless search for justice, the consequences would most likely be catastrophic.

He sat at the edge of the chair, hands clasp while the internal struggle raged back and forth. He knew full well that abdication of his moral responsibility could never be complete. His feelings of guilt would rise and fall, that he knew, and he knew equally well that they could never be fully eradicated. They would be embedded in him, part of him.

If he chose to pursue his quest and even if he failed at least he would escape that fate. For him, torments of the soul could never be slighter than those of the body. His course was set and from its path he could see no escape.

He emerged from his inner conflict, steadfast in his conviction but unsure as to what would be next. The certainty of his cause failed to provide him with a plan.

Maybe Charles was wrong. He was obviously a confirmed cynic.

"The man could find fault with the Virgin Mary" thought Ed.

He'd call the EPA. What the hell. The worst that could happen would be Charles was right. He called the 800 number.

A Miss Goncalves answered and connected him with Mr. Wright who was in charge of radiation monitoring.

Wright listened as Ed detailed the events of the past months and periodically injecting words of encouragement, into the conversation.

At the end of twenty minutes or so Ed hung up the phone firmly convinced of Charles' fallibility. Wright was going to lay some groundwork to begin a full scale investigation, he said. The sound of his voice instilled optimism. He was to call Wright in the morning to get the specifics.

Again, he felt relieved but this time the nagging recollection of his experience with Charles served to dull his enthusiasm.

He forced himself into high spirits the next morning as he called Wright. His overpowering hope for resolution left no room for the anticipation of disappointment. He eagerly dialed the number; while Wright's optimistic words ran through his head.

The secretary answered. Ed identified himself and continued, "Mr. Wright is expecting my call."

"One moment please."

Within seconds, she was back on the line.

"I'm sorry. Mr. Wright is out on unexpected personal business and we're not quite sure when he'll return" she said sharply.

"Hello!" came the secretary's inquiring voice responding to the prolonged silence.

Ed struggled to speak.

“He said I should call him this morning” he stammered in reply. “When will he be back?”

“One moment please” came the sing-song voice and the line was quiet for several more seconds. He could feel the surge of anxiety begin its sweep over him as he waited.

“I can’t be sure” she answered without explanation.

“Will you have him call me when he returns?” he asked halfheartedly.

“Certainly” she answered in an obliging voice which was immediately followed by the click of the receiver.

The abrupt uneasiness of the conversation spoke for itself. Charles was right after all. Ed sensed it and with bitter reluctance, he forced himself to accept the truth.

Throughout the following days, the words Charles had uttered rang over again and again in Ed’s mind. He carefully recalled each and every syllable and it became increasingly clear that he was in this alone now and that’s the way it would stay.

He knew he could count on Melinda. She had already made that perfectly clear by both word and action but he also knew he couldn’t expose her to the dangers he was sure awaited him. He was on his own alright.

Carefully, he began to piece together a plan. A plan that was admittedly risky or maybe even foolhardy he conceded to himself, but still far preferable to safe inaction.

He called the stadium’s public relations department and was connected with the office of a Mr. Art Gilrain. He was the director of half time activities. All scheduling and selection of events was arranged through him.

The Cedar Hills High School marching band from Cedar Hills, Ohio would perform this Sunday. The band leader’s name was John Suter. He would direct the band. Ed scribbled down several notes as he subtly questioned Gilrain’s willing secretary. He folded the note and placed it in his shirt pocket as he hung up the phone.

Then, he sat quietly, realizing that his next step would be the most difficult one that of summoning the courage to carry out his plan.

Chapter 19

Sunday was a cool, sunny day with clear skies and the leafy smell of late autumn in the air. Ed looked out of the window approvingly as he dressed himself.

Melinda nodded patiently reaffirming his plan while he described it to her for a third time as they dressed. She knew that the whole thing bordered on insanity but attempts to dissuade him would be pointless. She just whispered a silent prayer for his safety as he outlined the details once more.

"That looks fine on you" she said as she stood back to admire him as he finished speaking.

"Yeah, looks real good. It should do the trick" he said while brushing the lint from the shoulder of the gray blazer he wore.

"Looks very official" he said with final approval.

He looked at his watch. They'd have just enough time for breakfast and still make it to the stadium on time.

The towering, gray stadium walls loomed over the horizon and Ed felt a cramp in the pit of his stomach as they moved closer. It was only a matter of hours now. He swallowed hard and forced the rising swell in his throat back down.

In several minutes, they reached the parking lot. Ed lifted his raincoat from the seat and carefully placed it over the black doctor's bag he had tucked between his arm and chest. He reached into his shirt pocket and withdrew his ticket to reassure himself of its presence there. Then he replaced it and reached over and grasped Melinda's hand. He looked into her eyes.

"Look, I don't know how this will turn out but you know I have to do it and you know I love you" he said and drew her hand to his lips.

Her instinct was to plead with him again to reconsider the consequences but she'd been through it all before in vain. She recalled his gentle chidings of her selfishness and his condemnations of moral weakness for those who would turn their backs on wrong doing. She knew he was right but if she could, she would gladly exchange his virtue for his safety. She sadly realized that no words could make that happen and fate would have its way.

She looked back at him unable to speak with bittersweet tears slowly streaming down her face. The tender warmth of her silent reply radiated over him. It emitted both love and respect from which he drew strength.

He left the car and walked to the gate without once glancing back. Once passed the ticket collector he made his way to the main office at the far corner of the entrance hall. His knock on the door was answered by a big man wearing a bright green sport jacket. He stood filling the doorway with the lights in the background shining from his jet black hair.

"Can I help you?" he asked in a stern, mechanical sounding voice.

"My name is Doctor Adolph Sloan" Ed began reaching for his identification. "Do you have a Mr. John Suter here today? I believe he is with the half time band from Cedar Hills."

The man carefully perused the card Ed had handed to him.

"What's the problem?" he asked as he gave the card back to Ed.

"His doctor in Ohio called me. His wife is very upset. He's supposed to take these pills daily and he left them at home. Evidently, he's a pretty forgetful guy. But anyway, she couldn't get him at his hotel and she's worried that he's not taking them like he should" replied Ed as he withdrew a small prescription bottle from his pocket and held it up for display.

"The man's got a bad heart and the excitement of the performance could be a problem for him if he doesn't have them. I picked them up as soon as I got the call but I've got to get them to him immediately" he added with an air of urgency in his voice.

"Wait a minute." The door closed and Ed stood counting endless minutes until it reopened. A different man, older, with a much less threatening appearance greeted him.

"Doctor Sloan, I'm sorry to leave you standing in the hallway but Mark's got his orders. A lot of kooks around, you know what I mean? Can't let every Tom, Dick and Harry just walk in!

Come in. My name's Art Gilrain" he said as he stepped aside from the open doorway.

Ed stepped inside the door hesitatingly.

"It's quite urgent that I see Mr. Suter" Ed repeated.

"There's not going to be any problem - is there?" asked Gilrain anxiously.

"I'll send someone to get him right away."

"No" Ed quickly stammered.

"It would be better if I go to see him."

He knew that Suter would know nothing about his supposed heart condition.

"That way I can take a quick look at him while I'm here. His wife asked for that and I said that I would. It probably would be better" he added with obvious concern.

"I don't want to generate any unnecessary anxiety. I can keep it low key and not embarrass him. As a matter of fact I'll stay with him to be sure there's no problem" Ed volunteered.

Gilrain paused for a moment.

"You're the doctor. I guess you're right" and he called Mark to escort Ed to Suter's location.

When they reached the correct section, Mark pointed out Suter at the lower end, close to the field.

He was a middle aged man with long gray flecked hair, peeking out from the back of his band cap. His round face wore a thick mustache also flecked in gray. The reflection from his bright red uniform gave him a ruddy complexion consistent with his portly shape.

Ed silently rehearsed what he was about to say as he walked down the aisle toward him. He'd have to stay calm and make it work. He was too far now to have anything go wrong.

He approached Suter presenting as an official; air as he could.

"Mr. Suter!" Suter looked up acknowledging his address.

"I'm Ed Bennett, one of Mr. Gilrain's assistants. I don't want to alarm you but there's been a little trouble" he began calmly.

"We had a crank phone call prior to today's game. It happens now and then. The call had nothing to do with you or the band and you're in no danger. Let me assure you we've never had any problems in the past when this type of thing has happened.

Mr. Gilrain has asked me to stay with you and your group throughout the game and during the half time show just as a routine precaution. There's no need to mention this to any of the others. The only reason I'm telling this to you is so my presence doesn't make you uncomfortable."

"Are you sure there's no danger?" asked Suter, anxiously.

"None at all. This is just a routine procedure" replied Ed.

"We've done this before and nothing's ever happened. It's like a high school bomb scare it's kind of routine after so many times. I'm surprised Mr. Gilrain didn't mention this as a possibility before because it does happen. But I guess he didn't want to cause any upset unless it was absolutely necessary."

Suter seemed more tranquil after Ed's lengthy reassurances but remained obviously uneasy. He continued to quiz about security at the stadium and Ed likewise continued to supply unfaltering answers that eased Suter's misgivings.

As the game began and half time rapidly approached, Ed searched himself for answers that could help to satisfy his own misgivings. He knew, that in a very few minutes, he would be inextricably entangled in the consequences of his soon to be committed act and there would be no possibility of retreat.

He watched the score board intently with little concern for the score. Only the mesmerizing flickers of the clock, as it counted away the seconds were fixed in his gaze. He could feel the cold wetness in his armpits and the rapid beat of his pulse accelerate with each flash of the numbers.

Finally, it read zero. The shrill shriek of the referee's whistles echoed from the stadium walls ending the first half. The crowd roared and rose to its feet as the teams left the field.

Suter motioned to his charges that stood in unison and began readying themselves and their instruments. Ed lifted his bag from beneath the raincoat where it was lying and tucking it under one arm, followed close behind Suter.

Within seconds they moved through the gate leading to the field and marched towards the end zone. He stopped at the edge of the field just beside the goal post and waited.

“Well folks, we’ve had a great first half. It looks like the Giants are in their usual fine form” expounded the announcer with vehemence rivaling that of an evangelist.

“And now we’ve got a fabulous half time show from Cedar Hills, Ohio” he added while motioning to one of the cameramen at the far corner of the broadcast booth.

“What do you think of the game so far Charlie?” he continued without awaiting an answer.

“Folks, let me introduce a man who needs no introduction to most of you, Charlie Rhodes, All Pro two times and a man who helped make the Giants what they are today. Charlie’s our newest regular addition to the pregame show. That comes up right before every game starting next week. We can also expect to see him up here with us more and more as the season goes on. What did you think of that first half?” he repeated. This time he paused for Charlie’s response.

“First, let me thank you and everybody here at the stadium for giving me this opportunity. I’m sure all the people out there know how hard it’s been for me these last few weeks. There for a while it looked like I was done with football on account of my knee injury but now you’ve changed all that for me and I really appreciate it.”

“You’re a real one hundred percent” interjected the announcer.

“Thank you, Ray” Charlie continued.

“I plan on doing the same kind of job up here with you that I tried to do down on the field.”

“We all know what that means. The fans are in for a treat and we’re sure looking forward to it” replied Ray and he shook Charlie’s hand enthusiastically as the cameras cut away to commercial.

Suddenly, their attention was drawn to the field below. The band had finished its performance and was marching out through the gate at the left side of the field. A lone figure stood at the fifty yard line. He raised a bullhorn to his mouth and his voice resounded throughout the stands, over the dying drum beats of the exiting marchers.

“Ladies and gentlemen” he began.

“I have an extremely important announcement to make. Please give me your full attention. This is very important” he repeated.

Instinctively, the cameras shot into tight close up. Ed’s profile filled the monitor screen in the broadcast booth as he fired his words out over the crowd.

“Who the hell is that?” cried Ray.

“What’s he doing? Nobody told me about this!”

Charlie watched with a stunned gaze. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

“This stadium is contaminated. The very ground upon which it stands is lethal.”

The phone on the desk rang. Ray snatched it from its cradle before the sound of its first ring left the air.

“Right.”

“Okay” and he slammed the receiver back into its place.

“Better get ready for your first half time show Charlie. That was Gilrain. He said we may have to fill a little time while they get rid of that nut down there” said Ray pointing to Ed’s picture on the monitor.

Within seconds, the stadium’s powerful speakers vibrated with the pounding rhythm of the week’s number one song, drowning Ed’s words in its deluge of sound. Several blazer clad security men vaulted the fence surrounding the playing area and raced towards him.

Ed stood motionless, vainly attempting to continue his message over the thundering music. When they reached him they firmly escorted him away without a struggle. The cameras followed them to the edge of the field as Charlie and Ray sat watching.

The director’s signal suddenly interrupted their silent entrancement. The red light of the booth camera flicked on.

“Well, we’re back; a little excitement here while you were gone on commercial. A man with a bullhorn tried to deliver some kind of protest statement from the fifty yard line. Security has him now and I guess everything’s under control.

This is the first time I’ve seen this kind of thing. There’s going to be a brief delay before we start the second half just make sure everything’s okay.

What was he trying to say? I couldn’t quite hear it?” Ray asked Charlie.

The camera shifted to Charlie, awaiting his reply. As his mouth opened to respond, he wasn’t sure what would come out.

He knew full well what Ed was saying. He felt himself divided between logic and loyalty. Why did Ed do this to him and to himself? He never expected so rash an act, not even from him.

“Before the cock crows thrice.” The words flashed through his mind. He couldn’t be sure what they meant, but they raced over and over through his head.

He looked out through the windows of the booth at the cheering crowd and his mind’s eye saw a gaping emptiness. The seats were vacant and a cold wind lofted floating scrapes of paper skyward. The crash of

a wrecking ball broke the silent void as it burst through the walls of the stadium in the distance. The very spot where he sat quivered more violently with each impact of the ball as it moved steadily closer. He knew that his next few words could make all that he saw in his mind's eye, a reality.

He'd played in this stadium and he felt fine and all the guys he played with were fine. He only knew of two people who got sick and maybe, just maybe it had nothing to do with any radioactivity. It could have just happened. Sometimes people just get sick he told himself.

He respected Ed. He admired him. He had guts but there's a fine line between courage, conviction and foolishness he reasoned.

"Charlie! Are you okay?"

Ray's words came crashing in like the wrecking ball he had imagined, shaking him from his thought filled stupor.

"I guess this whole thing caught you by surprise too" continued Ray in an effort to cover Charlie's apparent inattention.

"Yes, you're right" he replied as he straightened himself upright in his seat. "I couldn't really hear anything either" Charlie replied.

"There was too much noise" he added convincingly.

Ray stopped and listened while he pressed the small ear plug more tightly into his ear.

"Just a minute folks! We've just been informed that the man in custody claims that he was sent to save us from the devil's evil within the earth. Needless to say, he's being held for observation" he said with a smirk.

"We have eighty thousand people here for each game and I guess we have to expect that kind of thing once in a while. Now, that we're sure there's no serious problem, the second half should begin shortly."

Ray turned toward Charlie and spoke.

"Thank you for helping us fill in and we'll be looking for you next week on your new show. Good luck" said Ray as he again shook Charlie's hand while the camera faded.

Chapter 20

"Put it right over there" she instructed the movers.

The muffled pounding of hammer and nails issued from the back room.

Workmen paraded back and forth carrying lumber and sheetrock.

"It's starting to look real good. It's a thousand times better than the old place" he remarked as he walked through the door less entrance.

"Hi Mike" she greeted him.

"We'll be able to do a thousand times more now too with this new equipment" Rita replied.

"We should be ready to open in a week or so. Mike, this is a good friend of mine who's going to work here at the clinic with me. Mike, this is Larry" she said as they extended their hands towards each other.

"Considering the shape of this place when you left it, this is a real miracle" said Mike.

"The miracle is that we ever came back at all" she replied.

"The people down here need us and with some luck and the financial backing we have now, the miracle is just starting for them" she continued.

Rita motioned again to several other workmen who entered carrying still more crates.

"I heard you've just got quite a funding increase for your agency. I also heard you're getting married. You'll have to bring the lucky girl over to meet us" she continued.

"Yeah, a little salary increase is helping to make that happen sooner than I thought" he replied.

"And for the first time I can remember we can hire all the clerical and research people we've always needed."

There was a silence.

Mike and Rita looked at each other, both fully aware of the others thoughts and each waiting for the other to speak.

"How is he? Do you have any word?"

"He's at Caramore. Melinda sees him often. She's been up there numerous times. She says he's okay. She doesn't hold anything against us. She understands and so does he" replied Mike.

"What's going to happen to him? House promised me he wouldn't be hurt" said Rita."

"I don't think he was lying to you. As soon as all the big boys can unload their bonds on the public they'll let him out. They really won't care anymore then what happens to the stadium.

Interest rates are on the way down now, so if they sell now they'll be in for giant profits, so it will probably be real soon."

"I hope you're right" Rita said sincerely.

"I'm sure I am. I'm going to go up to see him this weekend. It's not going to be easy" he said.

"When you see him, tell him a man named Wright was here looking for him. He said he was supposed to talk with Ed a couple of months ago but he was in a serious car accident and was in the hospital. He wouldn't say where he was from or what he wanted to talk to him about. He was real eager to see him though. He said he had been looking for him for the past two weeks and had been told that I might be able to help contact him. I didn't tell him anything, I just said I hadn't seen Ed in months and that is the truth. I figured at this point Ed has enough trouble and I didn't want to send him more."

"I'll be sure to tell him" promised Mike.

END

Epilogue

Where are they now?

Migs – Migs was killed by police during a drug raid in downtown Newark.

Hollar and Mercer – both were convicted of stealing drug evidence from the police compound. Both were sentenced to ten years in state prison. Mercer was murdered in prison before his term was completed. Hollar served eight years and was paroled.

Angie – she remarried and had two children but never forgot Al. She still visits his grave frequently.

Wright – has retired from his position as Deputy Undersecretary of the U.S. Bureau of Environmental Protection.

House – he sold Caramore to an HMO holding company for fifteen million dollars and retired to Boca. He died of a heart attack on his yacht in 2001.

Sam – continued to live in the hood and became an important community organizer until being afflicted with Alzheimer's in 2004.

Charles – retired from the paper and writes a weekly blog attempting to expose the wheeling and dealing of government officials and wealthy investors. So far, his writings have had little impact.

Charlie – he continued to be an announcer for pro football. He completed his announcing career hosting a radio sports talk show. His leg never did heal correctly and he continues to walk with a cane to this day.

Larry – he moved in with Rita and they ran the clinic for several years. They split in 1989.

Rita – she closed the clinic shortly after she and Larry separated. She is now in private practice and still regrets ‘selling out’ Ed.

Mike – went on to open a successful private law practice with many wealthy clients referred by prominent politicians.

Melinda – still looks great and lives with Ed in Newark and helps care for her aged father Sam.

Ed – having been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, received numerous ECTs (electroconvulsive “shock” treatments) and was released from Caramore after two years. He remains medicated as required by his release agreement. He works as a lab tech in a local downtown hospital.